A dance to the music of time

ANTHONY POWELL ◆ 1ST MOVEMENT

P871
1995
v.1

Praise for the three novels in the First Movement *of Anthony Powell's comic masterpiece:*

"Powell has a quality all his own. Irony and understatement are parts of this quality, but more essential ingredients are the sheer delights of form, stylization and rhythm. His dance to the music of time moves like a delicate and fantastic minuet."
– William Barrett, *Atlantic*

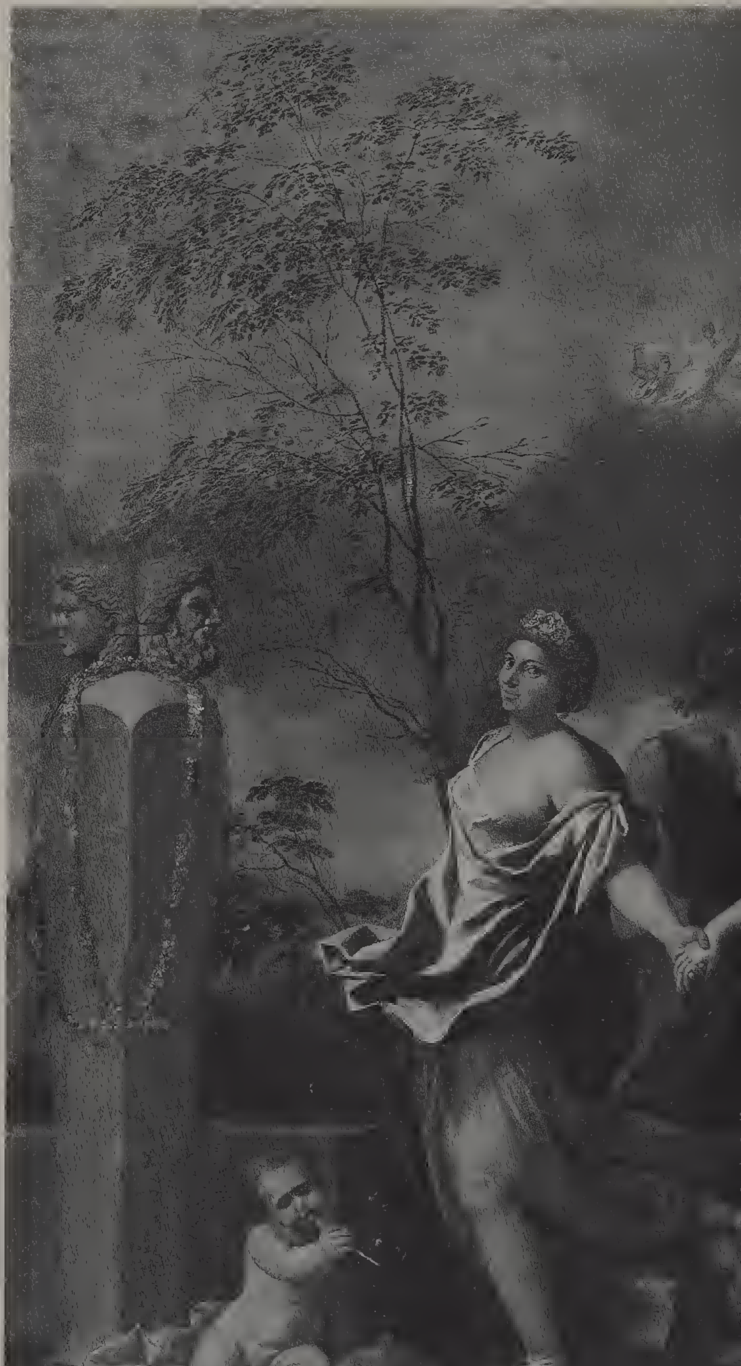
"Anthony Powell's serial novel . . . has been widely recognized as one of the most important works of fiction since the Second World War."
– Naomi Bliven, *New Yorker*

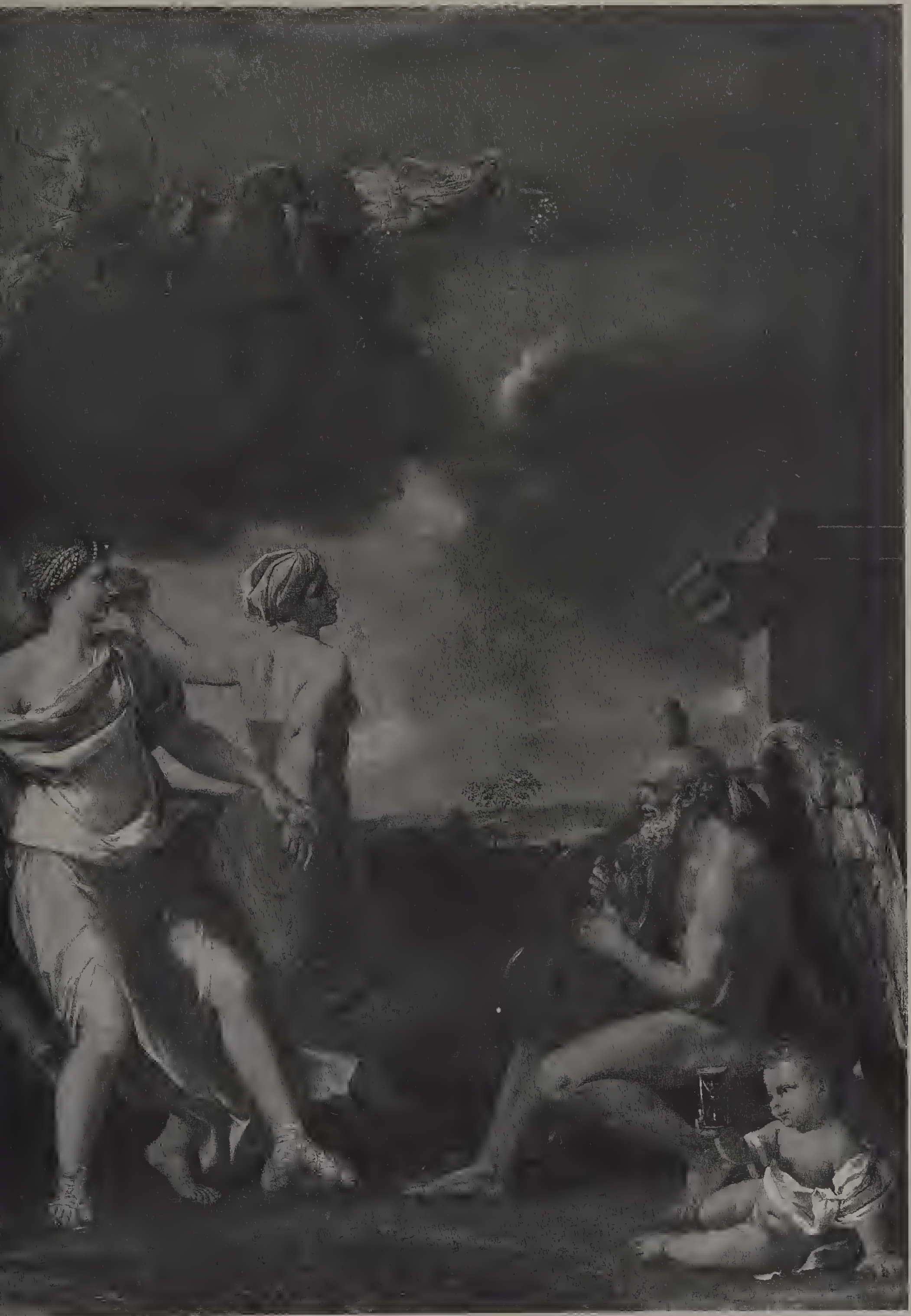
"Each succeeding volume of Mr. Powell's *Music of Time* series enhances its importance. The work is dry, cool, humorous, elaborately and accurately constructed and quintessentially English. It is more realistic than *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu,* to which it is often compared, and much funnier."
– Evelyn Waugh

"When the time comes for the historian to get the sense of what life was like for the British between and during the two big wars . . . he can wrap up the whole era with Anthony Powell's incalculably brilliant series."
– *Time*

"Mr. Powell is the most subtle writer now performing in English. . . . As the pattern develops and is revealed in its complexity, it is clearer than ever that a literary mansion is being constructed before our eyes."
– William Trevor, *Guardian*

"I would rather read Mr. Powell than any English novelist now writing."
– Kingsley Amis





Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, c. 1639–40. The Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.

A Dance to the Music of Time

First Movement

MARYGROVE COLLEGE
LIBRARY
DETROIT, MICH.

Books by
Anthony Powell

A Dance to the Music of Time, First Movement
(including the following three novels)
A Question of Upbringing
A Buyer's Market
The Acceptance World

A Dance to the Music of Time, Second Movement
(including the following three novels)
At Lady Molly's
Casanova's Chinese Restaurant
The Kindly Ones

A Dance to the Movement of Time, Third Movement
(including the following three novels)
The Valley of Bones
The Soldier's Art
The Military Philosophers

A Dance to the Music of Time, Fourth Movement
(including the following three novels)
Books Do Furnish a Room
Temporary Kings
Hearing Secret Harmonies

OTHER NOVELS

Afternoon Men
Venusberg
From a View to a Death
Agents and Patients
Fisher King
O, How the Wheel Becomes It!
What's Become of Waring

OTHER WORKS

To Keep the Ball Rolling: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell
Volume I: *Infants of the Spring*
Volume II: *Messengers of Day*
Volume III: *Faces in My Time*
Volume IV: *The Strangers Are All Gone*
John Aubrey and His Friends
Brief Lives: And Other Selected Writings of John Aubrey
Miscellaneous Verdicts: Writings on Writers
Under Review: Further Writings on Writers, 1946–1990

PLAYS

The Garden God
The Rest I'll Whistle

A Dance to the Music of Time

First Movement

A QUESTION OF UPBRINGING
A BUYER'S MARKET
THE ACCEPTANCE WORLD

BY

Anthony Powell

★

The University of Chicago Press

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
Copyright © 1951, 1952, © 1955 by Anthony Powell
Copyright renewed 1979, 1983 by Anthony Powell
All rights reserved.
Originally published 1962
University of Chicago Press Edition 1995
Printed in the United States of America

01 00 99 98 97 96 95 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-226-66714-1 (pbk.)

The *First Movement* of *A Dance to the Music of Time* includes the first three of twelve novels that make up the entire opus. *A Question of Upbringing* was first published in 1951. *A Buyer's Market* was first published in Great Britain in 1952 and in the United States in 1953. *The Acceptance World* was first published in Great Britain in 1955 and in the United States in 1956. The three novels were first published in one volume in the United States in 1962.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Powell, Anthony, 1905–
A dance to the music of time / by Anthony Powell.
p. cm.
Contents: 1st movement. A question of upbringing ; A buyer's market ; The acceptance world — 2nd movement. At Lady Molly's ; Casanova's Chinese restaurant ; The kindly ones — 3rd movement. The valley of bones ; The soldier's art ; The military philosophers — 4th movement. Books do furnish a room ; Temporary kings ; Hearing secret harmonies.
1. England—Social life and customs—20th century—Fiction. 2. Autobiographical fiction, English. I. Title.
PR6031.074D33 1995
823′.912—dc20 94-47228
CIP

Cover image credit: Bridgeman/Art Resource, NY

♾ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

A Question of Upbringing

For
T. R. D. P.

1.

THE men at work at the corner of the street had made a kind of camp for themselves, where, marked out by tripods hung with red hurricane-lamps, an abyss in the road led down to a network of subterranean drain-pipes. Gathered round the bucket of coke that burned in front of the shelter, several figures were swinging arms against bodies and rubbing hands together with large, pantomimic gestures: like comedians giving formal expression to the concept of extreme cold. One of them, a spare fellow in blue overalls, taller than the rest, with a jocular demeanour and long, pointed nose like that of a Shakespearian clown, suddenly stepped forward, and, as if performing a rite, cast some substance—apparently the remains of two kippers, loosely wrapped in newspaper—on the bright coals of the fire, causing flames to leap fiercely upward, smoke curling about in eddies of the north-east wind. As the dark fumes floated above the houses, snow began to fall gently from a dull sky, each flake giving a small hiss as it reached the bucket. The flames died down again; and the men, as if required observances were for the moment at an end, all turned away from the fire, lowering themselves laboriously into the pit, or withdrawing to the shadows of their tarpaulin shelter. The grey, undecided flakes continued to come down, though not heavily, while a harsh odour, bitter and gaseous, penetrated the air. The day was drawing in.

For some reason, the sight of snow descending on fire always makes me think of the ancient world—legionaries in sheepskin warming themselves at a brazier: mountain altars where offerings glow between wintry pillars; centaurs with torches cantering beside a frozen sea—scattered, unco-ordinated shapes from a fabulous past, infinitely removed from life; and yet bringing with them memories of things real and imagined. These classical projections, and something in the physical attitudes of the men themselves as they turned from the fire, suddenly suggested Poussin's scene in which the Seasons, hand in hand and facing outward, tread in rhythm to the notes of the lyre that the winged and naked greybeard plays. The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality: of human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure: stepping slowly, methodically, sometimes a trifle awkwardly, in evolutions that take recognisable shape: or breaking into seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the steps of the dance. Classical associations made me think, too, of days at school, where so many forces, hitherto unfamiliar, had become in due course uncompromisingly clear.

As winter advanced in that river valley, mist used to rise in late afternoon and spread over the flooded grass; until the house and all the outskirts of the town were enveloped in opaque, chilly vapour, tinted like cigar-smoke. The house looked on to other tenement-like structures, experiments in architectural insignificance, that intruded upon a central concentration of buildings, commanding and antiquated, laid out in a quadrilateral, though irregular, style. Silted-up residues of the years smouldered uninterruptedly—and not without melancholy—in the maroon brickwork of these medieval closes: beyond the cobbles and archways of which (in a more northerly direction) memory also brooded, no less enigmatic and inconsolable, among water-meadows and avenues of trees: the sombre demands of the past becoming at times almost suffocating in their insistence.

Running westward in front of the door, a metalled road continued into open country of a coarser sort than these gothic parklands—fields: railway arches: a gas-works: and then more fields—a kind of steppe where the climate seemed at all times extreme: sleet: wind: or sultry heat; a wide territory, loosely enclosed by inflexions of the river, over which the smells of the gasometer, recalled perhaps by the fumes of the coke fire, would come and go with intermittent strength. Earlier in the month droves of boys could be seen drifting in bands, and singly, along this trail, migrating tribes of the region, for ever on the move: trudging into exile until the hour when damp clouds began once more to overwhelm the red houses, and to contort or veil crenellations and pinnacles beyond. Then, with the return of the mist, these nomads would reappear again, straggling disconsolately back to their deserted habitations.

By this stage of the year—exercise no longer contestable five days a week—the road was empty; except for Widmerpool, in a sweater once white and cap at least a size too small, hobbling unevenly, though with determination, on the flat heels of spiked running-shoes. Slowly but surely he loomed through the dusk towards me as I walked back—well wrapped-up, I remember—from an expedition to the High Street. Widmerpool was known to go voluntarily for 'a run' by himself every afternoon. This was his return from trotting across the plough in drizzle that had been falling since early school. I had, of course, often seen him before, because we were in the same house; even spoken with him, though he was a bit older than myself. Anecdotes relating to his acknowledged oddness were also familiar;

but before that moment such stories had not made him live. It was on the bleak December tarmac of that Saturday afternoon in, I suppose, the year 1921 that Widmerpool, fairly heavily built, thick lips and metal-rimmed spectacles giving his face as usual an aggrieved expression, first took coherent form in my mind. As the damp, insistent cold struck up from the road, two thin jets of steam drifted out of his nostrils, by nature much distended, and all at once he seemed to possess a painful solidarity that talk about him had never conveyed. Something comfortless and inelegant in his appearance suddenly impressed itself on the observer, as stiffly, almost majestically, Widmerpool moved on his heels out of the mist.

His status was not high. He had no colours, and, although far from being a dunce, there was nothing notable about his work. At this or any other time of year he could be seen training for any games that were in season: in winter solitary running, with or without a football: in summer, rowing 'courses' on the river, breathing heavily, the sweat clouding his thick lenses, while he dragged his rigger through the water. So far as I know he never reached even the semi-finals of the events for which he used to enter. Most of the time he was alone, and even when he walked with other boys he seemed in some way separate from them. About the house he was more noticeable than in the open air, because his voice was pitched high and he articulated poorly: as if tongue were too big for mouth. This delivery made his words always appear to protest, a manner of speaking almost predictable from his face. In addition to that distinctly noisy manner of utterance, thick rubber reinforcements on soles and heels caused his boots—he wore boots more often than what Stringham used to call 'Widmerpool's good sensible shoes'—to squeal incessantly: their shrill rhythmic bursts of sound, limited in compass like the notes of a barbaric orchestra, giving warning of his approach along the linoleum of distant passages; their sullen whining dirge seeming designed to express in musical terms the mysteries of an existence of toil and abnegation lived apart from the daily life of the tribe. Perhaps he sounds a grotesque and conspicuous figure. In excess, Widmerpool was neither. He had his being, like many others, in obscurity. The gap in age caused most of my knowledge of him to have come second-hand; and, in spite of this abrupt realisation of him as a person that took place on that winter evening, he would have remained a dim outline to me if he had not at an earlier date, and before my own arrival, made himself already memorable, as a new boy, by wearing the wrong kind of overcoat.

At this distance of time I cannot remember precisely what sort of an overcoat Widmerpool was said to have worn in the first instance. Stories about it had grown into legend: so much so that even five or six years later you might still occasionally hear an obtrusive or inappropriate garment referred to as 'a Widmerpool'; and Templer, for example, would sometimes say: 'I am afraid I'm wearing rather Widmerpool socks today', or, 'I've bought a wonderfully Widmerpool tie to go home in'. My impression is that the overcoat's initial deviation from normal was slight, depending on the existence or absence of a belt at the back, the fact that the cut was single- or double-breasted, or, again, irregularity may have had something to do with the collar; perhaps the cloth, even, was of the wrong colour or texture.

As a matter of fact the overcoat was only remarkable in itself as a vehicle for the comment it aroused, insomuch that an element in Widmerpool himself had proved indigestible to the community. An overcoat (which never achieved the smallest notoriety) belonging to a boy called Offord whose parents lived in Madeira, where they had possibly purchased the garment, was indeed once pointed out to me as 'very like Widmerpool's'. There was on no occasion the slightest question of Widmerpool being bullied, or even seriously ragged about the matter. On the contrary, his deviation seems scarcely to have been mentioned to him, except by cruder spirits: the coat becoming recognised almost immediately as a traditionally ludicrous aspect of everyday life. Years later, if you questioned his contemporaries on the subject, they were vague in their answers, and would only laugh and say that he wore the coat for a couple of terms; and then, by the time winter came round again, he was found to possess an overcoat of a more conventional sort.

This overcoat gave Widmerpool a lasting notoriety which his otherwise unscintillating career at school could never wholly dispel. How fully he was aware of this reputation it was hard to say. His behaviour certainly indicated that he hoped for more substantial credit with other people than to be known solely on account of a few months given over to out-of-the-way dress. If such was his aim, he was unsuccessful; and the only occasion when I heard these exertions of his receive some small amount of public recognition had been about a month before this, so to speak transcendental, manifestation of himself to me in the mist. Everyone had been summoned to the house library to listen to complaints that Parkinson, captain of games, wanted to make on the subject of general slackness. Parkinson, rather a feeble figure who blushed easily, had ended his little speech with the words: 'It is a pity that some of you are not as keen as Widmerpool.' There had been loud laughter at this. Parkinson himself grinned sheepishly, and, as usual, went red, as if he had said something that might be considered, even in his own eyes, more than a little indecent:

lightly touching, as his habit was, a constellation of spots accumulated on one of his cheekbones.

Widmerpool himself had not smiled, though he could hardly have failed to notice the laughter. He had stared seriously at his boots with their thick rubber reinforcements, apparently trying to avoid any imputation of priggishness. While he did this, his fingers twitched. His hands were small and gnarled, with nails worn short and cracked, as if he spent his spare time digging with them deep down into the soil. Stringham had said that the nails of the saint who had hollowed his own grave without tools might fairly have competed against Widmerpool's in a manicure contest. If Widmerpool had not developed boils soon after this crumb of praise had been let fall, he would, by the end of the season, have scraped into the house football team. This achievement, however, was not to be; though from the moment that his ailment began to abate he was training again as hard as ever. Some more popular figure was made twelfth man.

Still pondering on this vision of Widmerpool, I entered the house, encountering in the hall its familiar exhalation of carbolic soap, airing blankets, and cold Irish stew—almost welcoming after the fog outside—and mounted the staircase towards tea. A thick black stripe of paint divided the upper, and yellow, half of the wall from the magenta dado beneath. Above this black line was another, mottled and undulating, where passers-by, up and down the stairs, rested arm or shoulder, discolouring the distemper in a slanting band of grey. Two or three boys were as usual standing in front of the notice-board on the first floor, their eyes fixed on the half-sheets of paper attached by drawing-pins to the green baize, gazing at the scrawled lists and regulations as if intent on a tape-machine liable at any moment to announce the winner. There was nothing more recent than one of the recurrent injunctions emanating from Le Bas, our housemaster, requiring that all boots should be scraped on the scraper, and then once more scoured on the door-mat on entering the hall, to avoid dispersion of mud throughout the house. On the corner of this grubby fiat Stringham, some days before, had drawn a face in red pencil. Several pairs of eyes were now resting glassily on that outward protest against the voice of authority.

Since the beginning of the term I had messed with Stringham and Templer; and I was already learning a lot from them. Both were a shade older than myself, Stringham by about a year. The arrangement was in part a matter of convenience, dictated by the domestic economy of the house: in this case the distribution of teas. I liked and admired Stringham: Templer I was not yet sure about. The latter's boast that he had never read a book for pleasure in his life did not predispose me in his favour: though he knew far more than I of the things about which books are written. He was also an adept at breaking rules, or diverting them to ends not intended by those who had framed them. Having obtained permission, ostensibly at his parents' request, to consult an oculist, Templer was spending that day in London. It was unlikely that he would cut this visit short enough to enable him to be back in time for tea, a meal taken in Stringham's room.

When I came in, Stringham was kneeling in front of the fire, employing a paper-knife shaped like a scimitar as a toasting-fork. Without looking up, he said: 'There is a jam crisis.'

He was tall and dark, and looked a little like one of those stiff, sad young men in ruffs, whose long legs take up so much room in sixteenth-century portraits: or perhaps a younger—and far slighter—version of Veronese's Alexander receiving the children of Darius after the Battle of Issus:

with the same high forehead and suggestion of hair thinning a bit at the temples. His features certainly seemed to belong to that epoch of painting: the faces in Elizabethan miniatures, lively, obstinate, generous, not very happy, and quite relentless. He was an excellent mimic, and, although he suffered from prolonged fits of melancholy, he talked a lot when one of these splenetic fits was not upon him: and ragged with extraordinary violence when excited. He played cricket well enough to rub along: football he took every opportunity of avoiding. I accepted the piece of toast he held out towards me.

'I bought some sausages.'

'Borrow the frying-pan again. We can do them over the fire.'

The room contained two late eighteenth-century coloured prints of racehorses (Trimalchio and The Pharisee, with blue-chinned jockeys) which hung above a picture, cut out of one of the illustrated weeklies and framed in passe-partout, of Stringham's sister at her wedding: the bridegroom in khaki uniform with one sleeve pinned to his tunic. Over the fireplace was a large, and distinctly florid, photograph of Stringham's mother, with whom he lived, a beauty, and an heiress, who had remarried the previous year after parting from Stringham's father She was a South African. Stuck in the corner of the frame was a snapshot of the elder Stringham, an agreeable-looking man in an open shirt, smoking a pipe with the sun in his eyes. He, too, had remarried, and taken his second, and younger, wife, a Frenchwoman, to Kenya. Stringham did not often talk about his home, and in those days that was all I knew about his family; though Templer had once remarked that 'in that direction there was a good deal of money available', adding that Stringham's parents moved in circles that lived 'at a fairly rapid pace'.

I had been so struck by the conception of Widmerpool, disclosed almost as a new incarnation, shortly before on the road in front of the house, that I described, while the sausages cooked, the manner in which he had materialised in a series of jerks out of the shadows, bearing with him such tokens of despondency. Stringham listened, perforating each of the sausages with the scimitar. He said slowly: 'Widmerpool suffers—or suffered—from contortions of the bottom. Dickinson told me that, in the days when the fags used to parade in the library at tea-time, they were all standing by the wall one evening when suddenly there were inarticulate cries. Owing to this infirmity of his, Widmerpool's legs had unexpectedly given way beneath him.'

'Did he fall?'

'He clung to the moulding of the wall, his feet completely off the ground.'

'What next?'

'He was carted off.'

'I see. Have we any mustard?'

'Now I'll tell you what I saw happen last summer,' Stringham went on, smiling to himself, and continuing to pierce the sausages. 'Peter Templer and I had—for an unaccountable reason—been watching the tail-end of some cricket, and had stopped for a drink on the way back. We found Widmerpool standing by himself with a glass of lemonade in front of him. Some of the Eleven were talking and ragging at the far end of the counter and a skinned banana was thrown. This missed its target and hit Widmerpool. It was a bull's-eye. The banana was over-ripe and it burst all over his face, knocking his spectacles sideways. His cap came off and he spilt most of the lemonade down the front of his clothes.'

'Characteristic of the Eleven's throwing-in.'

'Budd himself was responsible. Widmerpool took out his handkerchief and began to clean up the mess. Budd came down the shop, still laughing, and said: "Sorry, Widmerpool. That banana wasn't intended for you." Widmerpool was obviously astonished to hear himself addressed by name, and so politely, by no less a person than the Captain of the Eleven—who could only have known what Widmerpool was called on account of the famous overcoat. Budd stood there smiling, showing a lot of those film-star teeth of his, and looking more than ever like the hero of an adventure story for boys.'

'That noble brow.'

'It doesn't seem to help him to pile up runs,' said Stringham, 'any more than do those fine cutting shots of his which photograph so well.'

He paused and shook his head, apparently in sadness at the thought of Budd's deficiencies as a cricketer; and then continued: 'Anyway, Budd—exuding charm at every pore—said: "I'm afraid I've made you in a bit of a mess, Widmerpool," and he stood there inspecting the havoc he had just caused. Do you know an absolutely *slavish* look came into Widmerpool's face. "I don't mind," he said, "I don't mind at all, Budd. It doesn't matter in the least." '

Stringham's dexterity at imitating the manner in which Widmerpool talked was remarkable. He stopped the narrative to put some bread into the fat in which the sausages were frying, and, when this was done, said: 'It was as if Widmerpool had experienced some secret and awful pleasure. He had taken off his spectacles and was wiping them, screwing up his eyes, round which there were still traces of banana. He began to blow on the glasses and to rub them with a great show of good cheer. The effect was not at all what might have been hoped. In fact all this heartiness threw the most appalling gloom over the shop.

Budd went back to his friends and finished whatever he was eating, or drinking, in deathly silence. The other members of the Eleven—or whoever they were—stopped laughing and began to mutter self-consciously to themselves about future fixtures. All the kick had gone out of them. I have never seen anything like it. Then Budd picked up his bat and pads and gloves and other belongings, and said: "I must be getting along now. I've got the Musical Society tonight," and there was the usual business of "Good-night, Bill, good-night——" '

' "Good-night, Guy . . . good-night, Stephen . . . good-night, John . . . good-night, Ronnie . . . good-night, George . . ." '

'Exactly,' said Stringham. ' "Good-night, Eddie . . . good-night, Simon . . . good-night, Robin . . ." and so on and so forth until they had all said good-night to each other collectively and individually, and shuffled off together, arm-in-arm. Templer wanted to move because he had to go down-town before lock-up; so we left Widmerpool to himself. He had put on his spectacles again, and straightened his cap, and as we went through the door he was rubbing his gritty little knuckles together, still smiling at his great encounter with Budd.'

The account of this incident, illustrating another of Widmerpool's aspects, did not at that moment make any deep impression on me. It was like a number of other anecdotes on the subject that circulated from time to time, differing only in the proficiency with which Stringham told his stories. My own renewed awareness of Widmerpool's personality seemed to me closer and more real. Stringham, however, had not finished with the matter. He said: 'As we walked past the fives courts, Templer remarked: "I'm glad that ass Widmerpool fielded a banana with his face." I asked why he did not like him—for after all there is little harm in the poor old boy—and it turned out that it was Widmerpool who got Akworth sacked.'

Stringham paused to allow this statement to sink in, while he arranged the sausages in a new pattern. I could not recall at all clearly what Akworth's story had been: though I remembered that he had left the school under a cloud soon after my arrival there, and that various rumours regarding his misdoings had been current at the time.

'Akworth tried to set fire to his room, didn't he? Or did he steal everything that was not nailed down?'

'He well may have done both,' said Stringham; 'but he was principally shot out for sending a note to Peter Templer. Widmerpool intercepted the note and showed it to Le Bas. I must admit that it was news to me when Peter told me.'

'And that was why Peter had taken against Widmerpool?'

'Not only that but Widmerpool got hold of Peter and gave him a tremendous jaw on morals.'

'That must have been very good for him.'

'The jaw went on for so long, and Widmerpool came so close, that Templer said that he thought Widmerpool was going to start something himself.'

'Peter always thinks that about everybody.'

'I agree his conceit is invincible,' said Stringham, turning the sausages thoughtfully, as if contemplating Templer's vanity.

'Did Widmerpool start anything?' I asked.

'It is a grim thought, isn't it?'

'What is the answer?'

Stringham laughed. He said: 'Peter made an absolutely typical Templer remark when I asked him the same question. He said: "No, thank God, but he moved about the room breathing heavily like my sister's white pekinese. Did you see how pleased he was just now to be noticed by Budd? He looked as if he had just been kissed under the mistletoe. Bloody fool. He's so wet you could shoot snipe off him." Can you imagine a more exquisitely Templer phrase? Anyhow, that is how poor old Widmerpool looks to our little room-mate.'

'But what is he like really?'

'If you are not sure what Widmerpool is like,' said Stringham, 'you can't do better than have another look at him. You will have an opportunity at prayers tonight. These sausages are done.'

He stopped speaking, and, picking up the paper-knife again, held it upright, raising his eyebrows, because at that moment there had been a kind of scuffling outside, followed by a knock on the door: in itself a surprising sound. A second later a wavering, infinitely sad voice from beyond said: 'May I come in?'

Obviously this was no boy: the approach sounded unlike a master's. The hinge creaked, and, as the door began to open, a face, deprecatory and enquiring, peered through the narrow space released between the door and the wall. There was an impression of a slight moustache, grey or very fair, and a well-worn, rather sporting tweed suit. I realised all at once, not without apprehension, that my Uncle Giles was attempting to enter the room.

I had not seen my uncle since the end of the war, when he had been wearing some sort of uniform, though not one of an easily recognisable service. This sudden appearance in Stringham's room was an unprecedented incursion: the first time that he had found his way here. He delayed entry for a brief period, pressing the edge of the door against his head, the other side of which touched the wall: rigid, as if imprisoned in a cruel trap specially designed to catch him and his like: some ingenious snare, savage in mechanism, though at the same time calculated to preserve from injury the skin of such rare creatures. Uncle Giles's skin was, in point of fact, not easily injured, though experience of years had made him cautious of assuming as a matter of course that his company would be welcome anywhere—anywhere, at least, where other members of his family might be gathered together. At first, therefore, he did not venture to advance farther into the room, meekly conscious that his unexpected arrival might, not unreasonably, be regarded by the occupants as creating a pivot for potential embarrassment.

'I was just passing through on the way to Reading,' he said. 'Thought I might look you up.'

He stood by the door and appeared a little dazed, perhaps overcome by the rich smell of sausages that permeated the atmosphere of the room: possibly reminding him of what might easily have been a scanty luncheon eaten earlier in the day. Why he should be going to Reading was unguessable. If he had come from London, this could hardly be termed 'on the way'; but it might well be that Uncle Giles had not come from London. His locations were not, as a rule, made public. Stringham stood up and pushed the sausages on to a plate.

'This is my uncle—Captain Jenkins.'

Checking the sausages with the paper-knife, Stringham said: 'I'll get another cup. You'll have tea with us, won't you?'

'Thank you, I never take tea,' said Uncle Giles. 'People who eat tea waste half the afternoon. Never wanted to form the habit.' He added: 'Of course, I'm not speaking of *your* sort of tea.'

He looked round at us, as if for sympathy, a bit uncertain as to whether or not this declaration expressed a justifiable attitude towards tea; unsure—and with good reason—if an assertion that he made efforts, however small, to avoid waste of time would prove easily credible, even in the company in which he now found himself. We borrowed a hard chair from next door, and he sat down, blowing his nose into a bandana handkerchief in a series of little grunts.

'Don't let me keep you fellows from your sausages,' he said. 'They will be getting cold. They look damned good to me.'

Neat, and still slightly military in appearance—though he had not held a commission for at least twenty years and 'captain' was probably a more or less honorary rank, gazetted to him by himself and the better disposed of his relations—my father's brother was now about fifty. His arrival that night made it clear that he had not emigrated: a suggestion put forward at one moment to explain his disappearance for a longer period than usual from public view. There had also been some rather uneasy family jokes regarding the possibility of his having overstepped the limits set by the law in the transaction of everyday business, some slip in financial dealings that might account for an involuntary absence from the scene; for Uncle Giles had been relegated by most of the people who knew him at all well to that limbo where nothing is expected of a person, and where more than usually outrageous actions are approached, at least conversationally, as if they constituted a series of practical jokes, more or less enjoyable, according to where responsibility for clearing up matters might fall. The curious thing about persons regarding whom society has taken this largely self-defensive measure is that the existence of the individual himself reaches a pitch when nothing he does can ever be accepted as serious. If he commits suicide, or murder, only the grotesque aspects of the event dominate the circumstances: on the whole, avoidance of such major issues being an integral part of such a condition. My uncle was a good example of the action of this law; though naturally I did not in those days see him with anything like this clearness of vision. If Reading were his destination, there could be no hint of immediate intention to leave the country: and, unless on ticket-of-leave, he was evidently under no sort of legal restraint. He finished blowing his nose, pushed the handkerchief back up his sleeve, and, using without facetious implication a then popular catchword. said: 'How's your father?'

'All right.'

'And your mother?'

'Very well.'

'Good,' said Uncle Giles, as if it were a relief to him personally that my parents were well, even when the rest of the world might feel differently on the same matter.

There was a pause. I asked how his own health had been, at which he laughed scornfully.

'Oh, me,' he said, 'I've been about the same. Not growing any younger. Trouble with the old duodenal. I rather wanted to get hold of your father about signing some papers. Is he still in Paris? I suppose so.'

'That bit of the Conference is finished.'

'Where is he?'

'London.'

'On leave?'

'Yes.'

'The War Office haven't decided where they are going to send him?'

'No.'

My uncle looked put out at this piece of news. It was most unlikely, hardly conceivable, that he really intended to impose his company on my father, who had for many years discouraged close association with his brother, except when possessed with an occasional and uncontrollable desire to tell Uncle Giles to his face what he thought of him, a mood that rarely lasted more than thirty-six hours; by the end of which period of time the foredoomed inefficacy of any such contact made itself clear.

'In London, is he?' said Uncle Giles, wrinkling the dry, reddish skin at the sides of his nostrils, under which a web of small grey veins etched on his nose seemed to imply preliminary outlines for a game of noughts-and-crosses. He brought out a leather cigarette-case and—before I could prevent him—lighted a cigarette.

'Visitors are not really supposed to smoke here.'

'Oh, aren't they?' said Uncle Giles. He looked very surprised. 'Why not?'

'Well, if the place smells of smoke, you can't tell if someone else smokes too.'

'Of course you can't,' said Uncle Giles readily, blowing outward a long jet of smoke. He seemed puzzled.

'Le Bas might think a boy had been smoking.'

'Who is Le Bas?'

'Our housemaster.'

How he had managed to find the house if he were ignorant of Le Bas's identity was mysterious: even inexplicable. It was, however, in keeping with the way my uncle conducted his life that he should reach his destination without knowing the name of the goal. He continued to take small puffs at his cigarette.

'I see,' he said.

'Boys aren't allowed to smoke.'

'Quite right. Stunts the growth. It is a great mistake to smoke before you are twenty-one.'

Uncle Giles straightened his back and squared his shoulders. One had the impression that he was well aware that young people of the day could scarcely attempt to compete with the rigorous standards that had governed his own youth. He shook his head and flicked some ash on to one of the dirty plates.

'It is a hundred to one Le Bas won't come in,' said Stringham. 'I should take a chance on it.'

'Take a chance on what?' Uncle Giles asked.

'On smoking.'

'You mean I really ought to put this out?'

'Don't bother.'

'Most certainly I shall bother,' said Uncle Giles. 'I should not dream of breaking a rule of that sort. Rules are made to be obeyed, however foolish they may sometimes seem. The question is where had I best put this, now that the regulation has been broken?'

By the time my uncle had decided to extinguish the cigarette on the sole of his shoe, and throw the butt into the fire, there was not much left of it. Stringham collected the ash, which had by now found its way into several receptacles, brushing all of this also into the cinders. For the rest of tea, Uncle Giles, who, for the time being at least, had evidently dismissed from his mind the question of discussing arrangements for meeting my father, discoursed, not very lucidly, on the possibility of a moratorium in connexion with German reparations and the fall of the mark. Uncle Giles's sympathies were with the Germans. 'They work hard,' he said. 'Therefore they have my respect.' Why he had suddenly turned up in the manner was not yet clear. When tea came to an end he muttered about wanting to discuss family matters, and, after saying good-bye—for my uncle, almost effusively—to Stringham, he followed me along the passage.

'Who was that?' he asked, when we were alone together.

As a rule Uncle Giles took not the slightest interest in anyone or anything except himself and his own affairs—indeed was by this time all but incapable of absorbing even the smallest particle of information about others, unless such information had some immediate bearing on his own case. I was therefore surprised when he listened with a show of comparative attention to what I could tell him about Stringham's family. When I had finished, he remarked:

'I used to meet his grandfather in Cape Town.'

'What was he doing there?'

'His mother's father, that was. He made a huge fortune. Not a bad fellow. Knew all the right people, of course.'

'Diamonds?'

I was familiar with detective stories in which South African millionaires had made their money in diamonds.

'Gold,' said Uncle Giles, nárrowing his eyes.

My uncle's period in South Africa was one of the several stretches of his career not too closely examined by other members of his family—or, if examined, not discussed—and I hoped that he might be about to give some account of experiences I had always been warned not to enquire into. However, he said no more than: 'I saw your friend's mother once when she was married to Lord Warrington and a very good-looking woman she was.'

'Who was Lord Warrington?'

'Much older than she was. He died. Never a good life, Warrington's. And so you always have tea with young Stringham?'

'And another boy called Templer.'

'Where was Templer?' asked Uncle Giles, rather suspiciously, as if he supposed that someone might have been spying on him unawares, or that he had been swindled out of something.

'In London, having his eyes seen to.'

'What is wrong with his eyes?'

'They ache when he works'

My uncle thought over this statement, which conveyed in Templer's own words his personal diagnosis of this ocular complaint. Uncle Giles was evidently struck by some similarity of experience, because he was silent for several seconds. I spoke more about Stringham, but Uncle Giles had come to the end of his faculty for absorbing statements regarding other people. He began to tap with his knuckles on the window-pane, continuing this tattoo until I had given up attempting, so far as I knew it, to describe Stringham's background.

'It is about the Trust,' said Uncle Giles, coming abruptly to the end of his drumming, and adopting a manner at once accusing and seasoned with humility.

The Trust, therefore, was at the bottom of this visitation. The Trust explained this arrival by night in winter. If I had thought harder, such an explanation might have occurred to me earlier; but at that age I cannot pretend that I felt greatly interested in the Trust, a subject so often ventilated in my hearing. Perhaps the enormous amount of time and ingenuity that had been devoted by other members of my family to examining the Trust from its innumerable aspects had even decreased for me its intrinsic attraction. In fact the topic bored me. Looking back, I can understand the fascination that the Trust possessed for my relations: especially for those, like Uncle Giles, who benefited from it to a greater or lesser degree. In those days the keenness of their interest seemed something akin to madness.

The money came from a great-aunt, who had tied it up in such a way as to raise what were, I believe, some quite interesting questions of legal definition. In addition to this, one of my father's other brothers, Uncle Martin, also a beneficiary, a bachelor, killed at the second battle of the Marne, had greatly complicated matters, although there was not a great deal of money to divide, by leaving a will of his own devising, which still further secured the capital without making it absolutely clear who should enjoy the interest. My father and Uncle Giles had accordingly come to a 'gentleman's agreement' on the subject of their respective shares (which brought in about one hundred and eighty-five pounds annually, or possibly nearly two hundred in a good year); but Uncle Giles had never been satisfied that he was receiving the full amount to which he was by right entitled: so that when times were hard—which happened about every eighteen months—he used to apply pressure with a view to squeezing out a few pounds more than his agreed portion. The repetition of these tactics, forgotten for a time and then breaking out again like one of Uncle Giles's duodenal ulcers, had the effect of making my father exceedingly angry; and, taken in conjunction with the rest of my uncle's manner of life, they had resulted in an almost complete severance of relations between the two brothers.

'As you probably know,' said Uncle Giles, 'I owe your father a small sum of money. Nothing much. Decent of him to have given me the use of it, all the same. Some brothers wouldn't have done as much. I just wanted to tell him that I proposed to let him have the sum in question back.'

This proposal certainly suggested an act to which, on the face of it, there appeared no valid objection; but my uncle, perhaps from force of habit, continued to approach the matter circumspectly. 'It is just a question of the trustees,' he said once or twice; and he proceeded to embark on explanations that seemed to indicate that he had some idea of presenting through myself the latest case for the adjustment of his revenue: tacking on repayment of an ancient debt as a piece of live bait. Any reason that might have been advanced earlier for my becoming the medium in these negotiations, on the grounds that my father was still out of England, had been utterly demolished by the information that he was to be found in London. However, tenacity in certain directions—notably that of the Trust—was one of Uncle Giles's characteristics. He was also habitually unwilling to believe that altered circumstances might affect any matter upon which he had already made up his mind. He therefore entered now upon a comprehensive account of the terms of the Trust, his own pecuniary embarrassment, the forbearance he had shown in the past—both to his relations and the world at large—and the reforms he suggested for the future.

'I'm not a great business expert,' he said, 'I don't claim to be a master brain of finance or anything of that sort. The only training I ever had was to be a soldier. We know how much use that is. All the same, I've had a bit of experience in my day. I've knocked about the world and roughed it. Perhaps I'm not quite so green as I look.'

Uncle Giles became almost truculent for a man with normally so quiet a manner when he said this; as if he expected that I was prepared to argue that he was indeed 'green', or, through some other similar failing, unsuited to run his own affairs. I felt, on the contrary, that in some ways it had to be admitted that he was unusually well equipped for looking after himself: in any case a subject I should not have taken upon myself to dispute with him. There was, therefore, nothing to do but agree to pass on anything he had to say. His mastery of the hard-luck story was of a kind never achieved by persons not wholly concentrated on themselves.

'Quand même,' he said at the end of a tremendous parade of facts and figures, 'I suppose there is such a thing as family feeling?'

I mumbled.

'After all there was the Jenkins they fought the War of Jenkins's Ear about.'

'Yes.'

'We are all descended from him.'

'Not directly.'

'Collaterally then.'

'It has never been proved, has it?'

'What I mean is that he was a relation and that should keep us together.'

'Well, our ancestor, Hannibal Jenkins, of Cwm Shenkin, paid the Hearth Tax in 1674——'

Perhaps justifiably, Uncle Giles made a gesture as if to dismiss pedantry—and especially genealogical pedantry—in all its protean shapes: at the same time picking up his hat. He said: 'All I mean is that just because I am a bit of a radical, it doesn't mean that I believe tradition counts for nothing.'

'Of course not.'

'Don't think that for a moment.'

'Not a bit.'

'Then you will put it to your father?'

'All right.'

'Can you get leave to walk with me as far as the station?'

'No.'

We set off together down the stairs, Uncle Giles continually stopping on the way to elaborate points omitted in his earlier argument. This was embarrassing, as other boys were hanging about the passages, and I tried, without success, to hurry him along. The front door was locked, and Cattle, the porter, had to be found to obtain the key. For a time we wandered about in a kind of no-man's-land of laundry baskets and coke, until Cattle, more or less asleep, was at last discovered in the boot-room. A lumbering, disagreeable character, he unlocked the door under protest, letting into the house a cloud of fog. Uncle Giles reached the threshold and plunged his hand deep into his trouser pocket as if in search of a coin: stood for what seemed an age sunk in reverie: thought better of an earlier impulse: and stepped briskly out into the mist with a curt 'Good-night to you'. He was instantly swallowed up in the gloom, and I was left standing on the steps with Cattle, whose grousing, silenced for the passage of time during which there had seemed hope of money changing hands, now began to rumble again like the buzz of distant traffic. As I returned slowly up the stairs, this sound of complaint sank to a low growling, punctuated with sharp clangs as the door was once more laboriously locked, bolted, and chained.

On the whole it could not be said that one felt better for Uncle Giles's visit. He brought with him some fleeting suggestion, always welcome at school, of an outside world: though against this had to be weighed the disturbing impact of home-life in school surroundings: even home-life in its diminished and undomestic embodiment represented by my uncle. He was a relation: a being who had in him perhaps some of the same essence that went towards forming oneself as a separate entity. Would one's adult days be spent in worrying about the Trust? What was he going to do at Reading? Did he manage to have quite a lot of fun, or did he live in perpetual hell? These were things to be considered. Some apology for his sudden appearance seemed owed to Stringham: after that, I might try to do some work to be dealt with over the week-end.

When I reached the door I heard a complaining voice raised inside the room. Listening for a moment, I recognised the tone as Le Bas's. He was not best pleased. I went in. Le Bas had come to find Templer, and was now making a fuss about the cigarette smoke.

'Here is Jenkins, sir,' said Stringham. 'He has just been seeing his uncle out of the house.'

He glanced across at me, putting on an expression to indicate that the ball was now at my foot. The room certainly smelt abominably of smoke when entered from the passage. Le Bas was evidently pretty angry.

He was a tall, untidy man, clean-shaven and bald with large rimless spectacles that gave him a curiously Teutonic appearance: like a German priest. Whenever he removed these spectacles he used to rub his eyes vigorously with the back of his hand, and, perhaps as a result of this habit, his eyelids looked chronically red and sore. On some occasions, especially when vexed, he had the habit of getting into unusual positions, stretching his legs far apart and putting his hands on his hips; or standing at attention with heels together and feet turned outwards so far that is seemed impossible that he should not overbalance and fall flat on his face. Alternatively, especially when in a good humour, he would balance on the fender, with each foot pointing in the same direction. These postures gave him the air of belonging to some highly conventionalised form of graphic art: an oriental god, or knave of playing cards. He found difficulty with the letter 'R', and spoke—like Widmerpool—rather as if he were holding an object about the size of a nut in his mouth. To overcome this slight impediment he was careful to make his utterance always slow and very distinct. He was unmarried.

'Stringham appears to think that you can explain, Jenkins, why this room is full of smoke.'

'I am afraid my uncle came to see me, sir. He lit a cigarette without thinking.'

'Where is your uncle?'

'I have just been getting Cattle to let him out of the house.'

'How did he get in?'

'I think he came in at the front door, sir. I am not sure.'

I watched Stringham, from where he stood behind Le Bas, make a movement as of one climbing a rope, following these gestures with motions of his elbows to represent the beating of wings, both dumb-shows no doubt intended to demonstrate alternative methods of ingress possibly employed by Uncle Giles.

'But the door is locked.'

'I suppose he must have come in before Cattle shut the door, sir.'

'You both of you—' he turned towards Stringham to include him in the indictment '—know perfectly well that visitors are *not allowed to smoke in the house.*'

He certainly made it sound a most horrible offence. Quite apart from all the bother that this was going to cause, I felt a twinge of regret that I had not managed to control Uncle Giles more effectively: insomuch that I had been brought up to regard any form of allowing him his head as a display of weakness on the part of his own family.

'Of course as soon as he was told, sir . . .'

'But why is there this *smell?*'

Le Bas spoke as if smoking were bad enough in all conscience: but that, if people must smoke, they might at least be expected to do so without the propagation of perceptible fumes. Stringham said: 'I think the stub—the fag-end, sir—may have smouldered. It might have been a *Turkish* cigarette. I believe they have a rather stronger scent than Virginian.'

He looked round the room, and lifted a cushion from one of the chairs, shaking his head and sniffing. This was not the sort of conduct to improve a bad situation. Le Bas, although he disliked Templer, had never showed any special animus against Stringham or myself. Indeed Stringham was rather a favourite of his, because he was quick at knowing the sources of the quotations that Le Bas, when in a good temper, liked to make. However, like most schoolmasters, he was inclined to feel suspicious of all boys in his house as they grew older; not because he was in any sense an unfriendly man, though abrupt and reserved, but simply on account of the increased difficulty in handling the daily affairs of creatures who tended less and less to fit into a convenient and formalised framework: or, at least, a framework that was convenient to Le Bas because he himself had formalised it. That was how Le Bas's attitude of mind appeared to me in later years. At the time of his complaint about Uncle Giles's cigarette, he merely seemed to Stringham and myself a dangerous lunatic, to be humoured and outwitted.

'How am I to know that neither of you smoked too?' he said, sweeping aside the persistent denials that both of us immediately offered. 'How can I possibly tell?'

He sounded at the same time angry and despairing. He said: 'You must write a letter to your uncle, Jenkins, and ask him to *give his word* that neither of you smoked.'

'But I don't know his address, sir. All I know was that he was on his way to Reading.'

'By car?'

'By train, I think, sir.'

'Nonsense, nonsense,' said Le Bas. 'Not know your own uncle's address? Get it from your parents if necessary. I shall make myself very objectionable to you both until I see that letter.'

He raised his hands from his sides a little way, and clenched his fists, as if he were about to leap high into the air like an athlete, or ballet dancer; and in this taut attitude he seemed to be considering how best to carry out his threat, while he breathed heavily inward as if to imbibe the full savour of sausages and tobacco smoke that still hung about the room. At that moment there was a sound of talking, and some laughter, in the passage. The door was suddenly flung open, and Templer burst into the room. He was brought up short by the sight of Le Bas: in whom Templer immediately called up a new train of thought.

'Ah, Templer, there you are. You went to London, didn't you? What time did your train get in this evening?'

'It was late, sir,' said Templer, who seemed more than usually pleased with himself, though aware that there might be trouble ahead: he dropped his voice a little: 'I couldn't afford a cab, sir, so I walked.'

He had a thin face and light blue eyes that gave out a perpetual and quite mechanical sparkle: at first engaging: then irritating: and finally a normal and inevitable aspect of his features that one no longer noticed. His hair came down in a sharp angle on the forehead and his large pointed ears were like those attributed to satyrs, 'a race amongst whom Templer would have found some interests in common', as Stringham had said, when Templer's ears had been dignified by someone with this classical comparison. His eyes flashed and twinkled now like the lamps of a lighthouse as he fixed them on Le Bas, while both settled down to a duel about the railway time-table. Although Templer fenced with skill, it seemed pretty clear that he would be forced, in due course, to admit that he had taken a train later than that prescribed by regulations. But Le Bas, who not uncommonly forgot entirely about the matter in hand, suddenly seemed to lose interest in Templer's train and its time of arrival (just as he had for the moment abandoned the subject of Uncle Giles's cigarette); and he hurried away, muttering something about Greek unseens. For the moment we were free of him. Templer sat down in the armchair.

'Did he come in when you were having a gasper?' he said. 'The room reeks as if camels had been stabled in it.'

'You don't suppose we should be such fools as to smoke in the house,' said Stringham. 'It was Jenkins's uncle. But my dear Peter, why do you always go about dressed as if you were going to dance up and down a row of naked ladies singing "Dapper Dan was a very handy man", or something equally lyrical? You get more like an advertisement for gents' tailoring every day.'

'I think it is rather a good get-up for London,' said Templer, examining a handful of his suit. 'Every item chosen with thought, I can assure you.'

Stringham said: 'If you're not careful you will suffer the awful fate of the man who always knows the right clothes to wear and the right shop to buy them at.'

Templer laughed. He had a kind of natural jauntiness that seemed to require to be helped out by more than ordinary attention to what he wore: a quality that might in the last resort save him from Stringham's warning picture of the dangers of dressing too well. As a matter of fact, although he used to make fun of him to his face, Stringham was stimulated, perhaps a little impressed, by Templer; however often he might repeat that: 'Peter Templer's affectation that he has to find time to smoke at least one pipe a day bores me to death: nor did it cut any ice with me when he pointed out the empty half-bottle of whisky he had deposited behind the conservatory in Le Bas's garden.' The previous summer, Stringham and Templer had managed to attend a race-meeting together one half-holiday afternoon without being caught. Such adventures I felt to be a bit above my head, though I enjoyed hearing about them. I was, as I have said, not yet sure that I really liked Templer. His chief subjects of conversation were clothes, girls, and the persecutions of Le Bas, who, always sensitive to the possibility of being ragged, tended to make himself unnecessarily disagreeable in any quarter that might reasonably be thought to arouse special apprehension. Besides this, Templer could not possibly be looked upon as a credit to the house. He was not much of a hand at the sort of games that are played at school (though his build made him good at tennis and golf), so that he was in a weak position, being fairly lazy at work, to withstand prolonged aggression from a housemaster. Consequently Templer was involved in a continuous series of minor rows. The question of the train was evidently to become the current point for Le Bas's attack.

'Well, that all seems to have blown over for the moment,' Stringham said. 'You ought to keep your uncles in better order, Jenkins.'

I explained that Uncle Giles was known for being impossible to keep in order, and that he always left trouble in his wake. Templer said: 'I suppose Le Bas will go on pestering about that train. You know, I used to be a great pet of his. Now his only object seems to be to get me sacked.'

'He ought to be able to bring that off sooner or later with your help,' said Stringham. 'After all he is not an absolute fool: though pretty near it.'

'I believe he was quite an oar in his youth,' said Templer. 'At least he won the Diamond Sculls. Still, past successes at Henley don't make him any more tolerable to deal with as a housemaster.'

'He started life as a poet,' Stringham said. 'Did you know that? Years ago, after coming back from a holiday in Greece, he wrote some things that he thought were frightfully good. He showed them to someone or other who pointed out that, as a matter of fact, they were frightfully bad. Le Bas never got over it.'

'I can't imagine anything more appalling than a poem by Le Bas,' said Templer, 'though I'm surprised he doesn't make his pupils learn them.'

'Who did he show them to?' I asked.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Stringham. 'Henry James, or Robert Louis Stevenson, or someone like that.'

'Who on earth told you?'

'An elderly character who came to lunch. I believe he is an ambassador somewhere; or was. He used to run round with the same gang as Le Bas. He said Le Bas used to be tremendously promising as a young man. He was good at everything.'

'I can't imagine he was ever much good with the girls,' said Templer.

'Maybe not,' said Stringham. 'Not everyone has your singleness of aim. As a matter of fact do you think Le Bas has any sex life?'

'I don't know about Le Bas,' said Templer, who had evidently been waiting since his arrival back from London for the right moment to make some important announcement about himself, 'but I have. The reason I took the later train was because I was with a girl.'

'You devil.'

'I was a devil, I can assure you.'

'I suppose we shall have to hear about it,' said Stringham. 'Don't spare my feelings. Did you hold hands at the cinema? Where did you meet?'

'In the street.'

'Do you mean you picked her up?'

'Yes.'

'Fair or dark?'

'Fair.'

'And how was the introduction effected?'

'She smiled at me.'

'A tart, in other words.'

'I suppose she was, in a kind of way,' said Templer, 'but quite young.'

'You know, Peter, you are just exactly the sort of boy my parents warned me against.'

'I went back to her flat.'

'How did you acquit yourself?'

'It was rather a success; except that the scent she used was absolutely asphyxiating. I was a bit afraid Le Bas might notice it on my clothes.'

'Not after the cigarette smoked by Jenkins's uncle. Was it a well appointed apartment?'

'I admit the accommodation was a bit on the squalid side,' said Templer. 'You can't have everything for a quid.'

'That wasn't very munificent, was it?'

'All I had. That was why I had to walk from the station.'

'You seem to have been what Le Bas would call "a very unwise young man".'

'I see no reason why Le Bas should be worried by the matter, if he didn't notice the scent.'

'What an indescribably sordid incident,' said Stringham. 'However, let's hear full details.'

'Not if you don't want to be told them.'

'We do.'

Templer was supplying further particulars when Le Bas appeared in the room again. He seemed increasingly agitated, and said: 'Templer, I want you to come and show me in the time-table which train you took. I have telephoned to the station and have been told that the one you should have travelled on was *not* late—and Jenkins, don't forget that I shall expect to see that letter from your uncle by the end of the week. You had better keep him up to it, Stringham, as it is just as much in your interests as his that the matter should be cleared up.'

He tore off up the passage with Templer following behind at a slower pace. Stringham said: 'Peter is crazy. He really will get shot out sooner or later.'

Although incomplete, the story of Templer's London adventure—to be recapitulated on countless future occasions—had sufficiently amplified the incident for its significance to be inescapably clear to Stringham and myself. This was a glimpse through that mysterious door, once shut, that now seemed to stand ajar. It was as if sounds of far-off conflict, or the muffled din of music and shouting, dimly heard in the past, had now come closer than ever before. Stringham smiled to himself and whistled. I think he felt a little uneasy in the awareness that Templer was one up on him now. He did not discuss the matter further: I too had no comment to make before thinking things over. After a time Templer returned to the room. He said: 'What an infernal nuisance that man Le Bas is. I think he is going to write to my father. I particularly do not want trouble at this moment.'

'He seems to have developed a mania for letters flying in all directions,' said Stringham. 'However, I feel competent to deal with his puny onslaughts. Meanwhile, I should like to hear more of this unfortunate incident which you were in the course of describing with such a wealth of colour. Begin at the beginning, please.'

The episode that Stringham continued to call 'Templer's unfortunate incident', not startlingly interesting in itself, somehow crystallised my impression of Templer's character: rather in the same way that seeing Widmerpool coming home from his 'run' had established a picture of him in my mind, not different from the earlier perception held there, but one set in a clearer focus. Templer's adventure indicated the lengths to which he was prepared to go, and behaviour that had previously seemed to me needless—and even rather tiresome—bravado on his part harmonised with a changing and widening experience. I found that I suddenly liked him better. His personality seemed to have fallen into place. There could be no doubt that he himself felt a milestone to have been passed; and, probably for this reason, became in some ways a quieter, more agreeable, friend. In due course, though not before the end of the term had been reached, Le Bas agreed to some sort of a compromise about the train: Templer admitting that he had been wrong in not returning earlier, at the same time producing evidence to show that alterations in the time-table might reasonably be supposed to have misled him. This saved Le Bas's face, and the matter was allowed to drop at the expense of some minor penalty. The question of Uncle Giles's cigarette was, however, pursued with extraordinary relentlessness into the New Year. My uncle's lapse seemed in some manner to have brought home to Le Bas the suspicion that Stringham and I might have developed a tendency, no less pernicious than Templer's, to break rules; and he managed in a number of small ways to make himself, as he had promised, decidedly obnoxious to both of us. I wrote twice to Uncle Giles, though without much hope of hearing from him. Months later, the second letter arrived back from his last address marked 'Gone Away': just as if—as Stringham had remarked—my uncle had been a fox. This envelope finally satisfied Le Bas; but in future he was never quite the same either to Stringham or myself, the deterioration of his relations with Stringham leading ultimately to the incident of 'Braddock alias Thorne', an occasion which illustrated, curiously enough, another aspect of Widmerpool, though in it he played an entirely subordinate part.

This rather absurd affair, which did no one great credit, took place the following summer. Stringham, Templer and I were still messing together; and by then both of them had become so much part of my existence at school that it seemed strange to me that I had ever had doubts about either as a companion: though Stringham remained the one with whom I had most in common. Even now it seems to me that I spent a large proportion of my life in their close company, although the time that we were all three together was less than eighteen months. Their behaviour exemplified two different sides of life, in spite of some outward similarity in their tastes. For Templer, there was no truth except in tangible things: though he was not ambitious. Stringham, as I now see him, was romantic, and would perhaps have liked to play a somewhat different rôle from that which varying moods, and love of eccentricity, entailed upon him. Personally, I was aware of no particular drift to my life at that time. The days passed, and only later could their inexorable comment be recorded; and, pointless in some respects as was the Braddock alias Thorne episode, it retains a place, though not a specially admirable one, in my recollections of Stringham especially.

The three of us had gone for a walk one Sunday afternoon and were wandering about, rather aimlessly, in the heat; Stringham and Templer having wished to proceed in opposite directions. Passing the police-station, which we had finally reached without yet deciding on a line of march, Stringham had paused to read the posters pasted up outside: where, among a collection of notices referring to lost dogs, stolen jewellery, and foot-and-mouth disease, was reproduced the likeness of a man wanted for fraud. He was called 'Braddock alias Thorne', and his portrait showed one of those blurred, nondescript countenances, familiar in advertisements depicting persons who testify that patent medicine has banished their uric acid, or that application of some more efficacious remedy has enabled them to dispense with the use of a truss. The writing under the picture said that Braddock alias Thorne (who seemed to have committed an unusually large number of petty offences) was a man of respectable appearance, probably dressed in a black suit. The description was hardly borne out by what could be resolved from the photograph, which showed a bald, middle-aged criminal in spectacles, who looked capable of any enormity. Stringham remarked that the picture resembled President Woodrow Wilson. Templer said: 'It is much more like Le Bas.'

'More of a poet,' said Stringham, who loved to emphasise this side of Le Bas's personality; and had indeed built up a picture of his housemaster as a man whose every spare moment was spent in scribbling verses with the help of a rhyming dictionary. He said: 'There is a touch of distinction about Braddock alias Thorne, and absolutely none about Le Bas.'

'Must we spend the whole afternoon reading this stuff?' said Templer. 'It is about as interesting as the house notice-board. Let's go somewhere where I can have my pipe. There is no point in trudging about the town on Sunday.'

And so we turned about towards the fields, passing the house again, and entering an area of dusty cow-parsley and parched meadows. While still on the road the figure of Widmerpool appeared in front of us. He was tramping along in the sunlight, swinging arms and legs like an automaton of which the mechanism might be slightly out of order. We walked behind him for a time, Stringham doing an imitation of the way Widmerpool put his feet to the ground. From an unreasoning fear of the embarrassment that would be caused me if Widmerpool should look back and himself observe Stringham's agitated pantomime, I persuaded him to stop this improvisation. I had remained in some odd manner interested in Widmerpool since that night in the fog; and, although Stringham's imitation was ludicrously exact, to think that Widmerpool might see it was for some reason painful to me; though I was almost sorry when the time came to turn off the road and leave Widmerpool to disappear in a distant cloud of dust.

'I don't know what I should do without Widmerpool,' Stringham said. 'He keeps me young.'

'I sometimes wonder whether he is a human being at all,' Templer said. 'He certainly doesn't move like one.'

We passed beyond the railway line to pasture, where Templer lit up his horrible, stubby pipe, and argued as we walked along about the age of the Dolly Sisters, one of whom Stringham held to be the mother of the other. The sun was too hot to make our way straight across the grass, so that we moved along by hedges, where there was some little shade. Templer was still vigorously contesting Stringham's theory of relationship, when we came through some trees and faced a low bank, covered with undergrowth, which stood between us and the next field. The road was by this time fairly far away. Stringham and Templer now ceased to discuss the Dolly Sisters, and both took a run at this obstacle. Stringham got over first, disappearing down the far side: from which a sort of cry, or exclamation, sounded. As Templer came to the top of the mound of grass, I noticed him snatch his pipe from his mouth and jump. I came up the slope at my leisure, behind the other two, and, reaching the crest, saw them at the foot of the bank. There was an unexpectedly deep drop to the ground. In the field below, Stringham and Templer were talking to Le Bas, who was reclining on the ground, leaning on one elbow.

Stringham was bending forward a little, talking hard. Templer had managed to get his pipe back into his pocket, or was concealing it in his hand, because, when I reached the level of the field, it had disappeared: although the rank, musty odour of the shag which he was affecting at that period swept from time to time through the warm air, indicating that the tobacco was still alight in the neighbourhood. Le Bas had in his hand a small blue book. It was open. I saw from the type face that it contained verse. His hat hung from the top of his walking stick, which he had thrust into the ground, and his bald head was sweating a bit on top. He crouched there in the manner of a large animal—some beast alien to the English countryside, a yak or sea-lion—taking its ease: marring, as Stringham said later, the beauty of the summer afternoon. However, Le Bas appeared to be in a moderately good humour. He was saying to Stringham: 'I don't know why I should tolerate this invasion of my favourite spot. Cannot you all understand that I come here to get away from people like you and Jenkins and Templer? I want peace and quiet for once: not to be surrounded by my pupils.'

'It is a nice place, sir,' said Stringham, smiling, though not in the least committing himself by too much friendliness all at once.

Le Bas turned without warning to his book, and, picking it up from the ground, began to read aloud in his guttural, controlled voice:

'"Ah! leave the smoke, the wealth, the roar
Of London, and the bustling street,
For still, by the Sicilian shore,
The murmur of the Muse is sweet,

Still, still, the suns of summer greet
The mountain-grave of Helikê,
And shepherds still their songs repeat,
Where breaks the blue Sicilian sea.

' "Theocritus! thou canst restore
The pleasant years, and over-fleet;
With thee we live as men of yore,
We rest where running waters meet:
And then we turn unwilling feet
And seek the world—so must it be—
We may not linger in the heat
Where breaks the blue Sicilian sea!" '

He shut the book with a snap, and said: 'Now can any one of you tell me who wrote that?'

We made various suggestions—Templer characteristically opting for Shakespeare—and then Stringham said: 'Matthew Arnold.'

'Not a bad shot,' said Le Bas. 'It is Andrew Lang as a matter of fact. Fine lines, you know.'

Another fetid whiff of Templer's shag puffed its way through the ether. It seemed impossible that Le Bas should remain much longer unaware that a pipe was smoking somewhere near him. However, he seemed to be getting into his stride on the subject of poetry. He said: 'There are descriptive verses by Arnold somewhat similar in metre that may have run in your head, Stringham. Things like:

' "The clouds are on the Oberland,
The Jungfrau's snows look faint and far;
But bright are those green fields at hand,
And through those fields comes down the Aar."

'Rather a different geographical situation, it is true, but the same mood of invoking melancholy by graphic description of natural features of the landscape.'

Stringham said: 'The Andrew Lang made me think of:

' "O singer of Persephone!
In the dim meadows desolate
Dost thou remember Sicily?"

'Do you know that, sir? I don't know how it goes on, but the lines keep on repeating.'

Le Bas looked a little uneasy at this. It was evident that Stringham had displeased him in some way. He said rather gruffly: 'It is a villanelle. I believe Oscar Wilde wrote it, didn't he? Not a very distinguished versifier.'

Quickly abandoning what had apparently been taken as a hostile standpoint, Stringham went on: 'And then Heraclitus——'

The words had an instantaneous effect. Le Bas's face cleared at once, and he broke in with more reverberance even than before:

' "Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales awake,
For Death he taketh all away, but them he cannot take."

'I think you are right, Stringham. Good. Very good. In fact, alpha plus. It all has the same note of nineteenth-century nostalgia for a classical past largely of their own imagining.'

Le Bas sighed, and, removing his spectacles, began in his accustomed manner to massage his eyelids, which appeared to be a trifle less inflamed than normally.

'I looked up Heraclitus in the classical dictionary, sir,' said Stringham, 'and was rather surprised to find that he fed mostly on grass and made his house on a dung-hill. I can quite understand his wanting to be a guest if that is how he lived at home, but I shouldn't have thought that he would have been a very welcome one. Though it is true that one would probably remember him afterwards.'

Le Bas was absolutely delighted at this remark. He laughed aloud, a rare thing with him. 'Splendid, Stringham, splendid,' he said. 'You have confused the friend of Callimachus with a philosopher who lived probably a couple of centuries earlier. But I quite agree that if the other Heraclitus's habits had been those you describe, he would not have been any encouragement to hospitality.'

He laughed a lot, and this would have been the moment to leave him, and go on our way. We should probably have escaped without further trouble if Templer—feeling no doubt that Stringham had been occupying too much of the stage—had not begun to shoot out radiations towards Le Bas, long and short, like an ocular Morse code, saying at the same time in his naturally rather harsh voice: 'I am afraid we very nearly jumped on you, sir.'

Le Bas at once looked less friendly. In any case it was an unwise remark to make and Templer managed to imply a kind of threat in the tone, probably the consequence in some degree of his perpetual war with Le Bas. As a result of this observation, Le Bas at once launched into a long, and wholly irrelevant, speech on the topic of his new scheme for the prevention of the theft of books from the slab in the hall: a favourite subject of his for wearing down resistance in members of his house. It was accordingly some time before we were at last able to escape from the field, and from Le Bas: who returned to his book of verse. Fortunately the pipe seemed to have extinguished itself during the latter period of Le Bas's harangue; or perhaps its smell was absorbed by that of the gas-works, which, absent in the earlier afternoon, had now become apparent.

Behind the next hedge Templer took the pipe from his pocket and tapped it out against his heel.

'That was a near one,' he said. 'I burnt my hand on that bloody pipe. Why on earth did you want to go on like that about poetry?'

'How Le Bas failed to notice the appalling stink from your pipe will always be a mystery,' Stringham said. 'His olfactory sense must be deficient—probably adenoids. Why, therefore, did he make so much fuss about Jenkins's uncle's cigarette? It is an interesting question.'

'But Heraclitus, or whoever it was,' said Templer. 'It was all so utterly unnecessary.'

'Heraclitus put him in a good temper,' said Stringham. 'It was your threatening to jump on him that made the trouble.'

'It was your talking about Oscar Wilde.'

'Nonsense.'

'Anyway,' said Templer, 'Le Bas has thoroughly spoiled my afternoon. Let's go back.'

Stringham agreed, and we pursued a grassy path bordered with turnip fields. A short distance farther on, this track narrowed, and traversed a locality made up of allotments, dotted here and there with huts, or potting-sheds. Climbing a gate, we came out on to the road. There was a garage opposite with a shack beside it, in front of which stood some battered iron tables and chairs. A notice offered 'Tea and Minerals'. It was a desolate spot. Stringham said: 'We might just drop in here for a cooling drink.'

Templer and I at once protested against entering this uninviting booth, which had nothing whatever to recommend it outwardly. All shops were out-of-bounds on

Sunday, and there was no apparent reason for running the risk of being caught in such a place; especially since Le Bas might easily decide to return to the house along this road. However, Stringham was so pressing that in the end we were persuaded to accompany him into the shack. The front room was empty. A girl in a grubby apron with untidy bobbed hair came in from the back, where a gramophone was playing:

Everything is buzz-buzz now,
Everything is buzz, somehow:
You ring up on your buzzer,
And buzz with one anozzer,
Or, in other words, pow-wow.

The girl moved towards us with reluctance. Stringham ordered ginger-beer. Templer said: 'This place is too awful. Anyway, I loathe sweet drinks.'

We sat down at one of the iron tables, covered with a cloth marked with jagged brown stains. The record stopped: the needle continuing to scratch round and round its centre, revolving slower and slower, until at last the mechanism unwound itself and ceased to operate. Stringham asked the girl if there was a telephone. She made some enquiries from an unseen person, still farther off than the gramophone, and an older woman's voice joined in discussion of the matter. Then the girl came back and told Stringham he could use the telephone in the office of the garage, if he liked to come with her to the back of the building. Stringham disappeared with the girl. Templer said: 'What on earth is happening? He can't be trying to get off with that female.'

We drank our ginger-beer.

'What the hell is he up to?' said Templer again, after some minutes had passed. 'I hope we don't run into Le Bas coming out of here.'

We finished our drinks, and Templer tried, without success, to engage the girl in conversation, when she came to clear plates and glasses from another table. At last Stringham reappeared, rather hurriedly, his usually pale face slightly flushed. He drank off his ginger-beer at a gulp and said: 'We might be getting along now. I will pay for this.'

Out on the road again, Templer said: 'First we are rushed into this horrible place: then we are rushed out again. What is supposed to be on?"

Stringham said: 'I've just had a word with the police.'

'What about?'

'On the subject of Braddock alias Thorne.'

'Who's that?'

'The chap they wanted for fraud.'

'What about him?'

'Just to inform them of his whereabouts.'

'Is this a joke?'

'Yes.'

'Where did you tell them to look?'

'In a field beyond the railway line.'

'Why?'

'Set your mind to it.'

'Le Bas?'

'Neat, wasn't it?'

'What did they say?'

'I rang up in the character of Le Bas himself,' Stringham said. 'I told them that a man "described as looking rather like me" had been piling up bills at various shops in the town where I had accounts: that I had positive information that the man in question had been only a few minutes earlier at the place I described.'

'Did the police swallow that?'

'They asked me to come to the station. I pretended to get angry at the delay, and—in a really magnificent Le Bas outburst—I said that I had an urgent appointment to address the confirmation candidates (although, as far as I can remember, it is the wrong time of year to be confirmed): that I was late already and must set off at once: and that, if the man were not arrested, I should hold the local police responsible.'

'I foresee the hell of a row,' said Templer. 'Still, one must admit that it was a good idea. Meanwhile, the sooner we get back to the house and supply a few alibis, the better.'

We walked at a fairly smart pace down the road Widmerpool had traversed when I had seen him returning from his run at the end of the previous year: the tar now soft under foot from the heat of the summer sun. Inside, the house was quiet and comparatively cool. Templer, who had recently relaxed his rule of never reading for pleasure, took up *Sanders of the River,* while Stringham and I discussed the probable course that events would take if the police decided to act as a result of the telephone message. We sat about until the bell began to ring for evening chapel.

'Come on,' said Stringham. 'Let's see if there is any news.'

At the foot of the stairs, we met Widmerpool in the hall. He had just come in from outside, and he seemed unusually excited about something. As we passed—contrary in my experience to all precedent so far as his normal behaviour was concerned—he addressed himself to Stringham, in point of age the nearest to him, saying in his shrillest voice: 'I say, do you know Le Bas has been *arrested?'*

He stood there in the shadowy space by the slab in a setting of brown-paper parcels, dog-eared school books, and crumbs—a precinct of which the moral and physical cleansing provoked endless activity in the mind of Le Bas—and stood with his feet apart and eyes expanded, his panting, as Templer had justly described it, like that of an elderly lap-dog: his appearance suggesting rather some unusual creature actually bred in those depths by the slab, amphibious perhaps, though largely belonging to this land-world of blankets and carbolic: scents which attained their maximum density at this point, where they met and mingled with the Irish stew, which, coming from the territories of laundry baskets and coke, reached its most potent force on the first step of the stairs.

Stringham turned to Widmerpool. 'I am not surprised,' he said coldly. 'How did it happen?'

'I was coming back from my walk,' said Widmerpool, in spite of his excitement lowering his voice a little, as though touching on a very sacred subject in thus referring to his personal habits, 'I was coming back from my walk,' he repeated, dwelling on the words, 'and, as I strolled across one of the fields by the railway line, I saw Le Bas lying on the ground reading a book.'

'I hope you weren't smoking, Widmerpool,' said Templer.

Widmerpool ignored this interpolation, and went on: 'Then I noticed that there was a policeman making across the field towards Le Bas. When the policeman—a big, fat fellow—reached Le Bas he seemed to begin reading something from a notebook. Anyway, Le Bas looked very surprised at first. Then he began to get up. I suppose he must have caught his foot in something, because he stumbled. Evidently the policeman thought he was going to try and escape.'

'What happened when he stumbled?' asked Stringham.

'The policeman took his arm.'

'Did he handcuff him?'

'No; but he grabbed him rather roughly.'

'What did Le Bas say?'

'I couldn't hear. It looked as if he were making an awful fuss. You know the way he stutters when he is angry.’

‘And so the policeman led him off?’

‘What *could* he have done?’ said Widmerpool, who seemed utterly overwhelmed at the idea that his housemaster should have been arrested.

Stringham asked: ‘Did anyone else see this?’

‘A soldier and a girl appeared from a ditch and watched them go off together.’

‘Did Le Bas notice you?’

‘I kept behind the hedge. I didn’t want to get mixed up with anything awkward.’

‘That was wise of you, Widmerpool,’ said Stringham. ‘Have you told anyone what you saw?’

‘Only F. F. Fletcher and Calthorpe Major. I met them on the way back. What can Le Bas have done?’

‘Do you mean to tell me you don’t know?’ said Stringham.

Widmerpool looked taken aback. His breathing had become less heavy while he unburdened himself of his story. Now once more it began to sound like an engine warming up.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

“I don’t *mean* anything,’ said Stringham, ‘except that I am not particularly surprised.’

‘But tell me what you think it is.’

Widmerpool spoke almost beseechingly.

‘Now look here, Widmerpool,’ said Stringham, ‘I am awfully sorry. If you have never noticed for yourself anything about our housemaster, it is hardly my place to tell you. You are higher up in the house than I am. You have to shoulder a certain amount of additional responsibility on that account. It is not for me to spread scandals in advance. I fear that we shall all be reading about Le Bas quite soon enough in the papers.’

We left Widmerpool on the steps of the house: to all intents and purposes, a fish recently hauled from the water, making powerful though failing efforts at respiration.

'That boy will be the death of me,' said Stringham, as we walked quickly together up the road.

Most of the crowd who paced up and down by the chapel, passing backwards and forwards over the cobbles, while masters tried to herd them into the building, already knew something of Le Bas's arrest: though only Calthorpe Major, armed with advanced information from Widmerpool, seemed yet to have had time to write home on the subject. 'I sat straight down and sent off a letter to my people about Le Bas having been removed to prison at last,' Calthorpe Major was saying. 'They never liked him. He got his Leander the same time as my father. I've promised to let them know further details as soon as I can get them.' He moved on, repeating the story to friends who had not yet heard the news. Stringham, too, pushed his way through the mob of boys, collecting versions of the scene that had taken place. These were many in number. The bell quickened its ring and stopped with a kind of explosion of sound as the clock began to strike the hour. We were swept up the steps. Stringham said: 'I am afraid it was all in rather doubtful taste. In some ways I regret having been concerned in it. One is such a creature of impulse.'

Although the air under the high vault struck almost chill after the warmth outside in the yard, the evening sun streamed through the windows of the chapel. Rows of boys, fidgeting but silent, provoked, as always, an atmosphere of expectancy before the service began. The voluntary droned quietly for a time, gradually swelling into a bellow: then stopped with a jerk, and began again more gently: remaining for a time at this muted level of sound. Emotional intensity seemed to meet and mingle with an air of indifference, even of cruelty within these ancient walls. Youth and Time here had made, as it were, some compromise. Le Bas came in late, just before the choir, and strode unsteadily towards his stall under the high neo-gothic canopy of carved wood. He looked discomposed. The surface of his skull was red and shining, and, more than once, he seemed to mutter to himself.

Cobberton, another housemaster, and a parson, through gold-rimmed spectacles looked across from the far side of the aisle, lips tightly caught together and eyebrows raised. He and Le Bas had chronically strained relations with one another, and, as it turned out, by one of those happy, or unhappy, chances, Cobberton had finally been the man to establish Le Bas's identity with the police. This fact was subsequently revealed by Cobberton, who also disclosed generally that the policeman who had taken down Stringham's telephone message on the subject of Braddock alias Thorne had remarked to Le Bas, after the matter had been cleared up: 'He'd fair got your manner of speech to a T, sir, whoever he was.'

The congregation rose to sing a hymn. I looked round the packed seats, and lines of faces arranged in tiers. Stringham was opposite, standing with his arms folded, not singing. His cheeks had lost the flush they had taken on during the excitement of all that had followed his telephoning the police-station and had now returned to their usual pallor. He looked grave, lost in thought, almost seraphic: a carved figure symbolising some virtue like Resignation or Self-sacrifice. Templer I could not see, because he sat on the same side of the aisle as myself and was too far distant to be visible from my place. On the other side, away to the left, Widmerpool was holding a book in front of him, singing hard: his mouth opening and shutting sharply, more than ever like some uncommon specimen of marine life. He turned his eyes from time to time towards the rafters and high spaces of the roof. I could see his lips forming the syllables. The words of the verse seemed especially applicable to his case, since he was leaving at the end of the term; and I wondered whether the same thought was passing through his own mind:

As o'er each continent and island
The dawn leads on another day,
The voice of prayer is never silent
Nor dies the strain of praise away.

Somehow I felt rather moved as the hymn rolled on. A group of boys sitting behind me began to chant a descant of their own; making a good deal of noise, not entirely disagreeable. Cobberton noticed the sound, and frowned. Widmerpool also stopped singing for a second and he too glanced across reprovingly. That was my last memory of him at school, because he left, for good, a few weeks later; although owing to some misunderstanding—perhaps Le Bas's mind was more confused than usual on account of the trick played on him—Widmerpool's name continued to appear in the house-list of the following September: a final assertion of the will to remain and strive further for unattainable laurels.

2.

It is not easy—perhaps not even desirable—to judge other people by a consistent standard. Conduct obnoxious, even unbearable, in one person may be readily tolerated in another; apparently indispensable principles of behaviour are in practice relaxed—not always with impunity—in the interests of those whose nature seems to demand an exceptional measure. That is one of the difficulties of committing human action to paper, a perplexity that really justifies the alternations of comedy with tragedy in Shakespearian drama: because some characters and some deeds (Uncle Giles's, as I have mentioned) may be thought of only in terms appropriate to themselves, irrespective of their consequence. On the stage, however, masks are assumed with some regard to procedure: in everyday life, the participants act their parts without consideration either for suitability of scene or for the words spoken by the rest of the cast: the result is a general tendency for things to be brought to the level of farce even when the theme is serious enough. This disregard for the unities is something that cannot be circumvented in human life; though there are times when close observation reveals, one way or another, that matters may not have been so irreconcilable at the close of the performance as they may have appeared in the Second Act.

For example, in the course of having tea for nine months of the year with Stringham and Templer, the divergent nature of their respective points of view became increasingly clear to me, though compared with some remote figure like

Widmerpool (who, at that time, seemed scarcely to belong to the same species as the other two) they must have appeared, say to Parkinson, as identical in mould: simply on account of their common indifference to a side of life—notably football—in which Parkinson himself showed every sign of finding absorbing interest. As I came gradually to know them better, I saw that, in reality, Stringham and Templer provided, in their respective methods of approaching life, patterns of two very distinguishable forms of existence, each of which deserved consideration in the light of its own special peculiarities: both, at the same time, demanding adjustment of a scale of values that was slowly taking coherent shape so far as my own canons of behaviour were concerned. This contrast was in the main a matter of temperament. In due course I had opportunities to recognise how much their unlikeness to each other might also be attributed to dissimilar background.

The autumn of the year of Le Bas's arrest turned to winter. Stringham was leaving at Christmas. Before going up to the university, he was to stay for some months with his father in Kenya, a trip for which he showed little enthusiasm, his periods of gloom becoming, if anything, of longer duration and more intense. As the time drew near, he used to give prolonged imitations of his father's probable demeanour in handling the natives of his new African home, in the course of which the elder Stringham—reputed to drink too much, though noted for elaborately good manners—employed circumlocutions a little in the manner of Lord Chesterfield to faithful coloured retainers envisaged in terms of Man Friday or Uncle Tom. 'I imagine everyone in Kenya will be terribly hearty and wear shorts and drink sun-downers and all that sort of thing,' Stringham used to say. 'However, it will be nice to leave school and be on one's own at last, even though it is to be one's own in darkest Africa in those great open spaces where men are men.' It was arranged that I should lunch at his mother's house on my way through London on the first day of the holidays. The weather, from being wet and mild, had changed to frost and bright sun; and we travelled up together through white and sparkling fields.

'You will probably meet Buster at lunch,' Stringham said.

'Who is Buster?'

'My mother's current husband.'

I knew nothing of this figure except that he was called Lieutenant-Commander Foxe, and that Stringham had once described him as 'a polo-playing sailor'. When asked what Buster was like, Stringham had replied that he preferred naval officers who were 'not so frightfully grand'. He had not elaborated this description, which did not at that time convey much to me, most of the naval officers I had come across being accustomed to speak of themselves as far from grand and chronically hard-up; though he added in amplification—as if the presence of a husband in his mother's house was in itself odd enough in all conscience—that Buster was 'always about the place'.

'Doesn't he ever go to sea?'

'At present he is at the Admiralty; and, I believe, starting some leave at any moment. However, I suppose it is better to have him living in the house than arriving there at all hours of the day and night disturbing the servants.'

This sketch of Buster evoked an impression of behaviour decidedly unsatisfactory; and for the rest of the journey I was curious to meet someone of mature years and such apparently irregular habits. When we arrived in London, Stringham explained that he wanted to buy some tropical clothes; and, as this proved an amusing occupation, we did not reach the house again until late in the morning; having delivered the luggage there on our arrival. It was a rather gloomy double-fronted façade in a small street near Berkeley Square: the pillars of the entrance flanked on either side with hollow cones for the linkmen to extinguish their torches.

'Come up to the library,' Stringham said. 'We shall probably find Buster there.'

I followed up the stairs into a room on the first floor, generally crimson in effect, containing a couple of large Regency bookcases. A female portrait, by appearance a Romney, hung over the fireplace, and there was a malachite urn of immense size on a marble-topped table by the window: presented, I learnt later, by the Tsar to one of the Warringtons who had headed some diplomatic mission to Russia at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Buster was standing beside this urn, cleaning a cigarette-holder with the end of a match-stick. He was tall, and at once struck me as surprisingly young; with the slightly drawn expression that one recognises in later life as the face of a man who does himself pretty well, while not ceasing to take plenty of exercise. His turn-out was emphatically excellent, and he diffused waves of personality, strong, chilling gusts of icy air, a protective element that threatened to freeze into rigidity all who came through the door, before they could approach him nearer.

'Hullo, you fellows,' he said, without looking up from his cigarette-holder, at which he appeared to be sneering, as if this object were not nearly valuable enough to presume to belong to him.

'Hullo.'

Stringham took a step forward, and, without moving farther into the room, stood for a moment looking more than ever like Veronese's Alexander. Then he introduced me. Buster slipped his cigarette-holder into his pocket, and nodded. He had a way of making one feel remarkably ill at ease. He said: 'It's a blow, but I have to leave you.'

'Aren't you lunching here?' said Stringham.

'I am trying to buy a Bentley from a man awfully cheap. I've got to keep him sweet.'

'Did you sell the Isotta?'

'I had to.'

Buster smiled a little sadly, as if in half public acknowledgment that he himself had long since seen through any illusions once possessed regarding the extent of his wife's fortune; but indicating by the same smile that he had learnt how to bear disappointment. Stringham said: 'Where are you taking him?'

'Claridge's.'

'Will you ply him with drink?'

'Hock, I think. That is what I am feeling like myself. Are you coming to the Russian Ballet tonight?'

'I didn't know I was asked,' Stringham said. 'I'd like to.'

'Do.'

'Anyone for lunch?'

'Only Tuffy. She will be glad to see you.'

'Then we will wish you good luck with your deal.'

I was conscious that some sort of a duel had been taking place, and that Stringham had somehow gained an advantage by, as it were, ordering Buster from the room. Buster himself began to smile, perhaps recognising momentary defeat, to be disregarded from assurance of ultimate victory. Like a man effortlessly winning a walking-race, he crossed the carpet with long, easy strides: at the same time separating from himself some of the eddies of cold air that surrounded him, and bequeathing them to the atmosphere of the room after he had left it. I was relieved at his departure. Stringham moved across to the window.

He said: 'He gets himself up rather like Peter Templer, doesn't he?'

'Have they ever met?'

To my surprise, Stringham laughed aloud.

'Good Lord, no,' he said.

'Wouldn't they like each other?'

'It is an interesting question.'

'Why not try it?'

'I am devoted to Peter,' Stringham said, 'but really I'm not sure one could have him in the house, could one?'

'Oh?'

'Well, I don't really mean that,' said Stringham. 'Not literally, of course. But you must admit that Peter doesn't exactly fit in with home life.'

'I suppose not.'

'You agree?'

'I see what you mean.'

I certainly saw what Stringham meant; even though the sort of home life that included Buster provided a picture rather different from that which the phrase ordinarily suggested to me from my own experience. At the moment, however, I was chiefly conscious of a new balance of relationship between Stringham and Templer. Although their association together possessed a curiously unrelenting quality, like the union of partners in a business rather than the intimacy of friends, I had always thought of Templer as a far closer and more established crony of Stringham's than was I myself; and it had never crossed my mind that Stringham might share at all the want of confidence that, at least in the earlier stages of our acquaintance, I had sometimes felt towards Templer. Templer certainly did not appear to be designed for domestic life: though for that matter the same might be said of Stringham. Before I could ponder the question further, someone descending the stairs passed in through the door left ajar by Buster. Catching sight of this person, Stringham called out: 'Tuffy, how are you?'

The woman who came into the room was about thirty or thirty-five, I suppose, though at the time she impressed me as older. Dressed in black, she was dark and not bad-looking, with a beaky nose. 'Charles,' she said; and, as she smiled at him, she seemed so positively delighted that her face took on a sudden look of intensity, almost of anxiety, the look that women's faces sometimes show at a moment of supreme pleasure.

That quick, avid glance disappeared immediately, though she continued to smile towards him.

'This is Miss Weedon,' said Stringham, laughing in a friendly way, as he took her left hand in his right. 'How have you been, Tuffy?'

Though less glacial than Buster, Miss Weedon was not overwhelmingly affable when she gave me a palm that felt cool and brittle. She said in an aside: 'You know they nearly forgot to take a ticket for you for the Russian Ballet tonight.'

'Good gracious,' said Stringham. 'What next?'

However, he did not show any sign of being specially put out by this lapse on the part of his family.

'I saw to it that they got an extra one.'

'Thank you, Tuffy.'

She had perhaps hoped for something more exuberant in the way of gratitude, because her face hardened a little, while she continued to fix him with her smile.

'We have just been talking to Buster,' Stringham said, plainly dismissing the subject of the tickets.

She put her head a little on one side and remarked: 'I am sure that he was as charming as ever.'

'If possible, even more so.'

'Buster has been behaving *very* well,' she said.

'I am glad to hear it.'

'Now I must rush off and do some things for your mother before luncheon.'

She was gone in a flash. Stringham yawned. I asked about Miss Weedon. Stringham said: 'Tuffy? Oh, she used to be my sister's governess. She stays here a lot of the time. She does all my mother's odd jobs—especially the Hospital.'

He laughed, as if at the thought of the preposterous amount of work that Miss Weedon had to undertake. I was not very clear as to what 'the Hospital' might be; but accepted it as an activity natural enough for Mrs. Foxe.

'Tuffy is a great supporter of mine,' Stringham added: as if in explanation of something that needed explaining.

He did not extend this statement. A moment or two later his mother appeared. I thought her tremendously beautiful: though smaller than the photograph in Stringham's room had suggested. Still wearing a hat, she had just come into the house. She kissed him, and said: 'Everything is in a terrible muddle. I really can't decide whether or not I want to go to Glimber for Christmas. I feel one ought to; but it is so frightfully cold.'

'Come to Kenya with me, instead,' said Stringham. 'Glimber is much too draughty in the winter. Anyway, it would probably kill Buster, who is used to snug cabins.'

'It would be rather fun to spend Christmas on the boat.'

'Too jolly for words,' said Stringham.

'Buster had to lunch out. Did you see him?'

'I hear he is buying a new car.'

'He really did need one,' she said.

This could hardly have been meant for an apology, but her voice sounded a little apprehensive. Changing the subject, she turned to me and said: 'I think poor Mr. Le

Bas must be so glad that Charles has left at last. He used to write the most pathetic letters about him. Still, you weren't expelled, darling. That was clever of you.'

'It took some doing,' Stringham said.

In view of their relationship, this manner of talking was quite unlike anything I had been used to; though, in a general way, fitting the rough outline pieced together from scraps of information regarding his home, or stories about his mother, that Stringham had from time to time let fall. He had, for example, once remarked that she liked interfering in political matters, and I wondered whether some startling intrigue with a member, or members, of the Cabinet would be revealed during luncheon, which was announced a minute or two later. Miss Weedon came down the stairs after us, and, before following into the dining-room, had some sort of a consultation with the footman, to whom she handed a sheaf of papers. As we sat down, Stringham said: 'I hear we are going to the Russian Ballet tonight.'

'It was Buster's idea. He thought you would like it.'

'That was kind of him.'

'I expect you boys—can I still call you boys?—are going to a matinée this afternoon.'

I told her that I had, unfortunately, to catch a train to the country.

'Oh, but that is too sad,' she said, seeming quite cast down. 'Where are you making for?'

I explained that the journey was to the west of England, where my father was on the staff of a Corps Headquarters. Thinking that the exigencies of army life might in all likelihood be unfamiliar to her, I added something about often finding myself in a place different from that in which I had spent previous holidays.

'I know all about the army,' she said. 'My first husband was a soldier. That was ages ago, of course. Even apart from that we had a house on the Curragh, because he used to train his horses there—so that nothing about soldiering is a mystery to me.'

There was something curiously overpowering about her. Now she seemed to have attached the army to herself, like a piece of property rediscovered after lying for long years forgotten. Lord Warrington had, it appeared, commanded a cavalry brigade before he retired. She told stories of the Duke of Cambridge, and talked of Kitchener and his collection of china.

'Are you going to be a soldier too?' she asked.

'No.'

'I think Charles ought. Anyway for a time. But he doesn't seem awfully keen.'

'No,' said Stringham, 'he doesn't.'

'But your father liked his time in the Grenadiers,' she insisted. 'He always said it did him a lot of good.'

She looked so beseeching when she said this that Stringham burst out laughing; and I laughed too. Even Miss Weedon smiled at the notion that anything so transitory as service with the Grenadiers could ever have done Stringham's father good. Stringham himself had seemed to be on the edge of one of his fits of depression; but now he cheered up for a time: though his mother seemed to exhaust his energies and subdue him. This was not surprising, considering the force of her personality, which perhaps explained some of Buster's need for an elaborate mechanism of self-defence. Except this force, which had something unrestrained, almost alien, about it, she showed no sign whatever of her South African origin. It is true that I did not know what to expect as outward marks of such antecedents; though I had perhaps supposed that in some manner she would be less assimilated into the world in which she now lived. She said: 'This is the last time you will see Charles until he comes back from Kenya.'

'We meet in the autumn.'

'I wish I wasn't going,' Stringham said. 'It really is the most desperate bore. Can't I get out of it?'

'But, darling, you are sailing in two days' time. I thought you wanted to go. And your father would be so disappointed.'

'Would he?'

His mother sighed. Stringham's despondency, briefly postponed, was now once more in the ascendant. Miss Weedon said with emphasis: 'But you will be back soon.'

Stringham did not answer; but he shot her a look almost of hatred. She was evidently used to rough treatment from him, because she appeared not at all put out by this, and rattled on about the letters she had been writing that morning. The look of disappointment she had shown earlier was to be attributed, perhaps, to her being still unaccustomed to having him at home again, with the kindnesses and cruelties his presence entailed for her. The meal proceeded. Miss Weedon and Mrs. Foxe became involved in a discussion as to whether or not the head-gardener at Glimber was selling the fruit for his own profit. Stringham and I talked of school affairs. The luncheon party—the whole house—was in an obscure way depressing. I had looked forward to coming there, but was quite glad when it was time to go.

'Write and tell me anything that may happen,' said Stringham, at the door. 'Especially anything funny that Peter may do.'

I promised to report any of Templer's outstanding adventures, and we arranged to meet in nine or ten months' time.

'I shall long to come back to England,' Stringham said. 'Not that I specially favour the idea of universities. Undergraduates all look so wizened, and suède shoes appear to be compulsory.'

Berkeley Square, as I drove through it, was cold and bright and remote: like Buster's manner. I wondered how it would be to return to school with only the company of Templer for the following year; because there was no one else with any claim to take Stringham's place, so that Templer and I would be left alone together. Stringham's removal was going to alter the orientation of everyday life. I found a place in a crowded compartment, next to the engine, beside an elderly man wearing a check suit, who, for the whole journey, quarrelled quietly with a clergyman on the subject of opening the window, kept on taking down a dispatch-case from the rack and rummaging through it for papers that never seemed to be there, and in a general manner reminded me of the goings-on of Uncle Giles.

Uncle Giles's affairs had, in fact, moved recently towards something like a climax. After nearly two years of silence—since the moment when he had disappeared into the fog, supposedly on his way to Reading—nothing had been heard of him; until one day a letter had arrived, headed with the address of an hotel in the Isle of Man, the contents of which implied, though did not state, that he intended to get married. In anticipation of this contingency, my uncle advocated a thorough overhaul of the conditions of the Trust; and expressed, not for the first time, the difficulties that lay in the path of a man without influence.

This news caused my parents some anxiety; for, although Uncle Giles's doings during the passage of time that had taken place were unknown in detail, his connection with

Reading had been established, with fair certainty, to be the result of an association with a lady who lived there: some said a manicurist: others the widow of a garage-proprietor. There was, indeed, no reason why she should not have sustained both rôles. The topic was approached in the family circle with even more gloom, and horrified curiosity, than Uncle Giles's activities usually aroused: misgiving being not entirely groundless, since Uncle Giles was known to be almost as indiscriminate in dealings with the opposite sex as he was unreliable in business negotiation. His first serious misadventure, when stationed in Egypt as a young man, had, indeed, centred upon a love affair.

It was one of Uncle Giles's chief complaints that he had been 'put' into the army—for which he possessed neither Mrs. Foxe's romantic admiration nor her hard-headed grasp of military realities—instead of entering some unspecified profession in which his gifts would have been properly valued. He had begun his soldiering in a line regiment: later, with a view to being slightly better paid, exchanging into the Army Service Corps. I used to imagine him wearing a pill-box cap on the side of his head, making assignations under a sub-tropical sun with a beautiful lady dressed in a bustle and sitting in an open carriage driven by a coloured coachman; though such attire, as a matter of fact, belonged to a somewhat earlier period; and, even if circumstances resembled this picture in other respects, the chances were, on the whole, that assignations would be made, and kept, 'in mufti'.

There had been, in fact, two separate rows, which somehow became entangled together: somebody's wife, and somebody else's money: to say nothing of debts. At one stage, so some of his relations alleged, there had even been question of court-martial: not so much to incriminate my unfortunate uncle as to clear his name of some of the rumours in circulation. The court-martial, perhaps fortunately, was never convened, but the necessity for Uncle Giles to send in his papers was unquestioned. He travelled home by South Africa, arriving in Cape Town a short time before the outbreak of hostilities with the Boers. In that town he made undesirable friends—no doubt also encountering at this period Mrs. Foxe's father—and engaged in unwise transactions regarding the marketing of diamonds: happily not involving on his part any handling of the stones themselves. This venture ended almost disastrously; and, owing to the attitude taken up by the local authorities, he was unable to settle in Port Elizabeth, where he had once thought of earning a living. However, like most untrustworthy persons, Uncle Giles had the gift of inspiring confidence in a great many people with whom he came in contact. Even those who, to their cost, had known him for years, sometimes found difficulty in estimating the lengths to which he could carry his lack of reliability—and indeed sheer incapacity—in matters of business. When he returned to England he was therefore seldom out of a job, though usually, in his own words, 'starting at the bottom' on an ascent from which great things were to be expected.

In 1914 he had tried to get back into the army, but his services were declined for medical reasons by the War Office. Not long after the sinking of the Lusitania he obtained a post in the Ministry of Munitions; later transferring himself to the Ministry of Food, from which he eventually resigned without scandal. When the United States entered the war he contrived to find some sort of a job in the provinces at a depot formed for supplying 'comforts' to American troops. He had let it be known that he had made business connexions on the other side of the Atlantic, as a result of this employment. That was why there had been a suggestion--in which wish may have been father to thought in the minds of his relations—that he might take up a commercial post in Philadelphia. The letter from the Isle of Man, with its hint of impending marriage, seemed to indicate that any idea of emigration, if ever in existence, had been abandoned; whilst references throughout its several pages to 'lack of influence' brought matters back to an earlier, and more fundamental, stage in my uncle's presentation of his affairs.

This business of 'influence' was one that played a great part in Uncle Giles's philosophy of life. It was an article of faith with him that all material advancement in the world was the result of influence, a mysterious attribute with which he invested, to a greater or lesser degree, every human being on earth except himself. That the rich and nobly born automatically enjoyed an easy time of it through influence was, of course, axiomatic; and—as society moved from an older order—anybody who might have claims to be considered, at least outwardly, of the poor and lowly was also included by him among those dowered with this almost magic appanage. In cases such as that of the window-cleaner, or the man who came to read the gas-meter, the advantage enjoyed was accounted to less obvious—but, in fact, superior—opportunity for bettering position in an increasingly egalitarian world. '*That* door was banged-to for me at birth,' Uncle Giles used to say (in a phrase that I found, much later, he had lifted from a novel by John Galsworthy) when some plum was mentioned, conceived by him available only to those above, or below, him in the social scale.

It might be imagined that people of the middle sort—people, in other words, like Uncle Giles himself—though he would have been unwilling to admit his attachment to any recognisable social group, could be regarded by him as substantially in the same boat. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Such persons belonged to the class, above all others, surveyed with misgiving by him, because members of it possessed, almost without exception, either powerful relations who helped them on in an underhand way, or business associations, often formed through less affluent relations, which enabled them—or so he suspected—to buy things cheap. Any mention of the City, or, worse still, the Stock Exchange, drove him to hard words. Moreover, the circumstances of people of this kind were often declared by him to be such that they did not have to 'keep up the same standards' in the community as those that tradition imposed upon Uncle Giles himself; and, having thus secured an unfair advantage, they were one and all abhorrent to him.

As a result of this creed he was unconquerably opposed to all established institutions on the grounds that they were entirely—and therefore incapably—administered by persons whose sole claim to consideration was that they could command influence. His own phrase for describing briefly this approach to all social, political and economic questions was 'being a bit of a radical': a standpoint he was at pains to make abundantly clear to all with whom he came in contact. As it happened, he always seemed to find people who would put up with him; and, usually, people who would employ him. In fact, at his own level, he must have had more 'influence' than most persons. He did not, however, answer the enquiries, and counter-proposals, put forward in a reply to his letter sent to the address in the Isle of Man; and, for the time being, no more was heard of his marriage, or any other of his activities.

Settling down with Templer at school was easier than I had expected. Without Stringham, he was more expansive, and I began to hear something of his life at home. His father and uncle (the latter of whom—for public services somewhat vaguely specified—had accepted a baronetcy at the hands of Lloyd George, one of the few subjects upon which Templer showed himself at all sensitive) had made their money in cement. Mr. Templer had retired from business fairly recently, after what his son called 'an appalling bloomer over steel.' There were two sisters: Babs, the eldest of the family, who towards the end of the war had left a husband in one of the dragoon regiments in favour of a racing motorist; and Jean, slightly younger than her brother. Their mother had died some years before I came across Templer, who displayed no photographs of his family, so that I knew nothing of their appearance. Although not colossally rich, they were certainly not poor; and whatever lack of appreciation Peter's father may at one moment have shown regarding predictable fluctuations of his own holdings in the steel industry, he still took a friendly interest in the market; and, by Peter's account, seemed quite often to guess right. I also knew that they lived in a house by the sea.

'Personally I wouldn't mind having a look at Kenya,' said Templer, when I described the luncheon with Stringham and his mother.

'Stringham didn't seem to care for the idea.'

'My elder sister had a beau who lived in the Happy Valley. He shot himself after having a lot of drinks at the club.'

'Perhaps it won't be so bad then.'

'Did you lunch with them in London or the country?'

'London.'

'Stringham says Glimber is pretty, but too big.'

'Will he come into it?'

'Good Lord, no,' said Templer. 'It is only his mother's for life. He will come into precious little if she goes on spending money at her present rate.'

I was not sure how much of this was to be believed; but, thinking the subject of interest, enquired further. Templer sketched in a somewhat lurid picture of Mrs. Foxe and her set. I was rather surprised to find that he himself had no ambition to become a member of that world, the pleasures of which sounded of a kind particularly to appeal to him.

'Too much of a good thing,' he said. 'I have simpler tastes.'

I was reminded of Stringham's disparagement of Buster on the ground that he was 'too grand'; and also of the reservations he had expressed regarding Templer himself. Clearly some complicated process of sorting-out was in progress among those who surrounded me: though only years later did I become aware how early such voluntary segregations begin to develop; and of how they continue throughout life. I asked more questions about Templer's objection to house-parties at Glimber. He said: 'Well, I imagine it was all rather pompous even at lunch, wasn't it?'

'Buster seemed rather an ass. His mother was awfully nice.'

Even at the time I felt that the phrase was not a very adequate way of describing Mrs. Foxe's forceful, even dazzling, characteristics.

'Oh, she is all right, I have no doubt,' said Templer. 'And damned good-looking still. She gave Stringham's sister absolute hell, though, until she married the first chap that came along.'

'Who was he?'

'I can't remember his name. A well-known criminal with one arm.'

'Stringham certainly seemed in bad form when she was there.'

'She led his father a dance, too.'

'Still, he need not join in all that if he doesn't want to.'

'He will want to,' said Templer. 'Take my word for it, he will soon disappear from sight so far as we are concerned.'

Armed, as I have said, with the knowledge of Stringham's admission regarding his own views on Templer, I recognised that there must be some truth in this judgment of Stringham's character; though some of its implications—notably with regard to myself—I failed, rather naturally, to grasp at that period. That was the only occasion when I ever heard Templer speak seriously about Stringham, though he often used to refer to escapades in which they had shared, especially the incident of Le Bas's arrest.

So far as Templer and I were concerned, nothing further had taken place regarding this affair; though Templer's relations with Le Bas continued to be strained. Although so little involved personally in the episode, I found myself often thinking of it. Why, for example, should Stringham, singularly good-natured, have chosen to persecute Le Bas in this manner? Was it a matter for regret or congratulation: had it, indeed, any meaning at all? The circumstances revealed at once Stringham's potential assurance, and the inadequacy of Le Bas's defences. If Stringham had been brutal, Le Bas had been futile. In spite of his advocacy of the poem, Le Bas had not learnt its lesson:

> 'And then we turn unwilling feet
> And seek the world—so must it be—
> *We* may not linger in the heat
> Where breaks the blue Sicilian sea!'

He was known for a long time after as 'Braddock alias Thorne', especially among his colleagues, whose theory was that the hoaxer had recently left the school, and, while passing through the town, probably in a car, had decided to tease Le Bas. Certainly Stringham would never have been thought capable of such an enormity by any master who had ever come in contact with him. Not unnaturally, however, Le Bas's tendency to feel that the world was against him was accentuated by an experience in many ways humiliating enough; and he persecuted Templer—or, at least, his activities in this direction were represented by Templer as persecution—more energetically than ever.

Finally Templer's habitual carelessness gave Le Bas an opportunity to close the account. This conclusion was the result of Templer leaving his tobacco pouch—on which, characteristically, he had inscribed his initials—lying on the trunk of a tree somewhere among the fields where we had happened on Le Bas. Cobberton, scouting round that neighbourhood, had found the pouch, and passed it on to Le Bas. Nothing definite could be proved against Templer: not even the ownership of a half-filled tobacco pouch, though no one doubted it was his. However, Le Bas moved heaven and earth to be rid of Templer, eventually persuading the headmaster to the view that life would be easier for both of them if Templer left the school. In consequence, Peter's father was persuaded to remove him a term earlier than previously intended. This pleased Templer himself, and did not unduly ruffle his father; who was reported to take the view that schools and universities were, in any case, waste of time and money: on the principle that an office was the place in which to learn the realities of life. And so I was left, as it seemed to me, alone.

Templer was not a great hand at letter-writing after his departure; though an occasional picture post-card used to arrive, stating his score at the local golf tournament, or saying that he was going to Holland to learn business methods.

Before he left school, he had suggested several times that I should visit his home, always qualifying his account of the amusements there offered by a somewhat menacing picture of his father's habitually cantankerous behaviour. I did not take these warnings about his father too seriously because of Templer's tendency to impute bad temper to anyone placed in a position of authority in relation to himself. At the same time, I had the impression that Mr. Templer might be a difficult man to live with; I even thought it possible that Peter's dealings with Le Bas might derive from experience of similar skirmishes with his father. Peter's chief complaint, so far as his father was concerned, seemed directed not towards any violent disagreement between them in tastes, or way of life, so much as to the fact that his father, in control of so much more money than himself, showed in his son's eyes on the whole so little capacity for putting this favourable situation to a suitable advantage. 'Wait till you see the car we have to use for station work,' Peter used to say. 'Then you will understand what sort of a man my father is.'

The invitation arrived just when the mechanical accessories of leaving school were in full swing. Later in the summer it had been arranged that, before going up to the university, I should spend a period in France; partly with a view to learning the language: partly as a solution to that urgent problem—inviting one's own as much as other people's attention—of the disposal of the body of one of those uneasy, stranded beings, no longer a boy and hardly yet a man. The Templer visit could be fitted in before the French trip took place.

Stringham's letters from Kenya reported that he liked the place better than he had expected. They contained drawings of people met there, and of a horse he sometimes rode. He could not really draw at all, but used a convention of blobs and spidery lines, effective in expressing the appearance of persons and things. One of these was of Buster selling a car; another of Buster playing polo. I used to think sometimes of the glimpse I had seen of Stringham's life at home; and—although this did not occur to me at once—I came in time to regard his circumstances as having something in common with those of Hamlet. His father had, of course, been shipped off to Kenya rather than murdered; but Buster and his mother were well adapted to play the parts of Claudius and Gertrude. I did not manage to get far beyond this, except to wonder if Miss Weedon was a kind of female Polonius, working on Hamlet's side. I could well imagine Stringham stabbing her through the arras. At present there was no Ophelia. Stringham himself had a decided resemblance to the Prince of Denmark; or, as Templer would have said: 'It was the kind of part the old boy would fancy himself in.'

At first sight the Templers' house seemed to be an enormously swollen villa, red and gabled, facing the sea from a small park of Scotch firs: a residence torn by some occult power from more appropriate suburban setting, and, at the same time, much magnified. It must have been built about twenty or thirty years before, and, as we came along the road, I saw that it stood on a piece of sloping ground set about a quarter of a mile from the cliff's edge. The clouded horizon and olive-green waves lapping against the stones made it a place of mystery in spite of this outwardly banal appearance: a sea-palace for a version of one of those embarkation scenes of Claude Lorraine—the Queen of Sheba, St. Ursula, or perhaps The Enchanted Castle—where any adventure might be expected.

There were a pair of white gates at the entrance to the drive, and a steep, sandy ascent between laurels. At the summit, the green doors of a row of garages faced a cement platform. As we drove across this open space a girl of about sixteen or seventeen, evidently Peter's unmarried sister, Jean, was closing one of the sliding doors. Fair, not strikingly pretty, with long legs and short, untidy hair, she remained without moving, intently watching us, as Peter shut off the engine, and we got out of the car. Like her legs, her face was thin and attenuated, the whole appearance given the effect of a much simplified—and somewhat self-conscious—arrangement of lines and planes, such as might be found in an Old Master drawing, Flemish or German perhaps, depicting some young and virginal saint; the racquet, held awkwardly at an angle to her body, suggesting at the same time an obscure implement associated with martyrdom. The expression of her face, although sad and a trifle ironical, was not altogether in keeping with this air of belonging to another and better world. I felt suddenly uneasy, and also interested: a desire to be with her, and at the same time, an almost paralysing disquiet at her presence. However, any hopes or fears orientated in her direction were quickly dissolved, because she hardly spoke when Peter introduced us, except to say in a voice unexpectedly deep, and almost as harsh as her brother's: 'The hard court needs re-surfacing.'

Then she walked slowly towards the house, humming to herself, and swinging her racquet at the grass borders. Peter shouted after her: 'Has Sunny arrived yet?'

'He turned up just after you left.'

She made this answer without turning her head. It conveyed no implication of disapproval; no enthusiasm either. I watched her disappear from sight.

'Leave your stuff here,' said Peter. 'Someone is bound to collect it. Let's have some tea. What bloody bad manners my sisters have.'

Wearing a soft felt hat squashed down in the shape of a pork-pie, he already showed signs of having freed himself from whatever remaining restraints school had imposed. He had spent a month or two in Amsterdam, where his father had business interests. Mr. Templer's notion was that Peter should gain in this way some smattering of commercial life before going into the City; as all further idea of educating or improving his son had now been abandoned by him. Peter could give no very coherent account of Dutch life, except to say that the canals smelt bad, and that there were two night-clubs which were much better than the others in that city. Apart from such slightly increased emphasis on characteristics already in evidence, he was quite unchanged.

'Who is Sunny?'

'He is called Sunny Farebrother, a friend of my father's. He was staying in the neighbourhood for a funeral and has come over to talk business.'

'Your father's contemporary?'

'Oh, no,' said Peter. 'Much younger. Thirty or thirty-five. He is supposed to have done well in the war. At least I believe he got rather a good D.S.O.'

The name 'Sunny Farebrother' struck me as almost redundant in its suggestion of clear-cut, straightforward masculinity. It seemed hardly necessary for Peter to add that someone with a name like that had 'done well' in the war, so unambiguous was the portrait conjured up by the syllables. I imagined a kind of super-Buster, in whom qualities of intrepidity and simplicity of heart had been added to those of dash and glitter.

'Why is he called Sunny?' I asked, expecting some confirmation of this imaginary personality with which I had invested Mr. Farebrother.

'Because his Christian name is Sunderland,' said Peter. 'I expect we shall have to listen to a lot of pretty boring conversation between the two of them.'

We entered the house at a side door. The walls of the greater part of the ground floor were faced with panelling, coloured and grained like a cigar-box. At the end of a large hall two men were sitting on a sofa by a tea-table at which Jean was pouring out cups of tea. The elder of this couple, a wiry, grim little fellow, almost entirely bald, and smoking a pipe, was obviously Peter's father. His identity was emphasised by the existence of a portrait of himself hanging on the wall above him—the only picture in the room—representing its subject in a blue suit and hard white collar. The canvas, from the hand of Isbister, the R.A., had been tackled in a style of decidedly painful realism, the aggressive nature of the pigment intensified by the fact that each feature had been made to appear a little larger than life.

'Hullo, Jenkins,' said Mr. Templer, raising his hand. 'Have some tea. Pour him out some tea, Jean. Well, go on, Farebrother—but try and stick to the point this time.'

He turned again to the tall, dark man sitting beside him. This person, Sunny Farebrother presumably, had shaken hands warmly, and given a genial smile when I approached the table. At Mr. Templer's interpellation, this smile faded from his face in a flash, being replaced by a look of almost devotional intensity; and, letting drop my hand with startling suddenness, he returned to what seemed to be a specification of the terms and bearings of a foreign loan—apparently Hungarian—which he and Mr. Templer had evidently been discussing before our arrival. Jean handed me the plate of buttered toast, and, addressing herself to Peter, spoke once more of the hard tennis court.

During tea I had an opportunity of examining Sunny Farebrother more closely. His regular features and ascetic, serious manner did remind me in some way of Buster, curiously enough: though scarcely for the reasons I had expected. In spite of neatness and general air of being well-dressed, Farebrother had none of Buster's consciously reckless manner of facing the world; while, so far from dispensing anything that might be interpreted as an attitude of indirect hostility, his demeanour—even allowing for the demands of a proper respect for a man older than himself and at the same time his host—appeared to be almost unnecessarily ingratiating. I was not exactly disappointed with the reality of someone whose outward appearance I had, rather absurdly, settled already in my mind on such slender grounds; but I was surprised, continuing to feel that I should like to know more of Sunny Farebrother.

The train of thought engendered by this association with Buster took me on, fairly logically, to Miss Weedon; and, for a second, it even occurred to me that some trait possessed in common by Buster and Miss Weedon linked both of them with Sunny Farebrother; the two latter being the most alike, ridiculous as it might sound, of the three. This was certainly not on account of any suggestion, open or inadequately concealed, that Farebrother's temperament was feminine in any abnormal manner, either physically or emotionally; on the contrary; though Miss Weedon for her part might perhaps lay claim to some remotely masculine air. It was rather that both had in common some smoothness, an acceptance that their mission in life was to iron out the difficulties of others: a recognition that, for them, power was won by self-abasement.

Sunny Farebrother's suit, though well cut, was worn and a trifle dilapidated in places. The elbows of the coat were shiny, and, indeed, his whole manner suggested that he might be in distinctly straitened circumstances. I imagined him a cavalryman—something about his long legs and narrow trousers suggested horses—unable to support the expenses of his regiment, unwillingly become a stockbroker, or agent for some firm in the City, in an attempt to make two ends meet; though I learnt later that he had never been a regular soldier. With folded hands and head bent, he was listening, attentively, humbly—almost as if his life depended on it—to the words that Mr. Templer was speaking.

Years later, when I came to know Sunny Farebrother pretty well, he always retained for me something of this first picture of him; a vision—like Jean's—that suggested an almost saintly figure, ill-used by a coarse-grained world: some vague and uncertain parallel with Colonel Newcome came to mind, in the colonel's latter days in the Greyfriars almshouses, and it was easy to imagine Mr. Farebrother answering his name in such a setting, the last rays of sunset falling across his, by then, whitened hair. Everything about him supported claims to such a rôle: from the frayed ends of the evening tie that he wore later at dinner, to the immensely battered leather hat-box that was carried through the hall with the rest of his luggage while we sat at tea. He seemed to feel some explanation for the existence of this last object was required, saying that it contained the top-hat he had recently worn at his great-uncle's funeral, adding that it was the headgear that normally hung on a hook in his office for use as part of the uniform of his calling in the City.

'It cost me a tidy sum in lost business to pay that last tribute,' he said. 'But there aren't many of that grand old fellow's sort left these days. I felt I ought to do it.'

Mr. Templer, his hands deep in his trousers pockets, took scarcely any notice of such asides. He discoursed instead, in a rasping undertone, of redemption dates and capital requirements. Jean finished what she had to say to Peter regarding the hard tennis court, then scarcely spoke at all. Later she went off on her own.

This introduction to the Templer household was fairly representative of its prevailing circumstances for the next few days. Mr. Templer was gruff, and talked business most of the time to Sunny Farebrother: Jean kept to herself: Peter and I bathed, or lounged away the day. I discovered that Peter's account of his lack of accord with his father had been much exaggerated. In reality, they understood each other well, and had, indeed, a great deal in common. Mr. Templer possessed a few simple ideas upon which he had organised his life; and, on the whole, these ideas had served him well, largely because they fitted in with each other, and were of sufficiently general application to be correct perhaps nine times out of ten. He was very keen on keeping fit, and liked to describe in detail exercises he was in the habit of performing when he first rose from his bed in the morning. He was always up and about the house long before anyone else was awake, and he certainly looked healthy, though not young for his age, which was somewhere in the sixties. Sunny Farebrother continued to impress me as unusually agreeable; and I could not help wondering why he was treated by the Templers with so little consideration. I do not mean that, in fact, I gave much thought to this matter; but I noticed from time to time that he seemed almost to enjoy being contradicted by Mr. Templer, or ignored by Jean, whom he used to survey rather hungrily, and attempt, without much success, to engage in conversation. In this, as other respects, Jean remained in her somewhat separate world. Peter used to tease her about this air of existing remote from everything that went on round her. I continued to experience a sense of being at once drawn to her, and yet cut off from her utterly.

The party was increased a few days after my arrival by the addition of the Striplings—that is to say Peter's married sister, Babs, and her husband, the racing motorist—who brought with them a friend called Lady McReith. These new guests radically altered the tone of the house. Babs was good-looking, with reddish fair hair, and she talked a lot, and rather loudly. She was taller than Jean, without her sister's mysterious, even melancholy, presence. Sitting next to her at dinner there was none of the difficulty that I used to experience in getting some scraps of conversation from Jean. Babs seemed very attached to Peter and asked many questions about his life at school. Her husband, Jimmy Stripling, was tall and burly. He wore his hair rather long and parted in the middle. Like his father-in-law he was gruff in manner, and always looked beyond, rather than at, the person he was talking to. Uncle Giles was, at that period, the only grumbler I had ever met at all comparable in volume: though Stripling, well-equipped financially for his pursuit of motor-racing, had little else in common with my uncle.

It is not unusual for people who look exceptionally robust, and who indulge in hobbies of a comparatively dangerous kind, to suffer from poor health. Stripling belonged to this category. On that account he had been unable to take an active part in the war; unless—as Peter had remarked—persuading Babs to run away with him while her husband was at the front might be regarded as Jimmy having 'done his bit'. This was no doubt an unkind way of referring to what had happened; and, if Peter's own account of Babs's early married life was to be relied upon, there was at least something to be said on her side, as her first husband, whatever his merits as a soldier, had been a far from ideal husband. It was, however, unfortunate from Stripling's point of view that his forerunner's conduct had been undeniably gallant; and this fact had left him with a consuming hatred for all who had served in the armed forces. Indeed, anyone who mentioned, even casually, any matter that reminded him that a war had taken place was liable to be treated by him in a most peremptory manner; although, at the same time, all his topics of conversation seemed, sooner or later, to lead to this subject. His state of mind was perhaps the outcome of too many persons like Peter having made the joke about 'doing his bit'. In consequence of this attitude he gave an impression of marked hostility towards Sunny Farebrother.

In spite of the circumstances of their marriage, outward relations between the Striplings were cool, almost formal; and the link which seemed most firmly to bind them together was, in some curious manner, vested in the person of their friend Lady McReith, known as 'Gwen', a figure whose origins and demeanour suggested enigmas that I could not, in those days, even attempt to fathom. In the first place I could form no idea of her age. When she came into the room on their arrival, I thought she was a contemporary of Jean's: this was only for a few seconds, and immediately after I supposed her to be nine or ten years older; but one afternoon, strolling across the lawn from tennis, when the air had turned suddenly cold and a chilly breeze from the sea had swept across the grass, she had shivered and changed colour, her face becoming grey and mottled, almost as if it were an old woman's. She was tall, though slightly built, with dark hair over a fair skin, beneath which the veins showed: her lips always bright red. Something about her perhaps hinted vaguely of the stage, or at least what I imagined theatrical people to be like. This fair skin with the blue veins running across had a look of extraordinary softness.

'She was married to a partner of my father's,' Peter said, when questioned. 'He had a stroke and died ten days after he was knighted—a remarkable instance of delayed shock.'

Although appearing to accept her as in some manner necessary for the well-being of their household, Jimmy Stripling seemed less devoted than his wife to Lady McReith. There was a certain amount of ragging between them, and Stripling liked scoring off her in conversation: though, for that matter, he liked scoring off anyone. Babs, on the other hand, seemed never tired of walking about the lawn, or through the rose garden, arm in arm with Lady McReith; and demonstrative kissing took place between them at the slightest provocation.

Lady McReith was also on excellent terms with the Templer family, especially Peter. Even Mr. Templer himself sometimes took her arm, and led her into dinner, or towards the drink tray in the evening. Sunny Farebrother, however, evidently regarded her without approval, though he was always scrupulously polite: so much so that Lady McReith was often unable to do more than go off into peals of uncontrollable laughter when addressed by him: the habit of giggling being one of her most pronounced characteristics. Personally, I found her rather alarming, chiefly because she talked, when she spoke at all, of people and things I had never heard of. The Striplings were always laughing noisily at apparently pointless remarks made by her on the subject of acquaintances possessed by them in common. Apart from this banter, she had little or nothing to say for herself; and, unlike Jean, her silences suggested to me no hidden depths. Mr. Templer used to say: 'Come on, Gwen, try and behave for once as if you were grown-up,' a request always followed by such immoderate fits of laughter from Lady McReith that she was left almost helpless. At dinner there would be exchanges between herself and Peter:

'Why aren't you wearing a clean shirt tonight, Peter?'

'I thought this one would be clean enough for you.'

'You ought to keep your little brother up to the mark, Babs.'

'He is always very grubby, isn't he?'

'What about those decomposing lip-sticks Gwen is always leaving about the house? They make the place look like the ladies' cloak-room in a third-rate night-club.'

'Do you spend much of your time in the ladies' cloak-rooms of third-rate night-clubs, Peter? What a funny boy you must be.'

Sunny Farebrother gave the impression of being not at all at his ease in the midst of this rough-and-tumble, in which he was to some degree forced to participate. Mr. Templer fell from time to time into fits of moroseness which made his small-talk at best monosyllabic: at worst, drying up all conversation. He treated his son-in-law with as little ceremony as he did Farebrother; evidently regarding the discussion of serious matters with Stripling as waste of time. He was, however, prepared to listen to Farebrother's views—apparently sensible enough—on how best to handle the difficulties of French reoccupation of the Ruhr (which had taken place earlier in the year), especially in relation to the general question of the shortage of pig-iron on the world market. When on one occasion Farebrother ventured to change the subject and give his opinion regarding professional boxing, Mr. Templer went so far as to say: 'Farebrother, you are talking through your hat. When you have watched boxing for forty years, as I have, it will be quite soon enough to start criticising the stewards of the National Sporting.'

Sunny Farebrother showed no sign of resenting this capricious treatment. He would simply nod his head, and chuckle to himself, as if in complete agreement; after a while giving up any attempt to soothe his host, and trying to join in whatever was happening at the other end of the table. It was at such moments that he sometimes became involved in cross-fire between Peter, Lady McReith, and the Striplings. I was not sure how often the Striplings had met Sunny Farebrother in the past. Each seemed to know a good deal about the other, though they remained on distant terms, Stripling making hardly an effort to conceal his dislike. They would sometimes talk about City matters, in which Stripling took an interest that was probably of a rather amateurish sort; for it was clear that Farebrother rarely agreed with his judgment, even when he outwardly concurred. After these mild contradictions, Stripling would raise his eyebrows and make faces at Farebrother behind his back. Farebrother showed no more sign of being troubled by this kind of behaviour than by Mr. Templer's gruffness; but he sometimes adopted a manner of exaggerated good-fellowship towards Stripling, beginning sentences addressed to him with the words: 'Now then, Jimmy——': and sometimes making a sweeping dive with his fist towards Stripling's diaphragm, as if in a playful effort to disembowel him. It was not Stripling so much as Lady McReith, and, to a lesser degree, Babs, who seemed to make Farebrother uncomfortable. I decided—as it turned out, correctly—that this was a kind of moral disapproval, and that some puritan strain in Farebrother rebelled against Lady McReith especially.

One evening, when Mr. Templer had come suddenly out of one of his gloomy reveries, and nodded curtly to Babs to withdraw the women from the dining-room, Sunny Farebrother jumped up to open the door, and, in the regrouping of seats that took place when we sat down again, placed himself next to me. The Templers, father and son, had begun to discuss with Stripling the jamming of his car's accelerator. Farebrother shifted the port in my direction, without pouring himself out a second glass. He said: 'Did I understand that your father was at the Peace Conference?'

'For a time.'

'I wonder if he and I were ever in the same show.'

I described to the best of my ability how my father had been wounded in Mesopotamia; and, after a spell of duty in Cairo, had been sent to Paris at the end of the war: adding that I had no very certain idea of the nature of his work. Farebrother seemed disappointed that no details were available on this subject; but he continued to chat quietly of the Conference, and of the people he had run across when he had worked there himself.

'Wonderfully *interesting* people, he said. 'After a time one thought nothing of lunching with, for example, a former Finance Minister of Rumania, as a matter of fact we reached the stage of my calling him "Hilarion" and he calling me "Sunny". I met Monsieur Venizelos with him on several occasions.'

I expressed the respect that I certainly felt for an appointment that brought opportunity to enjoy such encounters.

'It was a different world,' said Sunny Farebrother.

He spoke with more vehemence than usual; and I supposed that he intended to imply that hobnobbing with foreign statesmen was greatly preferable to touting for business from Peter's father. I asked if the work was difficult.

'When they were kind enough to present me with an O.B.E. at the end of it,' said Farebrother, 'I told them I should have to wear it on my backside because it was the only medal I had ever won by sitting in a chair.'

I did not know whether it was quite my place either to approve or to deprecate this unconventional hypothesis, daring in its disregard for authority (if 'they' were superiors immediately responsible for the conferment of the award) and, at the same time, modest in its assessment of its expositor's personal merits. Sunny Farebrother had the happy gift of suggesting by his manner that one had known him for a long time; and I began to wonder whether I had not, after all, been right in supposing that his nickname had been acquired from something more than having been named 'Sunderland'. There was a suggestion of boyishness —the word 'sunny' would certainly be applicable—about his frank manner; but, in spite of this manifest desire to get along with everyone on their own terms, there was also something lonely and inaccessible about him. It seemed to me, equally, that I had not been so greatly mistaken in the high-flown estimate of his qualities that I had formed on first hearing his name, and of his distinguished record. However, before any pronouncement became necessary on the subject of the most appropriate region on which to distribute what I imagined to be his many decorations, his voice took on a more serious note, and he went on: 'The Conference was, of course, a great change from the previous three and a half years, fighting backwards and forwards over the Somme and God knows where else—and fighting damned hard, too.'

Jimmy Stripling caught the word 'Somme', because his mouth twitched slightly, and he began chopping at a piece of pine-apple rind on his plate: though continuing to listen to his father-in-law's diagnosis of the internal troubles of the Mercedes.

'Going up to the university?' Farebrother asked.

'In October.'

'Take my advice,' he said. 'Look about for a good business opening. Don't be afraid of hard work. That was what I said to myself when the war was over—and here we are.'

He laughed; and I laughed too, though without knowing quite why anything should have been said to cause amusement. Farebrother had the knack, so it seemed to me, of making others feel that they were in some conspiracy with him; though clearly that was not how he was regarded by the Striplings. When Peter had asked the day before: 'What do you think of old Sunny?' I had admitted that Farebrother had made a good impression as a man-of-the-world who was at the same time mild and well disposed: though I had not phrased my opinion quite in that way to Peter, in any case never greatly interested in the details of what people thought about each other. Peter had laughed even at the guarded amount of enthusiasm I had revealed.

'He is a downy old bird,' Peter said.

'Is he very hard up?'

'I suppose he is doing just about as nicely in the City as anyone could reasonably expect.'

'I thought he looked a bit down at heel?'

'That is all part of Sunny's line. You need not worry about him. I may be going into the same firm. He is a sort of distant relation, you know, through my mother's family.'

'He and Jimmy Stripling don't care for each other much, do they?'

'To tell the truth, we all pull Sunny's leg when he comes down here,' said Peter. 'He'll stand anything because he likes picking my father's brains, such as they are.'

This picture of Sunny Farebrother did not at all agree with that which I had formed in my own mind; and I should probably have been more shocked at the idea of teasing him if I had entirely believed all Peter had been saying. The fact that I was not prepared fully to accept his commentary was partly because I knew by experience that he was in the habit of exaggerating about such matters: and, even more, because at that age (although one may be prepared to swallow all kinds of nonsense of this sort or that) personal assessment of individuals made by oneself is hard to shake: even when offered by those in a favourable position to know what they are talking about. Besides, I could hardly credit the statement that Peter himself—even abetted by Jimmy Stripling—would have the temerity to rag someone who looked like Sunny Farebrother, and had his war record. However, later on in the same evening on which we had talked together about the Peace Conference, I was given further insight into the methods by which the Stripling-Farebrother conflict was carried on.

Mr. Templer always retired early. That night he went upstairs soon after we had left the dining-room. Jean had complained of a headache, and she also slipped off to bed. Jimmy Stripling was lying in an armchair with his legs stretched out in front of him. He was an inch or two over six foot, already getting a bit fleshy, always giving the impression of taking up more than his fair share of room, wherever he might be standing or sitting. Farebrother was reading *The Times,* giving the sports page that special rapt attention that he applied to everything he did. Babs and Lady McReith were sitting on the sofa, looking at the same illustrated paper. Farebrother came to the end of the column, and before putting aside the paper shook down the sheets with his accustomed tidiness of habit to make a level edge. He strolled across the room to where Peter was looking through some gramophone records, and I heard him say: 'When you come to work in London, Peter, I should strongly recommend you to get hold of a little gadget I make use of. It turns your collars, and reduces laundry bills by fifty per cent.'

I did not catch Peter's reply; but, although Farebrother had spoken quietly, Stripling had noticed this recommendation. Rolling round in his chair, he said: 'What is that about cutting down your laundry bill, Sunny?'

'Nothing to interest a gentleman of leisure like yourself, Jimmy,' said Farebrother, 'but we poor City blokes find it comes pretty hard on white collars. They have now invented a little patent device for turning them. As a matter of fact a small company has been formed to put it on the market.'

'And I suppose you are one of the directors,' said Stripling.

'As a matter of fact I am,' said Farebrother. 'There are one or two other little odds and ends as well; but the collar-turner is going to be the winner in my opinion.'

'You thought you could plant one on Peter?'

'If Peter has got any sense he'll get one.'

'Why not tackle someone of your own size?'

'I'll plant one on you, Jimmy, once you see it work.'

'I bet you don't.'

'You get some collars then.'

The end of it was that both of them went off to their respective rooms, Stripling returning with a round leather collar-box; Farebrother with a machine that looked like a pair of horse-clippers made from wood. All this was accompanied with a great deal of jocularity on Stripling's part. He came downstairs again first, and assured us that 'Old Sunny's leg was going to be well and truly pulled'. Babs and Lady McReith now began to show some interest in what was going on. They threw aside *The Tatler* and each put up her feet on the sofa. Farebrother stood in the centre of the room holding the wooden clippers. He said: 'Now you give me one of your collars, Jimmy.'

The round leather box was opened, and a collar was inserted into the jaws of the machine. Farebrother closed the contraption forward along the edge of the collar. After proceeding about two inches, there was a ripping sound, and the collar tore. It was extracted with difficulty. Everyone roared with laughter.

'What did I say?' said Stripling.

'Sorry, Jimmy,' said Farebrother. 'That collar must have been washed too often.'

'But it was practically new,' said Stripling. 'You did it the wrong way.'

Stripling chose a collar, and himself ran the clippers along it. They slipped from his grip half-way down, so that the collar was caused to fold more or less diagonally.

'Your collars are a different shape from mine,' Farebrother said. 'They don't seem to have the same "give" in them.'

Farebrother had another try, with results rather similar to his first attempt; and, after that, everyone insisted on making the experiment. The difficulty consisted in holding the instrument tight and, at the same time, running it straight. Babs and Lady McReith both crumpled their collars: Peter and I tore ours on the last inch or so of the run. Then Farebrother tried again, bringing off a perfect turn.

'There you are,' he said. 'What could be better than that?'

However, as three collars were ruined and had to be thrown into the waste-paper basket, and three more had to be sent to the laundry, Stripling was not very pleased. Although the utility of Farebrother's collar-turner had certainly been called into question, he evidently felt that to some extent the joke had been turned against him.

'It is something about your collars, old boy,' Farebrother repeated. 'It is not at all easy to make the thing work on them. It might pay you in the long run to get a more expensive kind.'

'They are damned expensive as it is,' said Stripling. 'Anyway, quite expensive enough to have been made hay of like this.'

However, everyone, including his wife, had laughed a great deal throughout the various efforts to make the machine work, so that, angry as he was, Stripling had to let the matter rest there. Farebrother, I think, felt that he had not provided a demonstration very satisfactory from the commercial point of view, so that his victory over Stripling was less complete on this account than it might otherwise have seemed. Soon after this he went upstairs, carrying the collar-turner with him, and saying that he had 'work to do', a remark that was received with a certain amount of facetious comment, which he answered by saying: 'Ah, Jimmy, I'm not a rich man like you. I have to toil for my daily bread.'

Stripling was, no doubt, glad to see him go. He probably wanted time to recover from what he evidently looked upon as a serious defeat over the collars. Peter turned on the gramophone, and Stripling retired to the corner of the room with him, where while Stripling's temper cooled they played some game with matches. It was soon after this that I made a decidedly interesting discovery about Lady McReith, who had begun to discuss dance steps with Babs, while I looked through some of the records that Peter had been arranging in piles. In order to illustrate some point she wanted to make about fox-trotting, Lady McReith suddenly jumped from the sofa, took my arm and, sliding it round her waist, danced a few steps. 'Like this?' she said, turning her face towards Babs; and then, as she continued to cling to me, tracing the steps back again in the other direction: 'Or like that?' The transaction took place so swiftly, and, so far as Lady McReith was concerned, so unselfconsciously, that Peter and Stripling did not look up from their game; but—although employed merely as a mechanical dummy—I had become aware, with colossal impact, that Lady McReith's footing in life was established in a world of physical action of which at present I knew little or nothing. Up to that moment I had found her almost embarrassingly difficult to deal with as a fellow guest: now the extraordinary smoothness with which she glided across the polished boards, the sensation that we were holding each other close, and yet, in spite of such proximity, she remained at the same time aloof and separate, the pervading scent with which she drenched herself, and, above all, the feeling that all this offered something further, some additional and violent assertion of the will, was—almost literally—intoxicating. The revelation was something far more universal in implication than a mere sense of physical attraction towards Lady McReith. It was realisation, in a moment of time, not only of her own possibilities, far from inconsiderable ones, but also of other possibilities that life might hold; and my chief emotion was surprise.

This incident was, of course, of interest to myself alone, as its importance existed only in my own consciousness. It would never have occurred to me to discuss it with Peter, certainly not in the light in which it appeared to myself, because to him the inferences would—I now realised—have appeared already so self-evident that he would have been staggered by my own earlier obtuseness: an obtuseness which he would certainly have disparaged in his own forceful terms. Keen awareness of Peter's point of view on the subject followed logically on a better apprehension of the elements that went towards forming Lady McReith as a personality: a personality now so changed in my eyes. However, all that happened was that we danced together until the record came to an end, when she whirled finally round and threw herself down again on the sofa, where Babs still lay: and a second later put her arm round Babs's neck. Stripling came across the room and poured out for himself another whisky. He said: 'We must find some way of ragging old Sunny. He is getting too pleased with himself by half.'

Lady McReith went off into such peals of laughter at this, wriggling and squeezing, that Babs, freeing herself, turned and shook her until she lay quiet, still laughing, at last managing to gasp out: 'Do think of something really funny this time, Jimmy.' I asked what had happened on earlier occasions when Sunny Farebrother had been ragged. Peter outlined some rather mild practical jokes, none of which, in retrospect, sounded strikingly amusing. Various suggestions were made, but nothing came of them at the moment; though the discussion might be said to have laid the foundation for a scene of an odd kind enacted on the last night of my stay.

Looking back at the Horabins' dance that took place on that last night, the ball itself seemed merely a prelude to the events that followed. At the time, the Horabins' party itself was important enough, not only on account of the various sequels enacted on our return to the Templers' house—fields in which at that time I felt myself less personally concerned, and, therefore, less interested—but because of the behaviour of Jean Templer at the dance, conduct which to some extent crystallised in my own mind my feelings towards her; at the same time precipitating acquaintance with a whole series of emotions and apprehensions, the earliest of numberless similar ones in due course to be undergone. The Horabins for long after were, indeed, momentous to me simply for that reason. As it happens, I cannot even remember the specific incident that clarified, in some quite uncompromising manner, the positive recognition that Jean might prefer someone else's company to my own; nor, rather unjustly, did the face of this superlatively lucky man —as he then seemed—remain in my mind a year or two later. I have, however, little doubt that the whole matter was something to do with cutting a dance; and that the partner she chose, in preference to myself, persisted dimly in my mind as a figure certainly older, and perhaps with a fair moustache and reddish face. Even if these circumstances are described accurately, it would undoubtedly be true to say that nothing could be less interesting than the manner in which Jean's choice was brought home to me. There was not the smallest reason to infer from anything that had taken place in the course of my visit that I possessed any sort of prescriptive rights over her: and it may well be that the man with the moustache had an excellent claim. Such an argument did not strike me at the time; nor were the disappointment and annoyance, of which I suddenly became aware in an acute degree, tempered by the realisation, which came much later, that such feelings—like those experienced during the incident with Lady McReith—marked development in transmutation from one stage of life to another.

One of the effects of this powerful, and in some ways unexpected, concentration on the subject of Jean at the dance was to distract my attention from everything not immediately connected with her; so that, by the time we were travelling home, several matters that must have been blowing up in the course of the evening had entirely escaped my notice. I was in the back of a chauffeur-driven car, Peter by the far window, and Lady McReith between us. I was conscious that for the first part of the drive these two were carrying on some sort of mutual conflict under the heavy motoring rug that covered the three of us; but I had not noticed how or why she had become separated from the Striplings. Probably the arrangement had something to do with transport to their homes of some other guests who had dined at the Templers' house for the ball. Whatever the reason, one of the consequences of the allotment of seats had been that Jean and Sunny Farebrother had been carried in the Striplings' Mercedes. We rolled along under the brilliant stars, even Peter and Lady McReith at last silent, perhaps dozing: though like electric shocks I could feel the almost ceaseless vibration of her arm next to mine, quivering as if her body, in spite of sleep, knew no calm.

I did not feel at all anxious to retire to bed when we arrived at the house. On the following day I was to travel to London. Farebrother was going on the same train. We were making a late start in order to rest on a little into the morning after the exertions of the ball. Peter, for once, seemed ready for bed, saying good-night and going straight upstairs. The Striplings had arrived before us, and were shifting about restlessly, talking of 'raiding the kitchen', bacon and eggs, more drink, and, in general, showing unwillingness to bring the party to an end. Lady McReith asserted that she was worn out. Sunny Farebrother, too, was evidently anxious to get some sleep as soon as possible. They went off together up the stairs. Finally Babs found her way to the kitchen, and returned with some odds and ends of food: that would for the time postpone the need to bring the night's entertainment to a close. Her husband walked up and down, working himself up into one of his rages against Sunny Farebrother, who had, it appeared, particularly annoyed him on the drive home. Jean had at first gone up to her room; but on hearing voices below came downstairs again, and joined the picnic that was taking place.

'Did you hear what he said about the car on the way back?' Stripling asked. 'Like his ruddy cheek to offer advice about the acceleration. He himself is too mean to have anything but an old broken-down Ford that you couldn't sell for scrap-iron; and he doesn't even take that round with him, but prefers to cadge lifts.'

'Have you seen Mr. Farebrother's luggage?' said Jean. 'It is all piled up outside his room ready to go down to the station first thing in the morning. It looks as if he were going big-game hunting.'

I wondered afterwards whether she said this with any intention of malice. There was not any sign on her part of a desire to instigate trouble; but it is not impossible that she was the true cause of the events that followed. Certainly this remark was responsible for her sister saying: 'Let's go and have a look at it. Jimmy might get an idea for one of his jokes. Anyway, I'm beginning to feel it's time for bed.'

There was, undeniably, a remarkable load of baggage outside Farebrother's bedroom door: several suitcases; a fishing rod and landing net; a cricket bat and pads; a tennis racket in a press; a gun case; and a black tin box of the kind in which deeds are stored, marked in white paint: 'Exors: Amos Farebrother, Esquire'. On the top of this edifice of objects, on the whole ancient, stood the leather hat-box, said by its owner to contain the hat required by tradition for City ritual. Babs pointed to this. Her husband said: 'Yes—and have you seen it? A Jewish old clothes man would think twice about wearing it.'

Stripling tiptoed to the hat-box, and, releasing the catch, opened the lid, taking from within a silk hat that would have looked noticeably dilapidated on an undertaker. Stripling inspected the hat for several seconds, returned it to the box, and closed the lid; though without snapping the fastening. Lowering his voice, he said: 'Get out of sight where you can all watch. I am going to arrange for old Sunny to have a surprise when he arrives at the office.'

My room was next to Peter's at one end of the passage: Farebrother's half-way down: the Striplings slept round the corner beyond. Jean was somewhere farther on still. Stripling said: 'It is a pity Gwen and Peter won't be able to see this. They will enjoy hearing about it. Find a place to squint from.'

He nodded to me, and I moved to my room, from where I regarded the passage through a chink in the door. Stripling, Babs and Jean passed on out of sight; and I suppose the two women remained in the intersecting passage, in a place from which they could command a view of Farebrother's luggage. I waited for at least five minutes, peering through the crack of the barely open door. It was daylight outside, and the passages were splashed with patches of vivid colour, where the morning sun streamed through translucent blinds. I continued to watch for what seemed an age. I had begun to feel very sleepy, and the time at last appeared so long that I was almost inclined to shut the door and make for bed. And then, all at once, Jimmy Stripling came into sight again. He was stepping softly, and carried in his hand a small green chamber-pot.

As he advanced once more along the passage, I realised with a start that Stripling proposed to substitute this object for the top-hat in Farebrother's leather hat-box. My immediate thought was that relative size might prevent this plan from being put successfully into execution; though I had not examined the inside of the hat-box, obviously itself larger than normal (no doubt built to house more commodious hats of an earlier generation), the cardboard interior of which might have been removed to make room for odds and ends. Such economy of space would not have been out of keeping with the character of its owner. In any case it was a point upon which Stripling had evidently satisfied himself, because the slight smile on his face indicated that he was absolutely certain of his ground. No doubt to make an even more entertaining spectacle of what he was about to do, he shifted the china receptacle from the handle by which he was carrying it, placing it between his two hands, holding it high in front of him, as if it were a sacrificial urn. Seeing it in this position, I changed my mind about its volume, deciding that it could indeed be contained in the hat-box. However, before this question of size and shape could be settled one way or the other, something happened that materially altered the course that events seemed to be taking; because Farebrother's door suddenly swung open, and Farebrother himself appeared, still wearing his stiff shirt and evening trousers, but without a collar. It occurred to me that perhaps he knew of some mysterious process by which butterfly collars, too, could be revived, as well as those of an up-and-down sort, and that he was already engaged in metamorphosing the evening collar he had worn at the Horabins'.

Stripling was taken completely by surprise. He stopped dead: though without changing the position of his hands, or the burden that they carried. Then, no doubt grasping that scarcely any other action was open to him, he walked sharply on down the passage, passing my door and disappearing into the far wing of the house, where Mr. Templer's room was situated. Sunny Farebrother watched him go, but did not speak a word. If he were surprised, he did not show it beyond raising his eyebrows a little, in any case a fairly frequent facial movement of his. Stripling, on the other hand, had contorted his features in such a manner that he looked not so much angry, or thwarted, as in actual physical pain. When he strode past me, I could see the sweat shining on his forehead, and at the roots of his rather curly hair. For a moment Farebrother continued to gaze after him down the passage, as if he expected Stripling's return. Then, with an air of being hurt, or worried, he shut his door very quietly. I closed mine too, for I had begun to feel uncommonly tired.

Peter was in the garden, knocking about a golf ball with his mashie, when I found him the following day. Although late on in the morning, no one else had yet appeared from their rooms. I was looking forward to describing the scene Peter had missed between Farebrother and Stripling. As I approached he flicked his club at the ball, which he sent in among the fir trees of the park. While we walked towards the place where it fell, I gave some account of what had happened after he had retired upstairs on returning from the dance. We found the ball in some bracken, and Peter scooped it back into the centre of the lawn, where it lay by the sundial. To my surprise he seemed scarcely at all interested in what had seemed to me one of the most remarkable incidents I had ever witnessed. I thought this attitude might perhaps be due to the fact that he felt a march had been stolen on him for once; though it would have been unlike him to display disappointment in quite that manner.

'I suppose I really ought to have slipped into your room and warned you that something was on.'

'You might not have found me,' he said.

'Why not?'

'I might not have been there.'

His eyes began their monotonous, tinny glistening. I saw that he was very satisfied with himself about something: what was this secret cause for complacency, I did not immediately grasp. I made no effort to solve the enigma posed by him. We talked about when we should meet again, and the possibility of having a party in London with Stringham at Christmas.

'Don't spoil the French girls,' said Peter.

It was only by the merest chance that a further aspect of the previous evening's transactions was brought to my notice: one which explained Peter's evident air of self-satisfaction. The time had come for us to catch our train. Neither the Striplings nor Lady McReith had yet appeared, but Peter's father was pottering about and said: 'I hope you've enjoyed yourself, Jenkins, and that it hasn't been too quiet for you. Peter complains there is never anything to do here.'

Jean said good-bye.

'I hope we meet again.'

'Oh, yes,' she said, 'we *must*.'

Just as I was getting into the car, I remembered that I had left a book in the morning-room.

'I'll get it,' said Peter. 'I know where it is.'

He went off into the house, and I followed him, because I had an idea that its whereabouts was probably behind one of the cushions of the armchair in which I had been sitting. As I came through the door, he was standing on the far side of the morning-room, looking about among some books and papers on a table. He was not far from another door on the opposite side of the room, and, as I reached the threshold, this farther door was opened by Lady McReith. She did not see me, and stood for a second smiling at Peter, but without speaking. Then suddenly she said: 'Catch,' and impelled through the air towards him some small object. Peter brought his right hand down sharply and caught, within the palm, whatever had been thrown towards him. He said: 'Thanks, Gwen. I'll remember next time.'

I saw now that he was putting on his wrist-watch. By this time I was in the room, and making for the book—*If Winter Comes*—which lay on one of the window-seats. I said good-bye to Lady McReith, who responded with much laughter, and Peter returned with me to the car, saying: 'Gwen is quite mad.' Sunny Farebrother was still engaged in some final business arrangement with Mr. Templer, which he brought to a close with profuse thanks. We set out together on the journey to the station.

The manner of Lady McReith's return of Peter's watch was the outward and visible sign to me of his whereabouts after we had returned from the Horabins'. The fact that an incisive step of one sort or another had been taken by him in relation to Lady McReith was almost equally well revealed by something in the air when they spoke to each other: some definite affirmation which made matters, in any case, explicit enough. The propulsion of the watch was merely a physical manifestation of the same thing. In the light of Peter's earlier remark on the subject of absence from his room during the attempted ragging of Sunny Farebrother, this discovery did not perhaps represent anything very remarkable in the way of intuitive knowledge: especially in view of Lady McReith's general demeanour and conversational approach to the behaviour of her friends. At the same time—as in another and earlier of Peter's adventures of this kind—his enterprise was displayed, confirming my conception of him as a kind of pioneer in this increasingly familiar, though as yet still largely unexplored country. It was about this time that I began to think of him as really a more forceful character than Stringham, a possibility that would never have presented itself in earlier days of my acquaintance with both of them.

These thoughts were cut short by Sunny Farebrother, who whispered to me (though two sheets of glass divided us from the chauffeur): 'Were you going to give this chap anything?' Rather surprised at his curiosity on this point, I admitted that two shillings was the sum I had had in mind. I hoped he would not think that I ought to have suggested half a crown. However, he nodded gravely, as if in complete approval, and said: 'So was I; but I've only got a bob in change. Here it is. You add it to your florin and say it's from both of us.'

When the moment came, I forgot to do more than hand the coins to the chauffeur, who, perhaps retaining memories of earlier visits, did not appear to be unduly disappointed.

In spite of the accumulation of luggage, extraordinary exertions on Farebrother's part made it possible to dispense with the assistance of a porter.

'Got to look after the pennies, you know,' he said, as we waited for the train. 'I hope you don't travel First Class, or we shall have to part company.'

As no such difficulty arose, we found a Third Class compartment to ourselves, and stacked the various items of Farebrother's belongings on the racks. They almost filled the carriage.

'Got to be prepared for everything,' he said, as he lifted the bat and pads. 'Do you play this game?'

'Not any longer.'

'I'm not all that keen on it nowadays myself,' he said. 'But a cricketer always makes a good impression.'

For about three-quarters of an hour he read *The Times*. Then we began to talk about the Templers, a subject Farebrother introduced by a strong commendation of Peter's good qualities. This favourable opinion came as something of a surprise to me; because I was accustomed to hear older persons speak of Peter in terms that almost always suggested improvement was absolutely necessary, if he were to come to any good in life at all. This was not at all the view held by Farebrother, who appeared to regard Peter as one of the most promising young men he had ever run across. Much as I liked Peter by that time, I was quite unable to see why anything in his character should appeal so strongly to Farebrother, whose own personality was becoming increasingly mysterious to me.

'Peter should do well,' Farebrother said. 'He is a bit wild. No harm in that. He knows his way about. He's alive. Don't you agree?'

This manner of asking one's opinion I had already noticed, and found it flattering to be treated without question as being no longer a schoolboy.

'Of course his father is a fine old man,' Farebrother went on. 'A very fine old man. A hard man, but a fine one.'

I wondered what had been the result of their business negotiations together, in which so much hardness and fineness must have been in operation. Farebrother had perhaps begun to think of this subject too, for he fell into silence for a time, and sighed once or twice; at last remarking: 'Still, I believe I got the best of him this time.'

As that was obviously a matter between him and his host, I did not attempt to comment. A moment later, he said: 'What did you think of Stripling?'

Again I was flattered at having my opinion asked upon such a subject; though I had to admit to myself that on the previous night I had been equally pleased when Stripling had, as it were, associated me with his projected baiting of Farebrother. Indeed, I could not help feeling, although the joke had missed fire, that I was not entirely absolved from the imputation of being in some degree guilty of having acted in collusion with Stripling on that occasion. I was conscious, therefore, unless I was to appear in my own eyes hopelessly double-dealing, that some evasive answer was required. Accordingly, although I had not much liked Stripling, I replied in vague terms, adding some questions about the relative success of his motor-racing.

'I don't really understand the fellow,' Farebrother said. 'I quite see he has his points. He has plenty of money. He quite often wins those races of his. But he always seems to me a bit too pleased with himself.'

'What was Babs's first husband like?'

'Quite a different type,' said Farebrother, though without particularising.

He lowered his voice, just as he had done in the car, though we were still alone in the compartment.

'A rather curious thing happened when we got in from that dance last night,' he said. 'As you know, I went straight up to my room. I started to undress, and then I thought I would just cast my eye over an article in *The Economist* that I had brought with me. I find my brain seems a bit clearer for that kind of thing late at night.'

He paused for a moment, and shook his head, suggesting much burning of midnight oil. Then he went on: 'I thought I heard a good deal of passing backwards and forwards and what sounded like whispering in the passage. Well, one year when I stayed with the Templers they made me an apple-pie bed, and I thought something like that might be in the wind. I opened the door. Do you know what I saw?'

At this stage of the story I could not possibly admit that I knew what he had seen, so there was no alternative to denial, which I made by shaking my head, rather in Farebrother's own manner. I had begun to feel a little uncomfortable.

'There was Stripling, marching down the passage holding *a jerry* in front of him as if he were taking part in some ceremony.'

I shook my head again; this time as if in plain disbelief. Farebrother was not prepared to let the subject drop. He said: 'What could he have been doing?'

'I can't imagine.'

'He was obviously very put out at my seeing him. I mean, what the hell could he have been doing?'

Farebrother leant forward, his elbows on his knees, confronting me with this question, as if he were an eminent counsel, and I in the witness box.

'Was it a joke?'

'That was what I thought at first; but he looked quite serious. Of course we are always hearing that his health is not good.'

I tried to make some non-committal suggestions that might throw light on what had happened.

'Coupled with the rest of his way of going on,' said Farebrother, 'it made a bad impression.'

We passed on towards London. When we parted company Sunny Farebrother gave me one of his very open smiles, and said: 'You must come and lunch with me one of these days. No good my offering you a lift as I'm heading Citywards.' He piled his luggage, bit by bit, on to a taxi; and passed out of my life for some twenty years.

3.

Being in love is a complicated matter; although anyone who is prepared to pretend that love is a simple, straightforward business is always in a strong position for making conquests. In general, things are apt to turn out unsatisfactorily for at least one of the parties concerned; and in due course only its most determined devotees remain unwilling to admit that an intimate and affectionate relationship is not necessarily a simple one: while such persistent enthusiasts have usually brought their own meaning of the word to something far different from what it conveys to most people in early life. At that period love's manifestations are less easily explicable than they become later: often they do not bear that complexion of being a kind of game, or contest, which, at a later stage, they may assume. Accordingly, when I used to consider the case of Jean Templer, with whom I had decided I was in love, analysis of the situation brought no relief from uneasy, almost obsessive thoughts that filled my mind after leaving the Templers' house. Most of all I thought of her while the train travelled across France towards Touraine.

The journey was being undertaken in fiery sunshine. Although not my first visit to France, this was the first time I had travelled alone there. As the day wore on, the nap on the covering of the seats of the French State Railways took on the texture of the coarse skin of an over-heated animal: writhing and undulating as if in an effort to find relief from the torturing glow. I lunched in the restaurant car, and drank some red *vin ordinaire* that tasted unexpectedly sour. The carriage felt hotter than ever on my return: and the train more crowded. An elderly man with a straw hat, black gloves, and Assyrian beard had taken my seat. I decided that it would be less trouble, and perhaps cooler, to stand for a time in the corridor. I wedged myself in by the window between a girl of about fifteen with a look of intense concentration on her pale, angular features, who pressed her face against the glass, and a young soldier with a spectacled, thin countenance, who was angrily explaining some political matter to an enormously fat priest in charge of several small boys. After a while the corridor became fuller than might have been thought possible. I was gradually forced away from the door of the compartment, and found myself unstrategically placed with a leg on either side of a wicker trunk, secured by a strap, the buckle of which ran into my ankle, as the train jolted its way along the line. All around were an immense number of old women in black, one of whom was carrying a feather mattress as part of her luggage.

At first the wine had a stimulating effect; but this sense of exhilaration began to change after a time to one of heaviness and despair. My head buzzed. The soldier and the priest were definitely having words. The girl forced her nose against the window, making a small circle of steam in front of her face. At last the throbbings in my head became so intense that I made up my mind to eject the man with the beard. After a short preliminary argument in which I pointed out that the seat was a reserved one, and, in general, put my case as well as circumstances and my command of the language would allow, he said briefly: '*Monsieur, vous avez gagné,*' and accepted dislodgment with resignation and some dignity. In the corridor, he moved skilfully past the priest and his boys; and, with uncommon agility for his age and size, climbed on to the wicker trunk, which he reduced almost immediately to a state of complete dissolution: squatting on its ruins reading *Le Figaro*. He seemed to know the girl, perhaps his daughter, because once he leaned across and pinched the back of her leg and made some remark to her; but she continued to gaze irritably out at the passing landscape, amongst the trees of which an occasional white château stood glittering like a huge birthday cake left out in the woods after a picnic. By the time I reached my destination there could be no doubt whatever that I was feeling more than a little sick.

The French family with whom I was to stay was that of a retired infantry officer, Commandant Leroy, who had known my father in Paris at the end of the war. I had never met him, though his description, as a quiet little man dominated by a masterful wife, was already familiar to me; so that I hoped there would be no difficulty in recognising Madame Leroy on the platform. There was, indeed, small doubt as to her identity as soon as I set eyes on her. Tall and stately, she was dressed in the deepest black. A female companion of mature age accompanied her, wearing a cone-shaped hat trimmed with luxuriant artificial flowers. No doubt I was myself equally unmistakable, because, even before descending passengers had cleared away, she made towards me with eyebrows raised, and a smile that made me welcome not only to her own house, but to the whole of France. I shook hands with both of them, and Madame Leroy made a gesture, if not of prevention and admonition, at least of a somewhat deprecatory nature, as I took the hand of the satellite, evidently a retainer of some sort, who removed her fingers swiftly, and shrank away from my grasp, as if at once offended and fearful. After this practical repudiation of responsibility for my arrival, Rosalie, as she turned out to be called, occupied herself immediately in some unfriendly verbal exchange with the porter, a sickly-looking young man Madame Leroy had brought with her, who seemed entirely under the thumb of these two females, emasculated by them of all aggressive traits possessed by his kind.

After various altercations with station officials, all more or less trifling, and carried off victoriously by Madame Leroy, we climbed into a time-worn taxi, driven by an ancient whose moustache and peaked cap gave him the air of a Napoleonic grenadier, an elderly *grognard,* fallen on evil days during the Restoration, depicted in some academic canvas of patriotic intention. Even when stationary, his taxi was afflicted with a kind of vehicular counterpart of St. Vitus's dance, and its quaverings and seismic disturbances must have threatened nausea to its occupants at the best of times. On that afternoon something far less convulsive would have affected me adversely; for the weather outside the railway station seemed warmer even than on the train. The drive began, therefore, in unfavourable circumstances so far as my health was concerned: nor could I remember for my own use any single word of French: though happily retaining some measure of comprehension when remarks were addressed to me.

Madame Leroy had evidently been a handsome proposition in her youth. At sixty, or thereabouts, she retained a classical simplicity of style: her dimensions comprehensive, though well proportioned: her eye ironical, but not merciless. She seemed infinitely prepared for any depths of poverty in the French language, keeping up a brisk line of talk, scarcely seeming to expect an answer to questions concerning the health of my parents, the extent of my familiarity with Paris, the heat of the summer in England, and whether crossing the Channel had spoiled a season's hunting. Rosalie was the same age, perhaps a little older, with a pile of grey hair done up on the top of her head in the shape of a farmhouse loaf, her cheeks cross-hatched with lines and wrinkles like those on the side of Uncle Giles's nose: though traced out here on a larger scale. From time to time she muttered distractedly to herself: especially when clouds of white dust from the road blew in at the window, covering us with blinding, smarting powder, at the same time obscuring even more thoroughly the cracked and scarred windscreen, which seemed to have had several bullets put through it in the past: perhaps during the retreat from Moscow. With much stress, and grunting of oaths on the part of the veteran, the car began to climb a steep hill: on one of the corners of which it seemed impossible that the engine would have the power to proceed farther. By some means, however, the summit was achieved, and the taxi stopped, with a final paroxysm of vibration, in front of a door in a whitewashed wall. This wall, along the top of which dark green creeper hung, ran for about fifty yards along the road, joining the house, also white, at a right-angle.

'*Voila,*' said Madame Leroy. 'La Grenadiere.'

Below the hill, in the middle distance, flowed the river, upon which the sun beat down in stripes of blue and gold. Along its banks minute figures of a few fishermen could just be seen. White dust covered all surrounding vegetation; and from a more solid and durable form of this same white material the house itself seemed to have been constructed. The taxi still throbbed and groaned and smelt very vile. To vacate it for the road brought some relief. Madame Leroy led the way through the door in the wall in the manner of a sorceress introducing a neophyte into the land of faërie: a parallel which the oddness of the scene revealed by her went some way to substantiate.

We entered a garden of grass lawns and untidy shrubs, amongst the stony paths of which a few rusty iron seats were dotted about. In one corner of this pleasure ground stood a summer-house, covered with the same creeper that hung over the outer wall, and hemmed in by untended flower beds. At first sight there seemed to be a whole army of people, including children, wandering about, or sitting on the seats, reading, writing, and talking. Madame Leroy, like Circe, moved forward through this enchanted garden, ignoring the inhabitants of her kingdom as if they were invisible, and we passed into the house, through a glass-panelled door. The hall was as black as night, and I fell over a dog asleep there, which took the accident in bad part, and was the object of much vituperation from Rosalie. Mounting several flights of stairs, Madame Leroy still leading the way, we at last entered a room on the top floor, a garret containing a bed, a chair, and a basin, with its accessories, in blue tin, set on a tripod. A view of the distant river appeared once more, through a port-hole in this austere apartment, one wall of which was decorated with a picture, in cheerful colours, of St. Laurence and his gridiron; intended perhaps in jocular allusion to the springs of the bed. Rosalie, who had followed us up the stairs bearing a small jug, now poured a few drops of lukewarm water, lightly tinted by some deposit, into the basin on the tripod: intoning a brief incantation as she did this. Madame Leroy stood by, waiting apparently for this final ministration: and, satisfied no doubt that I had become irrevocably subject to her occult powers, she now glided towards the door, having indicated that we might meet again in the garden in due course. As she retired, she said something about '*l'autre monsieur anglais*' having the bedroom next door. At that moment I could scarcely have felt less interest in a compatriot.

When the door shut, I lay for a time on the bed. Something had gone wrong, badly wrong, as a result of luncheon on the train. At first I attributed this recurrent feeling of malaise to the wine: then I remembered that some sort of fish in the hors d'œuvres had possessed an equivocal flavour. Perhaps heat and excitement were the true cause of my feeling unwell. There was a slight improvement after a lapse of about twenty minutes, at the end of which time I rose and peered through the port-hole on to a landscape through which the river ran as straight as a canal, among trees, and white houses similar in size and shape to La Grenadiere. I washed my hands in the tin basin, and set off, rather gingerly, down the stairs.

As I reached the hall, the door on the left opened suddenly, and Madame Leroy reappeared. She smiled meaningly, as if to give assurance of her satisfaction in accepting a new catachumen; and pointed to the garden, evidently with a view to undertaking further preliminaries of initiation. We stepped out into the evening sunshine, and, side by side, moved towards the groups gathered together in knots at different points on the grass: from one of which her husband, Commandant Leroy, at once detached himself and came towards us. He was a small man, several inches shorter than his wife, with dark blue glasses and a really colossal moustache. Speaking good English (I remembered he had been an interpreter) he enquired about the journey, explaining that he had been unable to come to the station because his health was not good: he had been gassed, though not seriously, he added, at one of the German attacks on Ypres early in the war, and he was suffering at present from pains in various parts of his body. Madame Leroy heard him with impatience: at length telling him sharply to go and lie down. He shook hands again, and pottered off towards the house. Madame Leroy inclined her head, apparently to express regret that control over her husband even after these many years, was still incomplete. She told me that she had one son, Emile, whom they saw occasionally because he was an instructor at the Cavalry School at Saumur: another, Marcel, serving in Morocco with the Chasseurs d'Afrique: and a daughter, Victorine, married to an army doctor in Saigon.

'Une vraie famille de soldats.'

'Une vraie famille d'officiers,' corrected Madame Leroy, though not unkindly.

We cruised about the garden. The persons assembled there, a trifle less numerous than had at first appeared, were of different classification: some guests, some members of the family. The next introduction was to Berthe, one of the Leroy nieces, a plump brunette, sitting on one of the seats, watching life through sly, greenish eyes set far apart in a face of fawn-coloured rubber. She was engaged, Madame Leroy explained, to the son of the Chef de Cabinet of the Sous-Secrétaire de Marine. Her aunt took this opportunity of speaking a few improving words on the subject of marriage in general, received by Berthe with a tightly compressed smirk; and we passed on to Suzette, another niece, who was writing letters in mauve ink at one of the iron tables. Suzette was small and fair, not a beauty, but dispensing instantaneously, and generously, emotional forces that at once aroused in me recollections of Jean Templer; causing an abrupt renewal—so powerful that it seemed almost that Jean had insinuated herself into the garden—of that restless sense of something desired that had become an increasing burden upon both day and night. Suzette shook hands and smiled in such a manner as to put beyond doubt, were the metaphor to be used, any question of butter melting in the mouth. Then she sat down again and continued her letter, evidently a composition that demanded her closest attention.

Two boys, perhaps great-nephews, followed, somewhere between nine and twelve years of age, with strongly marked features, broadly ironical like Madame Leroy's, to whose side of the family they belonged. Heavy black eyebrows were grafted on to white faces, as if to offset the pattern of dark blue socks against sallow, skinny legs. Both were hard at work with lexicons and notebooks; and, after shaking hands very formally, they returned to work, without looking up again as we passed on from their table. Their names were Paul-Marie and Jean-Népomucène.

Leaving these ramifications of the Leroy household, we approached the outskirts of a Scandinavian pocket in the local community, first represented in the person of a tall young man—in size about six foot three or four—wearing a black suit, light grey cap, and white canvas shoes, who was reading *Les Misérables* with the help of a dictionary. This figure, explained Madame Leroy, as I escaped from his iron grip, was Monsieur Örn—so, at least, after many changes of mind, I decided his name, variously pronounced by his fellow boarders, must be spelt, for during the whole of my stay at La Grenadière I never saw it written down—who was a Norwegian, now learning French, though in principle studying in his own country to be an engineer. From Monsieur Örn's vacant blue eyes a perplexed tangle of marked reactions seemed to signal uncertainly for a second or two, and then die down. I had seen a provincial company perform *The Doll's House* not many months before, and felt, with what I now see to have been quite inadmissible complacency, that I knew all about Ibsen's countrymen.

As Monsieur Örn seemed to be at a loss for words, we proceeded to Monsieur Lundquist, a Swede in dark grey knickerbockers, mending a bicycle. Monsieur Lundquist, although formality itself—he was almost as formal as Paul-

Marie and Jean-Népomucène had been—was much more forthcoming than Monsieur Örn. He repeated several times: *'Enchanté, Monsieur Yenkins,'* putting his heels together, and holding his bicycle-pump as if it were a sword and he were about to march past in review, while he smiled and took Madame Leroy's hand in his after he had let go of my own. His dark curly hair and round chubby face gleamed in the sun, seeming to express outwardly Monsieur Lundquist's complete confidence in his own powers of pleasing.

As we strolled on towards the summer-house, built with its entrance facing obliquely from the centre of the lawn—if the central part of the garden could really be so called—Madame Leroy explained that within this precinct would be found Monsieur and Madame Dubuisson, who had been married only a short time. Having called this fact to mind, she tapped loudly on one of the supports of the arbour before venturing to escort me through its arch. After taking this precaution, she advanced in front of me, and peeped through one of the embrasures in the wall, pausing for a moment, then beckoning me on, until at last we entered the heart of the retreat in which the Dubuissons were sitting side by side.

Afterwards I discovered that Monsieur Dubuisson was only about forty. At first sight he struck me as much older, since the skin of his face fell in diamond-shaped pouches which appeared quite bloodless. Like Monsieur Örn, he wore a cap, a very flat, very large, check cap, with a long peak, like that in which *apaches* used to be portrayed in French comic papers or on the stage. Under this headgear, rank and greying, almost lavender-coloured hair bunched out. He held a book on his knee, but was not reading. Instead he sat gazing with a look of immense and ineradicable scepticism on his face, towards what could be seen of the garden. His long upper lip and general carriage made me think of a French version of the Mad Hatter. His bride, a stocky little woman, younger than her husband, was dressed in white from head to foot: looking as if she had prepared herself for an afternoon's shopping in Paris, but had decided instead to spend her time knitting in the summer-house. This very domestic occupation seemed scarcely to harmonise with the suggestion—conveyed in some manner by her face, even more than her clothes—that she was not, temperamentally, a domestic person: not, at any rate, in the usual meaning of that term. As Stringham had said of Peter Templer, she did not appear to be intended by nature for 'home life'. Whatever domesticity she might possess seemed superimposed on other, and perhaps more predatory, characteristics.

Though still feeling decidedly bilious, I had done my best to make myself agreeable to each of the persons in turn produced by Madame Leroy; and, such is the extraordinary power of sentiment at that age, the impact of Suzette's personality, with its reminder of Jean, had made me forget for a while the consequences of the hors d'œuvres. However, when Monsieur Dubuisson held out to me the book lying on his knee, and said dryly, in excellent English: 'I should be interested to hear your opinion on this rendering,' my head began to go round again. The title on the cover, *Simples Contes des Collines,* for the moment conveyed nothing to me. Fortunately Monsieur Dubuisson did not consider it necessary to receive an answer to his question, because, almost immediately, he went on to remark: 'I read the stories in French merely as—as a matter of interest. For you see I find no—no difficulty at all in expressing myself in the language of the writer.'

The pauses were evidently to emphasise the ease with which he spoke English, and his desire to use the absolutely appropriate word, rather than on account of ignorance of phrasing. He went on: 'I like Kipling. That is, I like him up to a point. Naturally one finds annoying this—this stress on nationalism. Almost blatant nationalism, I should say.'

All this conversation was now becoming a little overwhelming. Madame Leroy, engaged with Madame Dubuisson on some debate regarding *en pension* terms, would in any case, I think, have cut short the development of a serious literary discussion, because she was already showing indications of restlessness at Monsieur Dubuisson's continued demonstration of his command of English. However, a new—and for me almost startling—element at that moment altered the temper of the party. There was the sound of a step behind us, and an additional personage came under the rustic arch of the entrance, refocusing everyone's attention. I turned, prepared for yet another introduction, and found myself face to face with Widmerpool.

Monsieur Dubuisson, quite shrewd in his way, as I learnt later, must have realised at once that he would have to wait for another occasion to make his speech about Kipling, because he stopped short and joined his wife in her investigation of the *en pension* terms. Possibly he may even have felt that his support was required in order that the case for a reduction might be adequately presented. It was evidently a matter that had been discussed between the three of them on a number of earlier occasions, and, so soon as Madame Leroy had spoken of the surprise and pleasure that she felt on finding that Widmerpool and I were already acquainted, she returned vigorously to her contest with the Dubuissons.

Widmerpool said in his thick, flat voice: 'I thought it might be you, Jenkins. Only yours is such a common name that I could not be sure.'

We shook hands, rather awkwardly. Widmerpool had tidied himself up a little since leaving school, though there was still a kind of exotic drabness about his appearance that seemed to mark him out from the rest of mankind. At a later stage of our sojourn at La Grenadière, he confided to me that he had purchased several ties during an afternoon spent in Blois. He was wearing one of these cravats of the country when he came into the summer-house, and its embroidered stripes insinuated that he might not be English, without adding to his appearance the least suggestion of French origins. His familiar air of uneasiness remained with him, and he still spoke as if holding a piece of india-rubber against the roof of his mouth. He also retained his accusing manner, which seemed to suggest that he suspected people of trying to worm out of him important information which he was not, on the whole, prepared to divulge at so cheap a price as that offered. All this uncomfortable side of him came into my mind, and I could think of nothing to say. Madame Leroy was now deeply involved with the Dubuissons regarding the subject of some proposed financial readjustment, and it looked as if the matter was going to come to a head, one way or the other. At last the three of them went off together, talking hard. I was left alone with Widmerpool. He did not speak.

'How long have you been here?' I asked.

He stared hard at me from the solid glass windows through which he observed the world; frowning as if some important canon of decency had already been violated by my ineptitude: and that this solecism, whatever it was, grieved rather than surprised him. Then he said: 'You know we are supposed to talk *French* here, Jenkins.'

It was hard to guess how best to reply to this admonition. To say: '*Oui,* Widmerpool,' would sound silly, even a trifle flippant; on the other hand, to answer in English would be to aggravate my incorrect employment of the language; and might at the same time give the appearance of trying to increase the temptation for Widmerpool to relapse into his native tongue, with which my arrival now threatened to compromise him. In spite of his insignificance at school, I still felt that he might possess claims to that kind of outward deference one would pay to the opinion of a boy higher up in the house, even when there was no other reason specially to respect his views. In any case the sensation of nausea from which I had once more begun to suffer seemed to be increasing in volume, adding to the difficulty of taking quick decisions in so complicated a question of the use of language. After a long pause, during which he appeared to be thinking things over, Widmerpool spoke again.

'It would probably be simpler,' he said, 'if I showed you round first of all *in English*. Then we can talk French for the rest of the time you are here.'

'All right.'

'But tell me in the first place how you knew of La Grenadière?'

I explained about Commandant Leroy and my father. Widmerpool seemed disappointed at this answer. I added that my parents had thought the terms very reasonable. Widmerpool said: 'My mother has always loved Touraine since she visited this country as a girl. And, of course, as you know, the best French is spoken in this part of France.'

I said I had heard a Frenchman question that opinion; but Widmerpool swept this doubt aside, and continued: 'My mother was always determined that I should perfect my French among the châteaux of the Loire. She made enquiries and decided that Madame Leroy's house was far the best of the several establishments for paying-guests that exist in the neighbourhood. Far the best.'

Widmerpool sounded quite challenging; and I agreed that I had always heard well of the Leroys and their house. However, he would not allow that there was much to be said for the Commandant: Madame, on the other hand, he much admired. He said: 'I will take you round the garden first, and introduce you.'

'No, for Heaven's sake—Madame Leroy has already done that.'

Widmerpool looked offended at this speech, and seemed uncertain what should be the next move. He temporised by asking: 'What sort of a journey did you have?'

'Hot.'

'You look a bit green.'

'Let's go into the house.'

'Did you have a change,' he said. 'I came straight through by a clever piece of railway management on my part.'

'Where can I be sick?'

'What do you mean?'

'Where can I be sick?'

At length he understood; and soon after this, with many expressions of sympathy from Madame Leroy, and some practical help from Rosalie, who unbent considerably now that I was established as a member of the household—and an indisposed one—I retired to bed: lying for a long time in a state of coma, thinking about Widmerpool and the other people in the garden. The images of Jean Templer and Suzette hovered in the shadows of the room, until they merged into one person as sleep descended.

How all the inhabitants of La Grenadière were accommodated in a house of that size was a social and mathematical problem, so far as I was concerned, never satisfactorily elucidated during my stay there. I could only assume that there were more bedrooms than passage doors on the upper storeys, and that these rooms led one from another. The dining-room was on the left of the main entrance: the kitchen on the right. In the sunless and fetid segment between these two rooms, Rosalie presided during meals, eating her own portion from a console table that stood on one side of the hall, facing a massive buhl cabinet on the other: the glass doors of this cabinet revealed the ragged spines of a collection of paper-backed novels. This segregation in the hall symbolised Rosalie's footing in the house, by imposing physical separation from her employers on the one hand, and, on the other, from Marthe, a girl of eighteen, showing signs of suffering from goitre, who did the cooking: and did it uncommonly well.

Two dogs—Charley and Bum—shared with Rosalie her pitchy vestibule: a state of perpetual war existing between the three of them. Charley was so named on account of the really astonishing presumption that he looked like an English dog: whereas his unnaturally long brown body, short black legs, and white curly tail, made it almost questionable whether he was indeed a dog at all, and not a survival of a low, and now forgotten, form of prehistoric life. Bum, a more conventional animal, was a white wire-haired terrier. He carried his name engraved on a wide leather collar studded with brass hob-nails. Every Monday he was placed on a table in the garden, and Madame Leroy would bathe him, until his crisp coat looked as if it were woven from a glistening thread of white pipe-cleaners. Charley was never washed, and resenting this attention to his fellow, would on this account pick a quarrel with Bum every seven days. Rosalie was for ever tripping over the dogs in the passage, and cursing them: the dogs squabbling with each other and with Rosalie: at times even stealing food from her plate when she was handing on the next course into the dining-room: where we all sat at a large round table that nearly filled the room.

Most of the talking at meals was done by Madame Dubuisson, Berthe and Paul-Marie, the last of whom was said, by almost everyone who referred to him, to be unusually full of *esprit* for his age: though I was also warned that his remarks were sometimes judged to be *'un peu shocking'*. When he spoke, his black eyebrows used to arch, and then shoot together, and a stream of words would pour out, sending Madame Dubuisson and Berthe, especially, into fits of laughter at his sallies. These sometimes caused Madame Leroy to shake her head in mild reproval: though Madame Leroy herself would often smile admiringly at the ease with which Paul-Marie succeeded in hitting off life's paradoxical situations: especially those connected with the relations of the sexes. For my own part I understood only a small proportion of Paul-Marie's jokes on account of the speed with which he spat out his sentences, and also because of his colloquial manner of expressing himself; but I gathered their general import, which was to the effect that women, owing to their cunning ways, were to be approached with caution. Whether or not they were good jokes I am now in no position to say. I imagine that they belonged, on the whole, to that immense aggregation of synthetic humour on this subject that serves the French pretty well, being adapted to most cases that arise. Indeed, Paul-Marie's synthetic jokes might perhaps be compared with Uncle Giles's synthetic scepticism, both employable for many common situations. Jean-Népomucène was much quieter. With heavy-lidded eyes, he used to watch his brother, and give a short, very grown-up laugh at appropriate moments. Most of the time at table Jean-Népomucène's manner was absent, suggesting that his mind was engaged on preoccupations of his own, perhaps of a similar order to his brother's reflections, but more gravely considered. Berthe and Madame Dubuisson would sometimes try and tease him about his silences, saying: *'Ah, Jean-Népomucène, il est bavard, lui,'* in this way provoking a verbal attack from Paul-Marie, which usually required their combined forces to beat off.

Commandant Leroy rarely spoke. His wife kept him on a diet, and he sat, almost hidden, behind a colossal bottle of Contrexeville water, that always stood in front of him, from which, after every meal, he took a few drops, mixed with grey powder, in a spoon. Monsieur Dubuisson also conversed little at meals, no doubt because he felt his conversation wasted in the intellectual surroundings available at La Grenadière. He would, however, occasionally read aloud some item of news from the papers (his only extravagance seemed to be buying newspapers), after which he would laugh satirically as he qualified these quotations by supplying details of the individual, country, or political group, that provided funds for the journal in question. He used to listen to Paul-Marie's chatter with a look of infinite sourness on his face.

The position of the Dubuissons at La Grenadière always remained something of a mystery. It was evident that they had come there merely to enjoy a cheap holiday, and that Monsieur Dubuisson considered that life owed him something superior to the accommodation to be found with the Leroys. Berthe and Suzette used to have some joke together about Madame Dubuisson, who was apparently held to own a past not to be too closely scrutinised. They were talking the matter over, in whispers, one day, when sitting behind me on the way back from an expedition to Loches. They seemed to have no very definite information, but their conclusions—as I rather dimly understood them—

seemed to be that Madame Dubuisson had been her husband's mistress for a number of years: having at last induced him to marry her. At that time such a subject, illustrated by the practical circumstances of a couple who seemed to me to be so lacking in romance as the Dubuissons, appeared to be of only the most academic interest: to have little or nothing to do with the practical problems of life. At a later date I should have been more curious regarding their story. Madame Dubuisson used to giggle, and behave generally in a fairly free manner, especially when her husband was not present; and I felt that —if an analogy could be drawn between two such different households—she represented at La Grenadière something comparable to Lady McReith's position when staying at the Templers'. Madame Dubuisson was, for example, the guest whom Commandant Leroy undoubtedly liked best, and the boys, too, seemed to get on with her well. I never discovered her husband's occupation. It appeared that—like Sunny Farebrother—he had distinguished himself during the war: or, at least, he mentioned this fact to me on one or two occasions; and at one period he seemed to have taught, or lectured, at some provincial university. He said that at present he was in business, but without specifying its nature.

'I am a very busy man, building up for my corporation, and trying to materialise along the same lines a few ideas regarding the financing of certain needs which actually are most difficult to meet,' he remarked to me soon after my arrival.

He must have suspected that I required further enlightenment before I could answer, because he added: 'I might even come to London, when, and if, certain—certain negotiations pending with British houses mature.'

I asked if he knew London well.

'Probably better than yourself,' he replied; 'being nearly at the head of a finance corporation, I am trying to assure a certain percentage of the insolvency risk which might arise when I guarantee credits by endorsing bills.'

'I see.'

'You must not think,' Monsieur Dubuisson continued, smiling and showing a barrier of somewhat discoloured teeth, 'that I am merely—merely a commercial gent. I am also developing my activity as a newspaperman, and publish weekly one, or a couple, of articles. I hope to be circulated in England soon.'

'Do you write in English?'

'Of course.'

I inquired about the subjects on which he wrote. Monsieur Dubuisson said: 'I sent lately to the *National Review* a longish article entitled "Cash Payments; or Productive Guarantees?" speaking my views on the actual and future relations of France, Great Britain, and Germany. I have had no answer yet, but I have a manuscript copy I can lend you to read.'

He paused; and I thanked him for this offer.

'As a matter of fact I write along three very different lines,' Monsieur Dubuisson went on. 'First as a financial expert: second, summaries of big problems looked upon from an independent threefold point of view—political, military, economic: finally in consideration of the growth of the social idea in English literature.'

All this left me little, if at all, wiser on the subject of the Dubuisson background, but there could be no doubt that Monsieur Dubuisson had plenty of confidence in his own qualifications. Outwardly, he never showed much interest in his wife, though they spent a good deal of their time together: since neither of them took any part in the collective recreations of La Grenadière, such as the excursions to places of interest in the neighbourhood. This lack of public attention from her husband did not appear to worry Madame Dubuisson at all. She chattered away all the time to anyone who happened to find themselves next to her; and without any regard for the question of whether or not her listener understood what she was talking about: a habit perhaps acquired from her husband.

The two Scandinavians did not 'get on' with each other. Both Berthe and Suzette warned me of this, in diplomatic terms, soon after I came to La Grenadière. According to the girls, Monsieur Örn complained that Monsieur Lundquist was 'too proud'; while Monsieur Lundquist had actually stated openly that he considered Monsieur Örn to be lacking in *chic*. Monsieur Örn, like Monsieur Dubuisson, rarely spoke, spending most of his time writing lists of French words in a notebook. Berthe said that Monsieur Örn had confided to her that all Swedes were proud, often for no reason at all; Monsieur Lundquist especially so, for no better cause than that his father happened to be an official at the Law Courts. Monsieur Lundquist himself was going to become a journalist, and Monsieur Örn had told Berthe that Monsieur Lundquist was much inclined to exaggerate the social position that this calling would bring him. Although Monsieur Örn did not talk a great deal, he would sometimes look sternly across the table at Monsieur Lundquist, the whole of his craggy face slowly setting into a gloomy, hostile state: *'comme un Viking'*, Berthe used to call this specially organised physiogonomy. As a matter of fact Berthe had a weak spot for Monsieur Örn, because he was so good at tennis. If she happened to be cutting the melon at luncheon, she would always give him the largest slice, or help him generously to *pot-au-feu*.

Apart from his regret that Monsieur Örn was so hopelessly ill-equipped so far as *chic* was concerned—an opinion of which, I found, he made no secret, expounding the view freely to everyone in the house—Monsieur Lundquist seemed quite unaware of the vigour of Monsieur Örn's disapproval of his own attitude towards the world, which both of them agreed to be characteristically Swedish; nor was he prepared to accept Monsieur Örn's repeated assertions that he did not understand the Swedish language. Monsieur Lundquist, transgressing the rule of La Grenadiere, whenever he found his French inadequate to make his meaning clear, would often make use of Swedish. Monsieur Örn would then listen, adjusting his firm features in such a way as to indicate utter failure to comprehend that such outlandish—or, perhaps it was, such affected—sounds could possibly have any meaning at all: even for Swedes. Monsieur Örn would finally make some remark in his notably individual French, evidently wholly irrelevant to the matter raised by Monsieur Lundquist. On such occasions Monsieur Lundquist would only smile, and shake this head, unable to credit Monsieur Örn's unvarying and oppressive lack of *chic*.

In this circle, Widmerpool had made himself an accepted, if not specially popular, figure. There was no question here of his being looked upon by the rest of the community as the oddity he had been regarded at school. In the weeks that followed I came to know him pretty well. We talked French to each other at meals, and kept up some show of using French during expeditions: alone together—usually late in the evening, when the others had gone to their rooms, to devote themselves to study, or to rest—we used to speak English; although Widmerpool rarely did so without making some reference to the reluctance with which he diverged from the rule of the house. He used to work hard at the language all the rest of the time. In spite of inherent difficulty in making words sound like French, he had acquired a large vocabulary, and could carry on a conversation adequately, provided he could think of something to say; for I found that he had no interest in anything that could not be labelled as in some way important or improving, an approach to conversation that naturally limited its scope. His determination to learn French set an example from which I fell lamentably short. In his rigid application to the purpose for which he came to France, he was undoubtedly the most satisfactory of Madame Leroy's boarders, even including the industrious Monsieur Örn, who never could get his genders right.

Like Monsieur Dubuisson, Widmerpool showed no enthusiasm for Paul-Marie's jokes.

'That boy has a corrupt mind,' he said, not many days after I had been in the house. 'Extraordinary for a child of that age. I cannot imagine what would happen to him at an English school.'

'He's like Stringham as a small French boy.'

I said this without thinking at all deeply about the accuracy of the comparison. I did not, in fact, find in Paul-Marie any startling resemblance to Stringham, though some faint affinity must have existed between them, in so much that more than once I had thought of Stringham, when Paul-Marie had been engaged in one of his torrential outbursts of conversation. However, Widmerpool showed sudden interest in the identification of their two characters.

'You were rather a friend of Stringham's, weren't you?' he asked. 'Of course I was a bit senior to know him. I liked the look of him on the whole. I should say he was an amusing fellow.'

For Widmerpool to imply that it was merely a matter of age that had prevented him from being on easy terms with Stringham struck me, at that time, as showing quite unjustifiable complacency regarding his own place in life. I still looked upon him as an ineffective person, rather a freak, who had no claim to consider himself as the equal of someone like Stringham who, obviously prepared to live dangerously, was not to be inhibited by the narrow bounds to which Widmerpool seemed by nature committed. It was partly for this reason that I said: 'Do you remember the time when you saw Le Bas arrested?'

'An appalling thing to happen,' said Widmerpool. 'I left soon after the incident. Was it ever cleared up how the mistake arose?'

'Stringham rang up the police and told them that Le Bas was the man they wanted to arrest.'

'What do you mean?'

'The criminal they were after looked rather like Le Bas. We had seen a picture of him outside the police-station.'

'But why——'

'As a hoax.'

'Stringham?'

'On the telephone—he said he was Le Bas himself.'

'I never heard anything like it,' said Widmerpool. 'What an extraordinary thing to have done.'

He sounded so furious that I felt that some sort of apology was called for—in retrospect the episode certainly seemed less patently a matter for laughter, now that one was older and had left school—and I said: 'Well, Le Bas was rather an ass.'

'I certainly did not approve of Le Bas, or of his methods of running a house,' said Widmerpool: and I remembered that Le Bas had particularly disliked him. 'But to do a thing like that to his own housemaster . . . And the risk he ran. He might have been expelled. Were you concerned in this too, Jenkins?'

Widmerpool spoke so sternly that for a moment I thought he intended to sit down, there and then, and, in a belated effort to have justice done, report the whole matter in writing to Le Bas or the headmaster. I explained that personally I had had no share in the hoax, beyond having been out walking with Stringham at the time. Widmerpool said, with what I thought to be extraordinary fierceness: 'Of course Stringham was thoroughly undisciplined. It came from having too much money.'

'I never noticed much money lying about.'

'Stringham may not have been given an abnormal amount himself,' said Widmerpool, irritably, 'but his family are immensely wealthy. Glimber is a huge place. My mother and I went over it once on visiting day.'

'But he is not coming in to Glimber.'

I felt glad that I had been supplied by Templer with this piece of information.

'Of course he isn't,' said Widmerpool, as if my reply had been little short of insulting. 'But there are all his mother's South African gold holdings. That divorce of hers was a very unfortunate affair for someone so well known.'

I should have liked to hear more of this last matter, but, Stringham being a friend of mine, I felt that it would be beneath my dignity to discuss his family affairs with someone who, like Widmerpool, knew of them only through hearsay. Later in life, I learnt that many things one may require have to be weighed against one's dignity, which can be an insuperable barrier against advancement in almost any direction. However, in those days, choice between dignity and unsatisfied curiosity was less clear to me as a cruel decision that had to be made.

'And that thin, rather good-looking boy,' Widmerpool continued, 'who used to be about a lot with you and Stringham?'

'Peter Templer.'

'Was he in the Le Bas affair too?'

'He was out for a walk with us on the same afternoon.'

'He did not have too good a reputation, did he?'

'Not too good.'

'That was my impression,' said Widmerpool. 'That he was not a good influence in the house.'

'You and he were mixed up in the Akworth row, weren't you?' I asked, not from malice, or with a view to keeping him in order on the subject of my friends, so much as for the reason that I was inquisitive to know more of that affair: and, considering the way that Widmerpool had been talking, I felt no particular delicacy about making the enquiry.

Widmerpool went brick-red. He said: 'I would rather not speak of that, if you don't mind.'

'Don't let's, then.'

'I suppose Templer got sacked in the end?' Widmerpool went on: no doubt conscious that he might have sounded over-emphatic, and evidently trying to bring some jocularity into his tone.

'More or less asked to leave.'

'How badly used he really to behave?'

He moistened his lips, though scarcely perceptibly. I thought his mixture of secretiveness and curiosity quite intolerable.

'He had a woman before he left.'

If Widmerpool had been upset by the news that Stringham had played the Braddock alias Thorne trick on Le Bas, and more personally embarrassed by reference to the Akworth scandal, this piece of information, regarding Templer's crowning exploit, threw him almost entirely off his balance. He made a strange sound, half-way between a low laugh and a clearing of the throat, simultaneously swallowing hard. He also went, if possible, redder than ever. Took off his spectacles and began to polish them, as he usually did when his nerves were on edge. I did not feel entirely at ease with the subject myself. To help out the situation, I added: 'I have just been staying with the Templers as a matter of fact.'

Widmerpool clearly welcomed this shift of interest in our conversation, enquiring almost eagerly about the Templers' house, and the manner in which they lived. We talked about the Templers for a time, and I found to my surprise that Widmerpool knew Sunny Farebrother by name, though they had never met. He said: 'A very sharp fellow, they tell me.'

'I liked him.'

'Naturally you did,' said Widmerpool. 'He can make himself very agreeable.'

I found Widmerpool's remarks in this vein so tiresome that I was almost inclined to try and shock him further by describing in detail the various incidents that had taken place while I was staying at the Templers'. In the end I decided that those happenings needed too much explanation before they could be appreciated, anyway by Widmerpool, that there was nothing to be gained by trying to impress him, or attempting to modify his point of view. I told him that Peter was going straight into business, without spending any time at the university. Rather unexpectedly, Widmerpool approved this decision, almost in Sunny Farebrother's own phrase.

'Much better get down to work right away,' he said. 'There was not much money when my father died, so I talked things over with my mother—she has a wonderful grasp of business matters—and we decided we would do the same thing, and cut out Oxford or Cambridge.'

By using the first person plural, he made the words sound as if there had been some question of his mother going up to the university with him. He said: 'This effort to polish up my French is merely in the nature of a holiday.'

'A holiday from what?'

'I am articled to a firm of solicitors.'

'Oh, yes.'

'I do not necessarily propose to remain a solicitor all my life,' said Widmerpool. 'I look to wider horizons.'

'What sort?'

'Business. Politics.'

This all seemed to me such rubbish that I changed the subject, asking where he lived. He replied, rather stiffly, that his mother had a flat in Victoria. It was convenient, he said; but without explaining the advantages. I enquired what life was like in London.

'That depends what you do,' said Widmerpool, guardedly.

'So I suppose.'

'What profession are you going to follow?'

'I don't know.'

It seemed almost impossible to make any remark without in one manner or another disturbing Widmerpool's equanimity. He was almost as shocked at hearing that I had no ready-made plans for a career as he had been scandalised a few minutes earlier at the information regarding the precocious dissipation of Templer's life.

'But surely you have some bent?' he said. 'An ambition to do well at something?'

This ideal conception—that one should have an aim in life—had, indeed, only too often occurred to me as an unsolved problem; but I was still far from deciding what form my endeavours should ultimately take. Being at that moment unprepared for an *a priori* discussion as to what the future should hold, I made several rather lame remarks to the effect that I wanted one day 'to write': an assertion that had not even the merit of being true, as it was an idea that had scarcely crossed my mind until that moment.

'To write?' said Widmerpool. 'But that is hardly a profession. Unless you mean you want to be a journalist—like Lundquist.'

'I suppose I might do that.'

'It is precarious,' said Widmerpool. 'And—although we laugh, of course, at Örn for saying so, right out—there is certainly not much social position attached: unless, for example, you become editor of *The Times,* or something of that sort. I should think it over very carefully before you commit yourself.'

'I am not absolutely determined to become a journalist.'

'You are wise. What are your other interests?'

Feeling that the conversation had taken a turn that delivered me over to a kind of cross-examination, I admitted that I liked reading.

'You can't earn your living by reading,' said Widmerpool, severely.

'I never said you could.'

'It doesn't do to read too much,' Widmerpool said. 'You get to look at life with a false perspective. By all means have some familiarity with the standard authors. I should never raise any objection to that. But it is no good clogging your mind with a lot of trash from modern novels.'

'That was what Le Bas used to say.'

'And he was quite right. I disagreed in many ways with Le Bas. In that one, I see eye to eye with him.'

There was not much for me to say in reply. I had a novel—*If Winter Comes,* which I had now nearly finished

—under my arm, and it was impossible to deny that I had been reading this book. Widmerpool must have noticed this, because he continued in a more kindly tone: 'You must meet my mother. She is one of those rare middle-aged women who have retained their youthful interest in matters of the mind. If you like books—and you tell me you do—you would thoroughly enjoy a chat with her about them.'

'That would be nice.'

'I shall arrange it,' said Widmerpool. *'Et maintenant, il faut se coucher, parce-que je compte de me reveiller de bonne heure le matin.'*

In the course of subsequent conversations between us he talked a good deal about his mother. On the subject of his father he was more reticent. Sometimes I had even the impression that Widmerpool *père* had earned a living in some manner of which his son—an only child—preferred not to speak: though, one evening, in a burst of confidence, he mentioned that his paternal grandfather had been a Scotch business man called Geddes, who had taken the name of Widmerpool after marrying a wife of that name, who was—so Widmerpool indicated in his characteristic manner—of rather higher standing than himself. There seemed to have been some kind of financial crisis when Widmerpool's father had died, either on account of debts, or because the family's income had been thereby much reduced. Life with his mother appeared to be very quiet and to consist of working all day and studying law after dinner most nights; though Widmerpool took care to explain to me that he deliberately took part in a certain amount of what he called 'social life'. He said, with one of his rare smiles: 'Brains and hard work are of very little avail, Jenkins, unless you know the right people.'

I told him that I had an uncle who was fond of saying the same thing; and I asked what form his relaxations generally took.

'I go to dances,' said Widmerpool; adding, rather grandly: 'in the Season, that is.'

'Do you get a lot of invitations?' I asked, divided between feeling rather impressed by this attitude towards the subject in hand and, at the same time, finding difficulty in believing that he could be overwhelmed by persons wishing to share his company.

Widmerpool was evasive on this point, and muttered something about invitations being 'just a question of getting on a list'. As he seemed unwilling to amplify this statement, I did not press him further, having myself a somewhat indistinct comprehension of what he meant: and appreciating that the relative extent of his invitations, as for anyone, might be, perhaps, a delicate matter.

'I don't get much time for games now,' he said. 'Though once in a way I make a point of going down to Barnes, and driving a ball into a net.'

I was, for some reason, conscious of an odd sense of relief that he should no longer consider himself compelled to undergo those protracted and gruelling trials of endurance against himself for which he still remained chiefly notable in my mind. Driving a golf ball into a net presented an innocuous, immensely less tortured, picture to the mind than that offered by those penitential exertions with which I had formed the habit of associating his hours of recreation. This mitigated strain became even more apparent to me later on, when we used to play tennis, though his old enthusiasm was still quite strong enough.

Tennis at La Grenadière—or rather in the grounds of a ruined nineteenth-century mansion in Renaissance style situated about a mile and a half away on the outskirts of the town—was certainly of a kind to give small opportunity for a parade of that feverish keenness which had made the sight of Widmerpool playing games at school so uncomfortable to watch: although, so far as possible, he always insisted upon a high standard of athletic formality being observed whenever we played. The tennis-court was, however, the stage for him to reveal to me quite another side of his character: an unsuspected strength of personality and power of negotiation. This was in connexion with the rupture of relations between Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist, both of whom, as it turned out, took their game with seriousness at least equal to Widmerpool's; in spite of the comparatively unprofessional circumstances in which these contests were held.

The several hard tennis courts in this garden, which had been taken over as a park by the municipality, had never been properly kept up since becoming public property; so that in the course of time the soil had receded from the metal bars that formed the lines of demarcation, leaving solid boundaries that protruded so far above the ground that it was easy to catch one's foot in them when running about the court. If the ball hit one of these projecting strips of metal, it might become wedged beneath, or fly off at an unexpected angle; accordingly counting as a 'let'. Both of these types of 'let' took place with fair frequency, somewhat slowing up the cadence of the game, and making it hard to play with the concentration with which Widmerpool liked to approach all forms of sport. In addition to this local impediment to rapid play, neither Berthe nor Suzette were very proficient at the game; and they—with Paul-Marie and Jean-Népomucène, also beginners—always had to be worked into the fours.

Being no great performer myself, I rather enjoyed tennis played in these leisurely, at times undoubtedly eccentric, conditions; but Widmerpool was perpetually grumbling about 'the game not being taken seriously', a complaint that was, from his point of view, fully justified: although he was himself in no sense a good player. If he could possibly manage to do so, he would try to arrange a 'men's four', which usually resulted in one of us partnering a Scandinavian; and it soon became clear that, however much Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist might be able to cloak their mutual antipathy in the common intercourse of everyday life, their hatred for each other on the tennis court was a passion far less easily curbed. As it happened, a 'men's four' was not so simple for Widmerpool to contrive as might be supposed, because Berthe and Suzette were inclined to resent having to play in a four with Paul-Marie and Jean-Népomucène—another instance of excessive insistence on dignity defeating its own ends, for in that manner the girls would have gained practice which they greatly needed—and also, a more potent reason, because there were at best only four tennis balls; one of which had a gash in its outer covering which adversely affected the bounce. These balls not uncommonly became mislaid in the thickets of the garden; and, although Paul-Marie and Jean-Nepomucene were themselves not above playing a single with only one ball (provided this were not the damaged one), the rest of the party looked upon a couple of sound balls as a minimum; and preferred, if possible, to have the use of all available. Sometimes either Berthe or Suzette was *'souffrante',* and wanted to sit out for a set or two. This rarely occurred to both of them on the same day, so that, as it happened, competition between Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist, although each occasionally played against the other partnering one of the girls, took on its most violent aspect when both were engaged in a 'men's four': a 'single' between them being, naturally, unthinkable.

If a 'single' had ever taken place, it would undoubtedly have been won by Monsieur Örn, a better player than Monsieur Lundquist, taller and quicker in movement. There was, however, another element that entered into these games, especially when four were playing. This was knowledge of the peculiarities of the court, and their uses in winning a set, of which Monsieur Lundquist had a far keener grasp than Monsieur Örn. Monsieur Lundquist was also accustomed to practice a trick which had for some reason the effect of making Monsieur Örn abandon his normal state of vague, silent acceptance of the hardships of life and become decidedly irritable. This stratagem was for Monsieur Lundquist suddenly to change the style of his service, from a fairly brisk delivery that sent the grit flying about the court, to a gentle lob that only just cleared the net: a stroke which, quite unaccountably, always took Monsieur Örn by surprise, invariably causing him to lose the point.

Monsieur Lundquist never employed this device more than once in the course of an afternoon: often not at all. However, on one unusually hot day, after I had been at La Grenadière for several weeks, he did it twice in the same set, catching out Monsieur Örn on both occasions. It so happened that earlier in the same afternoon a ball lodged itself four or five times under the back line, a particularly annoying circumstance for the player—in every case Monsieur Örn—who certainly would otherwise have won the point. After the last of these 'lets', Monsieur Lundquist served his second lob—an unheard-of thing—catching Monsieur Örn unawares for the second time, with—so far as I was concerned—entirely unexpected effect on the Norwegian's temper.

The actual word, or words, employed by Monsieur Örn never came publicly to light, even after the whole matter had been closed: nor was it ever established whether the epithet, or designation, had been expressed in Swedish, Norwegian, or in some opprobrious term, or phrase, common to both languages. Whatever was said, Monsieur Örn spoke quietly, with closed lips, almost muttering to himself; although in a manner apparently audible to Monsieur Lundquist, who lost all at once his look of enormous self-satisfaction, went red in the face, and walked quickly round to the other side of the net. Widmerpool, his partner, shouted: *'Mais qu'est-ce que vous faites, Monsieur Lundquist? J'en ai ici deux balles. C'est assez?'*

Monsieur Lundquist took no notice of him. It was at least clear to me that, whatever else he might want, he had not crossed the court in search of tennis balls. He went straight up to Monsieur Örn and—I suppose—demanded an apology. 'I thought those northern races did not get hysterical,' Widmerpool said to me afterwards, when we were discussing the distressing scene that followed; which ended with Monsieur Lundquist marching away from the rest of us, jumping on his bicycle, and riding at breakneck speed over the dusty pot-holes that punctuated the drive's steep descent. At one moment, as he rounded the corner, I felt sure that he was going to come off; but he recovered his balance, and passing rapidly through the open gates of wrought iron that led to the road, he disappeared from sight. I agreed with Widmerpool that if he had supposed that hysteria formed no part of the Scandinavian temperament, he had—to use a favourite phrase of his own—based his opinion on insufficient data.

This scene, though in itself a violent one, did not take long to play out. Before its close, Berthe and Suzette had both risen from the seat upon which they had been resting, and done their best to join in. They were only partially successful in this, though they contrived to add appreciably to the hubbub. Finally, we were all left standing in the centre of the court beside Monsieur Orn, who had limited himself throughout the commotion almost entirely to monosyllables. He now began to speak in a deep, strident voice, which after a minute or two showed signs of shaking with emotion. At first Widmerpool and I were unable to grasp the root of the trouble, partly because Monsieur Lundquist's lobbing technique was sufficiently common for none of the rest of us specially to have noticed it that afternoon: partly because at that age I was not yet old enough to be aware of the immense rage that can be secreted in the human heart by cumulative minor irritation. However, the subject of the dispute began to reveal itself in due course after Monsieur Lundquist had left the gardens. In fact Monsieur Örn at length demonstrated the origin of his annoyance by himself tapping a ball—the gashed one—lightly over the net in Monsieur Lundquist's manner, where it fell flat, like a stone, on the reddish dust. '*Jamais,*' said Monsieur Örn, now very quietly, after performing this action several times. '*Jamais—jamais.*' Whether his words were intended to convey that no one should ever practice tricks of that sort, or whether he was expressing an intention never again to play tennis with Monsieur Lundquist was not certain.

The result of all this was a breach between Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist which there seemed no possibility of closing. By the time we reached the house, I had satisfactorily reconstructed the situation in my own mind; and I imagined—as it turned out, quite incorrectly—that I had grasped its intricacies more thoroughly than Widmerpool. It is doubtful whether the two girls ever understood the true source of the disturbance, though neither of them was backward in explaining what had gone wrong, and how it should be put right. There is no knowing what sort of an account Madame Leroy was given of the trouble, because she heard the first version from Berthe and Suzette as soon as we arrived back at La Grenadiere.

Whatever was said was, in any case, sufficient to prepare her for a trying time at dinner that evening, during which meal Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist spoke no word to each other and very little to anyone else: projecting between them across the table a cloud of hatred that seemed to embarrass even Madame Leroy, not easily disconcerted in her own house. Her husband, it is true, did not show any concern whatever, or, indeed, awareness that something might be amiss; and Paul-Marie and Jean-Népomucène, at first greatly delighted by the grown-up quarrel, soon forgot the Scandinavians in some elaborate and secret diversion of their own. Berthe, Suzette, and Madame Dubuisson were in a state of acute excitement, shooting each other glances intended to be full of meaning; while they conversed in a kind of hissing undertone. Widmerpool, also, was plainly agitated. The only person whole-heartedly amused, and pleased, by what had happened was Monsieur Dubuisson, who talked more than was his custom throughout the meal, amplifying a little the *exposé* he had given on the previous day of one of his favourite subjects, the development of water-power in Morocco. So far as I was concerned myself, these circumstances made me feel very uneasy, and I could see no way for matters to right themselves; nor for normal life to be carried on, except by the hand-to-mouth method symbolised by passing to Monsieur Örn or Monsieur Lundquist whatever food or drink each was likely to need, for which neither would ask the other. This state of affairs lasted throughout the following day, and the next; until there seemed no solution to the problem of how to restore the relationship between Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist to its old footing, imperfect as this may have been.

To my great surprise, Monsieur Dubuisson began to discuss this situation with me one evening, when we found ourselves alone together in the garden. It had been another bakingly hot day, and the white dust lay thick on the leaves of the shrubs, and over the battered seat upon which I was sitting. I was reading *Bel-Ami,* discovered among the books—on the whole not a very exciting collection—kept in the glass cabinet in the hall. Monsieur Dubuisson had been walking up and down one of the paths, studying a newspaper. Now he came across the withered grass, and sat down beside me, at the same time taking from the pocket of his black alpaca coat his pipe, of which—like Peter Templer—he was, for some reason, immensely proud. As usual he cleared his throat several times before speaking, and then, leaning backwards, spat sideways over the seat. In his slow, disapproving voice he said: 'I think it would be a—a little absurd if I talked French to you in view of our—our relative mastery of each other's tongue. Do you agree, Jenkins, yes?'

'Absolutely.'

One had to admit that he spoke English remarkably well, in spite of the hesitations made necessary by the subtlety of his processes of thought. There could be no doubt that every sentence was intended to knock you down by its penetrative brilliance. Smiling quietly to himself, as if at some essentially witty conception that he was inwardly playing with, and withheld only because its discernment was not for everybody, he began slowly to fill his pipe with tobacco—again like Peter's—that smelt peculiarly abominable.

'There seems to be a regular falling-out between our good friends from the north,' he said.

I agreed.

'You and I,' said Monsieur Dubuisson, 'belong to nations who have solved their different problems in different ways.'

I admitted that this assertion was undeniable.

'Our countries have even, as you would say, agreed to differ. You lean on tradition: we on logic.'

I was not then aware how many times I was to be informed of this contrast in national character on future occasions by Frenchmen whose paths I might happen to cross; and again I concurred.

'As I understand the affair,' went on Monsieur Dubuisson, 'as I understand the circumstances of the matter, it would be difficult to achieve something in the nature of a reconciliation.'

'Very difficult, I——'

'It would be difficult, because it would be hard to determine whether an appeal should be made, on the one hand, to your congenital leaning towards tradition: or, on the other, to our characteristic preference for logic. Do you agree? The way may even lie near some Scandinavian fusion of these two ideas. You read Strindberg?'

'I have heard of him.'

'I think our Swedish friend, Lundquist, is quite pleased with himself,' said Monsieur Dubuisson, allowing me no opportunity to interrupt his train of thought: at the same time nodding and smiling, as a speaker personally familiar with the exquisite sensations that being pleased with oneself could impart to the whole being. 'Örn, on the other hand, always seems to have the blues. During the war I knew some of your countrymen of that type. Always down at the mouth.'

'Did you see a lot of the British Army?'

'Towards the end, quite a lot. It was obvious, speaking English as I do. For three months I was second-in-command to a battalion. I was wounded twice and have four citations.'

I asked if he had ever come across my father in Paris; but, although Monsieur Dubuisson was unwilling to admit that they had never met—and assured me that he had heard Commandant Leroy speak of my father in the highest terms—it seemed probable that the two of them had never run across one another. On the other hand, Monsieur Dubuisson remarked: 'Much of my work was done with Captain Farebrother, whom you have perhaps met in England. He was called Sunny Farebrother by his comrades in the army.'

'But how astonishing—I have met him.'

As a matter of fact, I had thought of Farebrother almost as soon as Monsieur Dubuisson had mentioned his own war record, because it had immediately occurred to me how much Jimmy Stripling would have loathed Monsieur Dubuisson, with his wounds and citations. Besides, Monsieur Dubuisson's treatment of the circumstances of his war career made Farebrother's references to his own military past seem infinitely fastidious.

'But why should you think it astonishing?' asked Monsieur Dubuisson, with one of his withering smiles, which spread over the whole of his face, crinkling the features into the shape of a formal mask of comedy, crowned with greyish-mauve locks. 'Captain Farebrother is a man I know to go about a great deal in society. What could be more natural than that you should have met him?'

I did not know in those days that it was impossible to convince egoists of Monsieur Dubuisson's calibre that everyone does not look on the world as if it were arranged with them—in this case Monsieur Dubuisson—at its centre; and, not realising that, in his eyes, the only possible justification for my turning up at La Grenadière would be the fact that I had once met someone already known to him, I tried to explain that this acquaintanceship with Farebrother seemed to me an extraordinary coincidence. In addition to this, if I had been old enough to have experienced something of the world of conferences and semi-political affairs, in effect a comparatively small one, it would have seemed less unexpected that their meeting had taken place.

'He was a good fellow,' said Monsieur Dubuisson. 'There was, as a matter of fact, a small question in which Captain Farebrother had shown himself interested, and of which I later heard nothing. Perhaps you know his address?'

'I am afraid not.'

'It is of no consequence,' said Monsieur Dubuisson. 'I can easily trace him.'

All the same he cleared his throat again, rather crossly. I felt that all this talk about the war, by reviving old memories, had put him out of his stride. He pulled at his pipe for a time, and then returned to the subject of Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist.

'Now you were present when this falling-out took place,' he said. 'Can you recite to me the pertinent facts?'

I told him how matters had looked to me as a witness of them. He listened carefully to the story, which sounded—I had to admit to myself—fairly silly when told in cold blood. When I came to the end he knocked out his pipe against the leg of the seat, and, turning towards me, said quite tolerantly: 'Now look here, Jenkins, you know you and I cannot believe eyewash of that sort. Grown-up men do not quarrel about such things.'

'What were they quarrelling about, then?'

Monsieur Dubuisson gave his slow, sceptical smile. He shook his head several times.

'You are no longer a child, Jenkins,' he said. 'I know that in England such matters are not—not stressed. But you have no doubt noticed at La Grenadiere the presence of two charming young ladies. You have?'

I conceded this.

'Very good,' said Monsieur Dubuisson. 'Very good.'

He rose from the seat, and stood looking down at me, holding his hands behind his back. I felt rather embarrassed, thinking that he had perhaps guessed my own feelings for Suzette.

'Then what is there to be done about it?' I asked, to break the silence.

'Ah, *mon vieux,*' said Monsieur Dubuisson. 'Well may you ask what is to be done about it. To me—troubled as I am with a mind that leaps to political parallels—the affairs seems to me as the problems of Europe in miniature. Two young girls—two gentlemen. Which gentleman is to have which young girl? Your Government wishes mine to devalue the franc. We say the solution lies in your own policy of export.'

He shrugged his shoulders.

'I shrug my shoulders,' he said, 'like a Frenchman on the London stage.'

I was entirely at a loss to know how to reply to his presentation of this political and international allegory in relation to the matter in hand: and I found myself unable to grasp the implications of the parallel he drew with sufficient assurance to enable me to express either agreement or disagreement. However, Monsieur Dubuisson, as usual, appeared to expect no reply. He said: 'I appreciate, Jenkins, that you have come here to study. At the same time you may need something—what shall I say?—something more stimulating than the conversation which your somewhat limited fluency in the French language at present allows you to enjoy. Do not hesitate to talk with me when we are alone together on any subject that may happen to interest you.'

He smiled once again; and, while I thanked him, added: 'I am conversant with most subjects.'

As he strolled back across the lawn towards the house, he stowed away his pipe, which he seemed to use as a kind of emblem of common sense, in the pocket of his black alpaca jacket, which he wore over fawn tussore trousers.

I remained on the seat, thinking over his remarks, which required some classification before judgment could be passed on them. I could not accept his theory that jealousy about the girls, at least jealousy in any straightforward form, was at the bottom of the quarrel; because, in so much as the Scandinavians were to be thought of in connexion with Berthe and Suzette, each had paired off—if such an expression could be used of so amorphous a relationship—with a different girl: and everyone seemed perfectly happy with this arrangement. Berthe, as I have said, undoubtedly possessed a slight weakness for Monsieur Örn, which he recognised by markedly chivalrous behaviour towards her, when any such questions arose as the pumping-up of tyres of her bicycle, or carrying parcels back from the village when she did the shopping. Like Berthe, Monsieur Örn, too, was engaged; and he had, indeed, once handed round a small, somewhat faded, snapshot of himself sitting in ski-ing costume in the snow with his fiancée, who came from Trondhjem. Monsieur Lundquist, on the other hand, although interest in himself allowed him to show no more than moderate preference towards girls, or anyone else, seemed distinctly inclined towards Suzette. In so much as this allocation could be regarded as in any way part of a system, it also appeared to be absolutely satisfactory to everyone concerned. Indeed, the only person I knew of who might be said to have suffered from emotions that fell within the range of those suggested by Monsieur Dubuisson was myself; because, although the episode of the tennis court represented the more dramatic side of life at La Grenadière, the image of Suzette played in fact a far more preponderant part in my thoughts than the affairs of the Scandinavians, however unrestrained their behaviour.

I sometimes tried to sort out these feelings that had developed towards Suzette, which had certainly aroused from time to time a sensation of annoyance that Monsieur Lundquist should be talking animatedly to her, or helping her down the spiral staircase of some medieval building that we might be visiting. These were, I was aware, responses to be compared with those aroused by Jean Templer, with whom, as I have said, I now thought of myself as being 'in love'; and I was somewhat put out to find that recurrent projections in the mind of the images of either of them, Jean or Suzette, did not in the least exclude that of the other. That was when I began to suspect that being in love might be a complicated affair.

Naturally these reflections linked themselves with the general question of 'girls', discussed so often in my presence by Stringham and Templer. The curious thing was that, although quite aware that a sentiment of attraction towards Suzette was merely part of an instinct that had occasioned Peter's 'unfortunate incident'—towards which I was conscious of no sense of disapproval—my absorption in the emotional disturbance produced by Jean and Suzette seemed hardly at all connected with the taking of what had been, even in Templer's case, a fairly violent decision. I did not view his conduct on that London afternoon either as a contrast to my own inability to tackle the problem posed by these girls; nor even, for that matter, as an extension—or cruder and more aggravated version—of the same motive. My own position in the matter seemed, even to myself, to be misty: half-pleasant, half-melancholy. I was, however, struck by the reflection that undoubted inconvenience was threatened if this apparently recurrent malady of the heart was to repeat itself throughout life, with the almost dizzy reiteration that had now begun to seem unavoidable.

Suzette herself remained, so far as I was concerned, almost as enigmatic as Jean. Sometimes I thought she liked me to sit beside her at meals, or play as her partner at the strange games of auction bridge that sometimes took place in the evening, bearing the same relation to ordinary card playing that our tennis bore to ordinary tennis; and once there seemed a chance that her preference was shown even a little more definitely. This happened one Monday afternoon, when Bum was having his bath on the table in the garden, and, Madame Leroy suffering from migraine, Suzette was conducting this ceremony.

She had asked me to hold the dog, while he was being soaped all over. Bum usually enjoyed his bath, standing quietly with legs apart, until it was time for him to be dried with a rough towel; then he would run off, wagging his tail. That day, however, he stood on the table peacefully until the soap-suds reached half-way down his back, when, at that point, he suddenly escaped from my hands, and jumped on to the ground. Shaking himself excitedly, he set off across the garden, having decided, evidently, that he had had enough of this bath. At that moment Charley appeared from the front door. I have mentioned that Charley was never bathed, and resented this attention paid to Bum's handsome coat. Charley began to growl, and the two dogs ran round the paths, snarling, though fairly amicably, at each other, chased by Suzette and myself. At last Charley disappeared into the bushes, and we headed Bum into the summer-house. As we came in there after him, he jumped on to the seat, and out of the window. Suzette sat down, rather breathless, shaking her head to show that she proposed to pursue him no farther. I sat down beside her, and found my hand resting on hers. She continued to laugh, and did not remove her fingers from under mine. Whether or not this fortuitous preliminary might have developed along more positive lines is hard to say. I had no plan of campaign in mind, though I knew this to be a moment that would commit us one way or the other. Suzette probably—indeed, certainly—knew far better what it was all about. However, there was no time for the situation to develop because, at that moment, Widmerpool appeared in the summer-house; just as he had done on the day of my arrival.

'Mais qu'est-ce que c'est que ce bruit effroyable?' he said. *'On doit penser que tout le monde a devenu fou.'*

'Tout le monde est fou,' Suzette said. *'Naturellement, tout le monde est fou.'*

Our hands had separated as Widmerpool came through the door. He sat down between us and began to talk of *Les Misérables,* which he had borrowed from Monsieur Örn. Suzette resumed her well-behaved, well-informed exterior, with which I was by now so familiar, and for a time she discoursed, almost as boringly as Widmerpool himself, on the subject of Victor Hugo. The occasion was past; but in the days that followed I thought often about that moment in the summer-house when our hands had been together, regretting that I had not managed to turn that chance to some account.

The words just spoken by Monsieur Dubuisson while sitting by me on the seat had, therefore, a peculiarly powerful effect in confirming, not only the overwhelming impact of this new, perhaps rather alarming, ascendancy of the emotions; but also my consciousness of the respect which Monsieur Dubuisson obviously paid to these forces, as coming first when any human relationship was to be analysed. I did not feel that I could discuss such things with Widmerpool; and it never occurred to me that he himself might feel equally attracted towards Berthe or Suzette. I still saw him only in the crude, and inadequate, terms with which I had accepted him at school.

If I had decided to discuss Suzette with Widmerpool, I should have had an opportunity that evening, because he mentioned in his more formal manner, after dinner, that he would like to have a word with me alone, before I went off to bed. He showed every sign of being particularly pleased about something, when he spoke to me, and he was rubbing together his 'gritty little knuckles', as Peter Templer had called them. Except at meals, I had seen nothing of him all day. I imagined that he had been working in his bedroom, where he would sometimes disappear for hours on end, while he translated the French classics, or otherwise studied the language.

Everyone, except Commandant Leroy, went off to their rooms early that night; probably because the atmosphere of disquiet spread by Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist, although perhaps a shade less crushing than on the previous day, was still discouraging to general conversation. After the rest of the household had gone upstairs, Widmerpool, pursing his lips and blowing out his cheeks, kept on looking in the commandant's direction, evidently longing to get rid of him; but the old man sat on, turning over the tattered pages of a long out-of-date copy of *L'Illustration*, and speaking, disjointedly, of the circumstances in which he had been gassed. I liked Commandant Leroy. The fact that he was bullied by his wife had not prevented him from enjoying a life of his own; and, within the scope of his world of patent medicines and pottering about the garden, he had evolved a philosophy of detachment that made his presence restful rather than the reverse. Widmerpool despised him, however, chiefly, so far as I could gather, on the grounds that the commandant had failed to reach a higher rank in the army. Madame Leroy, on the other hand, was respected by Widmerpool. 'She has many of the good qualities of my own mother,' he used to say; and I think he was even a trifle afraid of her.

Commandant Leroy sat describing in scrupulous detail how his unit had been ordered to move into the support line along a network of roads that were being shelled, according to his account, owing to some error committed by the directing staff. He had gone forward to inspect the ground himself, and so on, and so forth. The story came to an end at last, when he found himself in the hands of the army doctors, of whom he spoke with great detestation. Widmerpool stood up. There was another long delay while Bum was let out of the room into the garden: and, after Bum's return, Commandant Leroy shook hands with both of us, and shuffled off to bed. Widmerpool shut the door after him, and sat down in the commandant's chair.

'I have settled the matter between Örn and Lundquist,' he said.

'What on earth do you mean?'

Widmerpool made that gobbling sound, not unlike an engine getting up steam, which meant that he was excited, or put out, about something: in this case unusually satisfied. He said: 'I have had conversations with each of them—separately—and I think I can confidently predict that I am not far from persuading them to make things up.'

'What?'

'In fact I have reason to suppose that within, say, twenty-four hours I shall have achieved that object.'

'Did you tell them not to be such bloody fools?'

This was quite the wrong comment to have made.

Widmerpool, who had previously shown signs of being in a far more complacent mood than was usual in his conversations with me, immediately altered his expression, and, indeed, his whole manner. He said: 'Jenkins, do you mind home truths?'

'I don't think so.'

'First,' said Widmerpool, 'you are a great deal too fond of criticising other people: secondly, when a man's self-esteem has been injured he is to be commiserated with—not blamed. You will find it a help in life to remember those two points.'

'But they have both of them been behaving in the most pompous way imaginable, making life impossible for everyone else. I quite see that Lundquist should not have sent sneaks over the net like that, but Örn ought to be used to them by now. Anyway, if Örn did rap out something a bit stiff, he could easily have said he was sorry. What do you think the word meant?'

'I have no idea what the word meant,' said Widmerpool, 'nor am I in the least interested to learn. I agree with you that Lundquist's play from a certain aspect—I repeat from a *certain* aspect—might be said to leave something to be desired; that is to say from the purest, and, to my mind, somewhat high-flown, sportsmanship. On the other hand there was no question of *cheating*.'

'It is a pretty feeble way of winning a service.'

'Games,' said Widmerpool, 'are played to be won, whatever people may say and write to the contrary. Lundquist has never found that service to fail. Can he, therefore, be blamed for using it?'

He folded his arms and stared fixedly past me, as if he were looking out into the night in search of further dialectical ammunition, if I were to remain unconvinced by his argument.

'But you wouldn't use that service yourself?'

'Everyone has his own standards of conduct,' said Widmerpool. 'I trust mine are no lower than other people's.'

'Anyhow,' I said, as I was getting tired of the subject, 'what did you do to bring them together?'

'First of all I went to Lundquist,' said Widmerpool, relaxing a little the stringency of his manner; 'I explained to him that we all understood that Örn should not have spoken as he did.'

'But we don't know what Örn said.'

Widmerpool made a nervous movement with his hands to show his irritation. He seemed half-inclined to break off his narrative, but changed his mind, and went on: 'I told him that we all knew Örn was a bit of a rough diamond, as Lundquist himself understood, as much—or even more—than the rest of us. It was therefore no good expecting anything very courtly from Örn in the way of behaviour.'

'How did Lundquist take that?'

'He fully agreed. But he emphasised that such defects, attributed by him to inherent weaknesses in the Norwegian system of education, did not alter the fact that his, Lundquist's, honour had been insulted.'

Widmerpool stopped speaking at this point, and looked at me rather threateningly, as if he was prepared for such a statement on Lundquist's part to arouse comment. As I remained silent, he continued: 'That argument was hard to answer. I asked him, accordingly, if I had his permission to speak to Örn on the same subject.'

'What did he say to that?'

'He bowed.'

'It all sounds very formal.'

'It *was* very formal,' said Widmerpool. 'Why should it have been otherwise?'

Not knowing the answer, I did not take up this challenge; thinking that perhaps he was right.

'I went straight to Örn,' said Widmerpool, 'and told him that we all understood his most justifiable annoyance at Lundquist's service; but that he, Örn, must realise, as the rest of us did, that Lundquist is a proud man. No one could be in a better position to appreciate that fact than Örn himself, I said. I pointed out that it could not fail to be painful to Lundquist's *amour-propre* to lose so frequently—even though he were losing to a better tennis-player.'

'Did all this go on in French?'

Widmerpool took no notice of this question; which, both Scandinavians knowing some English, seemed to me of interest.

'Örn was more obstinate than Lundquist,' said Widmerpool. 'Örn kept on repeating that, if Lundquist wished to play pat-ball with the girls—or little boys, he added—there was plenty of opportunity for him to do so. He, Örn, liked to play with men—*hommes*—he shouted the word rather loud. He said that, in his own eyes, *hommes* might be stretched to include Paul-Marie and Jean-Népomucène, but did not include Lundquist.'

Widmerpool paused.

'And he stuck to that?' I asked.

Widmerpool shook his head slowly from side to side, allowing his lips to form a faint smile. He said: 'Örn took a lot of persuading.'

'Then he agreed?'

'He agreed that I should come again tomorrow to renew the discussion.'

'You are certainly taking a lot of trouble about them.'

'These things are worth trouble,' said Widmerpool. 'You may learn that in time, Jenkins.'

I followed him up the stairs, more than a little impressed.

There was something about the obstinacy with which he pursued his aims that could not be disregarded, or merely ridiculed. Even then I did not recognise the quest for power.

The consequence of Widmerpool's efforts was to be seen a couple of nights later, when Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist sat together, after dinner, at one of the tables in the garden, finishing off between them a bottle of Cognac: after giving a glass to Madame Leroy, Madame Dubuisson, and myself, and two glasses to Monsieur Dubuisson: everyone else, for one reason or another, refusing the offer. Long after I was in bed and asleep that night, I was woken by the sound of the Scandinavians stumbling up to their room, now apparently on the best of terms. It had been a triumph of diplomacy on Widmerpool's part. The enterprise he had shown in the matter displayed a side of his character the existence of which I had never suspected. I had to admit to myself that, in bringing Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist together again, he had achieved a feat that I should never have ventured even to attempt.

The sense of tension that had prevailed during the period of the row was now replaced by one of perhaps rather strained amiability, in which all but Monsieur Dubuisson joined. Monsieur Dubuisson accepted the brandy as the outward and visible sign of reconciliation, but he showed no vestige of surprise at the changed situation, certainly none of satisfaction. Madame Leroy was, of course, delighted; though I do not think that she ever had any idea of how concord had once more been brought about: attributing it entirely to a change of heart on the part of the couple concerned. For the rest of us, there could be no doubt of the improvement. The latter part of my stay at La Grenadière was passed, on the whole, in an atmosphere of good will on all sides: with the exception of a comparatively minor incident which involved Widmerpool only. There was undoubtedly a suggestion of nervous relaxation when Monsieur Lundquist moved, a few days later, to Bonn, where he was to continue his studies. Monsieur Örn shook him very heartily by the hand, and they agreed to meet when Monsieur Örn visited Stockholm, as he assured Monsieur Lundquist he had always intended to do sooner or later; but I do not think there was any doubt that Monsieur Örn was as heartily glad to see the Swede's back as Monsieur Lundquist to escape from Monsieur Örn.

Curiously enough, Widmerpool, although the sole author of the reconciliation, received little or no credit for his achievement. During the few days left to them after they had made things up, Monsieur Örn and Monsieur Lundquist used sometimes to walk up and down in the garden together, when Widmerpool would occasionally try to join them; but I noticed that they would always stroll away from him, or refuse to speak English, or French, which debarred him from conversation. It was hard to say whether or not he noticed this; his last week at La Grenadiere being, in any case, blighted by another matter, in its way, sufficiently provoking for him. This was the appearance on the wall of the *cabinet de toilette* of a crude, though not unaccomplished, representation of himself—somewhat in the style of the prehistoric drawings of the caves in the Dordogue—in this case scratched on the plaster with a sharp instrument.

Two things about this composition seemed to me certain: first, that it was intended as a portrait of Widmerpool: secondly, that the artist was French. Beyond these external facts, that seemed to admit of no critical doubt, I was completely at sea as to where responsibility might lie; nor could I be sure of the moment when the design was completed. At the time when I first became aware of its existence, Widmerpool had been out of temper all the previous day; so that his eye had probably fallen on the picture some twenty-four hours or more before it came to my own notice. I could not help wondering whether he would mention the subject.

That evening he remarked: 'I really think something should be done about those two French boys.'

'What have they been up to now?'

'Haven't you noticed a drawing on one of the walls?'

'A sort of scrawl?' I asked, rather dishonestly.

'I don't know what it is meant to be,' said Widmerpool. 'And although it is not exactly indecent, it is suggestive, which is worse. I hardly like to mention it to Madame Leroy, though I certainly think it should be removed.'

'How would you remove it?'

'Well, paint over it, or something like that. It is Paul-Marie, I suppose.'

He said no more about the picture; but I knew that its existence embittered his remaining days at La Grenadiere. I felt some curiosity myself as to the identity of the draughtsman, and was not at all sure that Widmerpool was right in recognising the work of Paul-Marie. If one of the boys was to be suspected, I should have put my money on Jean-Népomucène, who might easily have felt a sudden need to express himself in some graphic medium, in order to compete with the conversational gifts in which his elder brother excelled. However, there was no reason to suppose that he was good at drawing, and, especially on account of the facility displayed, the possibility that neither of the boys was responsible could not be disregarded.

I thought in turn of the other persons in the house. On the whole it was hardly likely to be attributable to Madame Leroy, or her husband. Berthe, it was true, had sometimes boasted of her sketches in water-colour: though this would have been an oblique and perverse manner of advertising her talent. I could not even bear to consider that the hand might have been Suzette's, dismissing all consideration of such a thing from my mind. Rosalie worked too hard all day to have had time to make the deep incisions in the wall: she was also short-sighted. Marthe was invariably in the kitchen, and she could hardly ever have had the opportunity to observe Widmerpool's appearance with sufficient thoroughness to have achieved so striking a likeness. It was doubtful whether Madame Dubuisson possessed the creative imagination: though there could be no question that the drawing must have appealed, especially, to her own brand of humour. Monsieur Dubuisson sometimes cleaned out his pipe with a sharp, stiletto-like instrument that could have been used as an etching-point.

There remained the contingency that Widmerpool might have derived some obscure gratification in the production of a self-portrait in such inappropriate circumstances: though here, as an objection, one came up against the essential Frenchness of the design. If Widmerpool himself had indeed been the artist, his display of annoyance had been a superb piece of acting: and it was not credible to me that anything so improbable was at the root of the mystery. Perplexity was increased a day or two later by the addition to the picture of certain extraneous details, in pencil, which, personally, I should have been prepared to swear belonged in spirit to a school of drawing other than that of the originator. However, these appendages may not have been attributable to any single individual. They were mannered, and less sure of touch. This business was never referred to in my presence by anyone except Widmerpool, and then only on that single occasion; though I had reason to suppose that Paul-Marie and Jean-Népomucène used to joke with each other privately on the subject.

When Widmerpool left for England, soon after this, the riddle remained unsolved. He was by then full of a project he had in mind for rearranging his legal books and papers; and, although he muttered that he hoped we might meet again, if I ever came to London, he was preoccupied, evidently thinking of more important matters. It was as if he had already dismissed from his mind the frivolities of Touraine, and peculiarities of the inhabitants of La Grenadière, even before he climbed into the *grognard's* taxi: which had not yet begun its habitual panting and heaving, as its owner was accustomed to coast downhill for the first part of the journey, with a view to saving petrol.

The space left at La Grenadière by the withdrawal of Monsieur Lundquist was filled by Dr. Szczepanowski, a quiet Pole, with gold pince-nez, who wore the rosette of the Légion d'Honneur in his button-hole. Monsieur Dubuisson used to take him for walks, during which, no doubt, he explained some of his theories, including the Moroccan hydraulic scheme. The morning after Widmerpool's departure, another visitor arrived, though for a few days only. This was the father of Paul-Marie and Jean-Népomucene, who was the double of the Frenchman with the Assyrian beard who had occupied my seat in the train on the journey from Paris. Perhaps it was even the man himself: if so, he made no reference to the incident. His presence had a sedative effect on his two sons. Monsieur Dubuisson did not approve of his handling of the French language; warning me not to imitate their father's construction of his sentences, especially in connexion with his use of the preterite. Madame Leroy, on the other hand, greatly admired her relative.

'Quel brave Papa,' she used to say, gazing at him, as he

used to set off down the hill in his straw hat and black gloves.

I never discovered precisely what relation each was to the other, but Madame Leroy's glance seemed to imply that life might have had more compensations if she had married some bearded, titanic figure of this kind, rather than Commandant Leroy. Familiarity with her had not dispelled my impression that she was a kind of sorceress. Life at La Grenadière was not altogether like life in the outer world. Its usage suggested a stage in some clandestine order's ritual of initiation. For a time the presence of Widmerpool had prolonged the illusion that he and I were still connected by belonging to the community of school: and that all that had happened since I had seen him last was that each of us was a year or two older. As the weeks passed at La Grenadière, the changes that had clearly taken place in Widmerpool since he had ceased to be a schoolboy emphasised the metamorphosis that had happened within myself. Now that he had moved on, his absence from La Grenadière made amputation from that earlier stage of life complete; and one day, when Suzette asked me something or other about the way lessons were taught in England, I was surprised to find forgotten the details of what had been for so long a daily routine.

It was, I suppose, an awareness of this change in circumstance that made me increasingly conscious, as the close of my stay in France approached, of the necessity to adopt an attitude towards life, in a general way, more enterprising. This aim owed something to remarks Widmerpool had addressed to me at one time or another; but it was directed particularly towards the project of taking some active step—exactly what step remained undecided—in solving the problem of Suzette: who had established herself as a dominating preoccupation, to which any recollection of

Jean Templer was now, on the whole, subordinate. In spite of prolonged thought devoted to this subject, I managed to devise no more resolute plan than a decision to make some sort of declaration to her when the day came to leave the house: a course of action which, although not remarkable for its daring, would at any rate mark some advance from a state of chronic inaction in such matters from which escape seemed so difficult. The question was: how best to arrange this approach?

Having seen other guests depart from La Grenadière, I knew that the entire household was accustomed to gather round, saying good-bye, and waiting to watch the taxi slide precipitously down the hill. If the question were to arise, for example, of kissing anyone good-bye, it was clear that there might be imminent risk of having to kiss—if such a hypothetical case as kissing were to be considered at all—the whole of the rest of the party gathered together at the door in the wall. Certainly, it might be safely assumed that nothing of the sort would be expected by anyone so anglicised as Monsieur Dubuisson: but I was not at all sure what French etiquette might prescribe in the case of guest and host: though suspecting that anything of the sort was, in general, limited to investitures. It was equally possible that any such comparatively intimate gesture might be regarded as far more compromising in France than in England; and, quite apart from any embarrassing, or unacceptable, situations that might be precipitated if kissing were to become general at my departure from La Grenadière, any hope of making a special impression on Suzette would undoubtedly be lost by collective recourse to this manner of saying good-bye: however pleasant in Suzette's individual case such a leave-taking might be. Some plan was, therefore, required if a hasty decision was to be avoided.

Accordingly, I finished packing early upon the day I was to return to England, and went downstairs to survey the house and garden. The hot weather had continued throughout my stay, and the sun was already beating down on the lawn, where no one except Dr. Szczepanowski was to be seen. I noticed that Suzette's big straw sun-bonnet was gone from the hall, where she was accustomed to leave it on the console table. Bum had once found it there, carrying the hat into the garden and gnawing away some of the brim. Dr. Szczepanowski was writing letters, and he smiled in a friendly manner. Jean-Népomucène at one of the tables appeared a moment later, and requested help in mending an electric torch, as Dr. Szczepanowski was skilled in such matters. Both of them retired to the house to find suitable implements to employ in making the repairs. There was just a chance that Suzette might be sitting in the summer-house, where she occasionally spent some of the morning reading.

I crossed the grass quickly, and went under the arch, preparing to withdraw if Monsieur Dubuisson should turn out to be settled there with his pipe. The excitement of seeing Suzette's straw bonnet was out of all proportion to the undecided nature of my project. She was sitting half-turned from the entrance, and, judging that, if I lost time in talk, I might be manœuvred into a position of formality which could impose insuperable restraint, I muttered that I had come to say good-bye, and took her hand, which, because her arm was stretched along the back of the seat, lay near me. As she turned, I immediately realised that the hand was, in fact, Madame Dubuisson's, who, as she left the house, must have taken up Suzette's straw hat to shield her eyes while she crossed the garden.

It was now too late to retreat. I had prepared a few sentences to express my feelings, and I was already half-way through one of them. Having made the mistake, there was nothing for it but to behave as if it were indeed Madame Dubuisson who had made my visit to La Grenadière seem so romantic. Taking her other hand, I quickly used up the remaining phrases that I had rehearsed so often for Suzette.

The only redeeming feature of the whole business was that Madame Dubuisson herself gave not the smallest sign of being in the least surprised. I cannot remember in what words she answered my halting assurance that her presence at La Grenadière would remain for me by far its sweetest memory; but I know that her reply was entirely adequate: indeed so well rounded that it seemed to have been made use of on a number of earlier occasions when she must have found herself in somewhat similar circumstances. She was small and round and, I decided, really not at all bad-looking. Her contribution to the situation I had induced was, at least from my own point of view, absolutely suitable. She may even have allowed me to kiss her on the cheek, though I could not swear to this. She asked me to send her a picture of Buckingham Palace when I returned to England.

This scene, although taking up only a few minutes, exhausted a good deal of nervous energy. I recognised that there could now be no question of repeating anything of the same sort with Suzette herself, even if opportunity were to present itself in the short time left to me. That particular card had been played, and the curious thing was that its effect had been to provide some genuine form of emotional release. It was almost as if Madame Dubuisson had, indeed, been the focus of my interest while I had been at La Grenadière. I began to feel quite warmly towards her, largely on the strength of the sentiments I had, as it were, automatically expressed. When the time came to say goodbye, hands were shaken all round. Suzette gave mine a little extra squeeze, after relaxing the first grip. I felt that this small attention was perhaps more than I deserved. The passage with Madame Dubuisson seemed at any rate a slight advance in the right direction when I thought things over in the train. It was nearly Christmas before I found the postcard of Buckingham Palace, which perhaps never reached her, as the Dubuissons must, by then, have moved on from La Grenadière.

4.

Prolonged, lugubrious stretches of Sunday afternoon in a university town could be mitigated by attending Sillery's tea-parties, to which anyone might drop in after half-past three. Action of some law of averages always regulated numbers at these gatherings to something between four and eight persons, mostly undergraduates, though an occasional don was not unknown. Towards the middle of my first term I was introduced to them by Short, who was at Sillery's college, a mild second-year man, with political interests. Short explained that Sillery's parties had for years played an established rôle in the life of the university; and that the staleness of the rock-buns, which formed a cardinal element of these at-homes, had become so hackneyed a subject for academical humour that even Sillery himself would sometimes refer to the perennially unpalatable essence of these fossils salvaged from some forgotten cake-world. At such moments Sillery would remind his guests of waggish or whimsical remarks passed on the topic of the rock-buns by an earlier generation of young men who had taken tea with him in bygone days: quoting in especial the galaxy of former undergraduate acquaintances who had risen to some eminence in later life, a class he held in unconcealed esteem.

Loitering about the college in aged sack-like clothes and Turkish slippers, his snow white hair worn longer than that of most of his colleagues, Sillery could lay claim to a venerable appearance: though his ragged, Old Bill moustache (which, he used laughingly to mention, had once been compared with Nietszche's) was still dark. He was, indeed, no more than entering into his middle fifties: merely happening to find convenient a façade of comparative senility. At the beginning of the century he had published a book called *City State and State of City* which had achieved some slight success at a time when works popularising political science and economic theory were beginning to sell; but he was not ambitious to make his mark as an author. In fact one or two of his pupils used to complain that they did not receive even adequate tuition to get them through the schools at anything but the lowest level. This was probably an unjust charge, because Sillery was not a man to put himself easily in the wrong. In any case, circumstances had equipped him with such dazzling opportunity for pursuing his preponderant activity of interfering in other people's business that only those who failed to grasp the extent of his potentiality in his own chosen sphere would expect—or desire—him to concentrate on a pedestrian round of tutorial duties.

Before my first visit, Short described some of this background with care; and he seemed to feel certain qualms of conscience regarding what he termed 'Sillers's *snobisme*'. He explained that it was natural enough that Sillery should enjoy emphasising the fact that he numbered among his friends and former pupils a great many successful people; and I fully accepted this plea. Short, however, was unwilling to encounter too ready agreement on this point, and he insisted that 'all the same' Sillery would have been 'a sounder man'—sounder, at any rate, politically—if he had made a greater effort to resist, or at least conceal, this temptation to admire worldly success overmuch. Short himself was devoted to politics, a subject in which I took little or no interest, and his keenest ambition was to become a Member of Parliament. Like a number of young men of that period, he was a Liberal, though to which of the various brands of Liberalism, then rent by schism, he belonged, I can no longer remember. It was this Liberal enthusiasm which had first linked him with Sillery, who had been on terms with Asquith, and who liked to keep an eye on a political party in which he had perhaps once himself placed hopes of advancement. Short also informed me that Sillery was a keen propagandist for the League of Nations, Czechoslovakia, and Mr. Gandhi, and that he had been somewhat diverted from earlier Gladstonian enthusiasms by the success of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Short had taken me to Sillery's two or three times before I found myself—almost against my own inclination—dropping in there on Sunday afternoon. At first I was disposed to look on Sillery merely as a kind of glorified schoolmaster —a more easy going and amenable Le Bas—who took out the boys in turn to explore their individual characteristics to know better how to instruct them. This was a manner of regarding Sillery's entertaining so crude as to be positively misleading. He certainly wanted to find out what the boys were like: but not because he was a glorified schoolmaster. His understanding of human nature, coarse, though immensely serviceable, and his unusual ingenuity of mind were both employed ceaselessly in discovering undergraduate connexions which might be of use to him; so that from what he liked to call 'my backwater'—the untidy room, furnished, as he would remark, like a boarding-house parlour—he sometimes found himself able to exercise a respectable modicum of influence in a larger world. That, at least, was how things must have appeared to Sillery himself, and in such activities his spirit was concentrated.

Clay, for example, was the son of a consul in the Levant. Sillery arranged a little affair through Clay which caused inconvenience, minor but of a most irritating kind, to Brightman, a fellow don unsympathetic to him, at that time engaged in archæological digging on a site in the Near East. Lakin, outwardly a dull, even unattractive young man, was revealed as being related through his mother to an important Trade Union official. Sillery discovered this relative—a find that showed something like genius—and managed to pull unexpected, though probably not greatly important, strings when the General Strike came in 1926. Rajagopalaswami's uncle, noted for the violence of his anti-British sentiments, was in a position to control the appointment of a tutor to one of the Ruling Princes; Sillery's nominee got the place. Dwight Wideman's aunt was a powerful influence in the women's clubs in America: a successful campaign was inaugurated to ban the American edition of a novel by an author Sillery disliked. Flannigan-Fitzgerald's brother was a papal chamberlain: the Derwentwater annulment went through without a hitch. These, at least, were the things that people said; and the list of accessories could be prolonged with almost endless instances. All were swept into Sillery's net, and the undergraduate had to be obscure indeed to find no place there. Young peers and heirs to fortune were not, of course, unwelcome; though such specimens as these—for whose friendship competition was already keen—were usually brought into the circle through the offices of secondary agents rather than by the direct approach of Sillery himself, who was aware that in a society showing signs of transition it was essential to keep an eye on the changing focus of power. All the same, if he was known to incline, on the whole, to the Right socially, politically he veered increasingly to the Left.

In the course of time I found that much difference of opinion existed as to the practical outcome of Sillery's scheming, and I have merely presented the picture as first displayed to me through the eyes of Short. To Short, Sillery was a mysterious, politically-minded cardinal of the academical world, 'never taking his tea without an intrigue' (that was the phrase Short quoted); for ever plotting behind the arras. Others, of course, thought differently, some saying that the Sillery legend was based on a kind of kaleidoscope of muddled information, collected in Sillery's almost crazed brain, that his boasted powers had no basis whatever in reality: others again said that Sillery certainly knew a great number of people and passed round a lot of gossip, which in itself gave him some claim to consideration as a comparatively influential person, though only a subordinate one. Sillery had his enemies, naturally, always anxious to denigrate his life's work, and assert that he was nothing more than a figure of fun; and there was probably something to be said at least for the contention that Sillery himself somewhat exaggerated the effectiveness of his own activities. In short, Sillery's standing remained largely a matter of opinion; though there could be no doubt about his turning out to be an important factor in shaping Stringham's career at the university.

Stringham had been due to come into residence the same term as myself, but he was thrown from a horse a day or two before his intended return to England, and consequently laid up for several months. As a result of this accident, he did not appear at his college until the summer, when he took against the place at once. He could scarcely be persuaded to visit other undergraduates, except one or two that he had known at school, and he used to spend hours together sitting in his room, reading detective stories, and complaining that he was bored. He had been given a small car by his mother and we would sometimes drive round the country together, looking at churches or visiting pubs.

On the whole he had enjoyed Kenya. When I told him about Peter Templer and Gwen McReith—an anecdote that seemed to me of outstanding significance—he said: 'Oh, well, that sort of thing is not as difficult as all that,' and he proceeded to describe a somewhat similar incident, in which, after a party, he had spent the night with the divorced wife of a coffee planter in Nairobi. In spite of Madame Dubuisson, this story made me feel very inexperienced. I described Suzette to him, but did not mention Jean Templer.

'There is absolutely nothing in it,' Stringham said. 'It is just a question of keeping one's head.'

He was more interested in what I had to report about Widmerpool, laughing a lot over Widmerpool's horror on hearing the whole truth of Le Bas's arrest. The narrative of the Scandinavians' quarrel struck him only on account of the oddness of the tennis-court on which we had been playing the set. This surprised me, because the incident had seemed of the kind to appeal to him. He had, however, changed a little in the year or more that had passed since I had seen him; and, although the artificial categories of school life were now removed, I felt for the first time that the few months between us made him appreciably older than myself. There was also the question of money—perhaps suggested by Widmerpool's talk on that subject—that mysterious entity, of which one had heard so much and so often without grasping more than that its ownership was desirable and its lack inconvenient: heard of, certainly, without appreciating that its possession can become as much part of someone as the nose on the face. Even Uncle Giles's untiring contortions before the altar of the Trust, when considered in this light, now began to appear less grotesque than formerly; and I realised at last, with great clearness, that a sum like one hundred and eighty pounds a year might indeed be worth the pains of prolonged and acrimonious negotiation. Stringham was, in fact, not substantially richer than most undergraduates of his sort, and, being decidedly free with his money, was usually hard-up, but from the foothills of his background was, now and then, wafted the disturbing, aromatic perfume of gold, the scent which, even at this early stage in our lives, could sometimes be observed to act intoxicatingly on chance acquaintances; whose unexpected perseverance, and determination not to take offence, were a reminder that Stringham's mother was what Widmerpool had described as 'immensely wealthy'.

Peter Templer, as I have said, rarely wrote letters, so that we had, to some extent, lost touch with him. Left to himself there could be little doubt that he would, in Stringham's phrase, 'relapse into primeval barbarism'. Stringham often spoke of him, and used to talk, almost with regret, of the adventures they had shared at school: already, as it were, beginning to live in the past. Some inward metamorphosis was no doubt the cause of Stringham's melancholia, because his attacks of gloom, although qualified by fairly frequent outbursts of high spirits, could almost be given that name. There was never a moment when he became reconciled to the life going on round him. 'The buildings are nice,' he used to say. 'But not the undergraduates.'

'What do you expect undergraduates to be like?'

'Keep bull-pups and drink brandies-and-soda. They won't do as they are.'

'Your sort sound even worse.'

'Anyway, what can one do here? I am seriously thinking of running away and joining the Foreign Legion or the

North-West Mounted Police—whichever work the shorter hours.'

'It is the climate.'

'One feels awful if one drinks, and worse if one's sober. I knew Buster's picture of the jolly old varsity was not to be trusted. After all he never tried it himself.'

'How is he?'

'Doing his best to persuade my mother to let Glimber to an Armenian,' said Stringham, and speaking with perhaps slightly more seriousness: 'You know, Tuffy was very much against my coming up.'

'What on earth did it have to do with her?'

'She takes a friendly interest in me,' said Stringham, laughing. 'She behaved rather well when I was in Kenya as a matter of fact. Used to send me books, and odds and ends of gossip, and all that sort of thing. One appreciates that in the wide open spaces. She is not a bad old girl. Many worse.'

He was always a trifle on the defensive about Miss Weedon. I had begun to understand that his life at home was subject to exterior forces like Buster's disapproval, or Miss Weedon's regard, which brought elements of uncertainty and discord into his family life, not only accepted by him, but almost enjoyed. He went on: 'There has been talk of my staying here only a couple of years and going into the Foot Guards. You know there is some sort of arrangement now for entering the army through the university. That was really my mother's idea.'

'What does Miss Weedon think?'

'She favours coming to London and having a good time. I am rather with her there. The Household Cavalry has been suggested, too. One is said—for some reason—to "have a good time in The Tins".'

'And Buster's view?'

'He would like me to remain here as long as possible—four years, post-graduate course, research fellowship, anything so long as I stay away—since I shattered his dream that I might settle in Kenya.'

It was after one of these conversations in which he had complained of the uneventfulness of his day that I suggested that we should drop in on Sillery.

'What is Sillery?'

I repeated some of Short's description of Sillery, adding a few comments of my own.

'Oh, yes,' said Stringham. 'I remember about him now. Well, I suppose one can try everything once.'

We were, as it happened, first to arrive at that particular party. Sillery, who had just finished writing a pile of letters, the top one of which, I could not avoid seeing, was addressed to a Cabinet Minister, was evidently delighted to have an opportunity to work over Stringham, whom he recognised immediately on hearing the name.

'How is your mother?' he said. 'Do you know, I have not seen her since the private view of the Royal Academy in 1914. No, I believe we met later at a party given by Mrs. Hwfa Williams, if my memory serves me.'

He continued with a stream of questions, and for once Stringham, who had shown little interest in coming to the party, seemed quite taken aback by Sillery's apparent familiarity with his circumstances.

'And your father?' said Sillery, grinning, as if in spite of himself, under his huge moustache.

'Pretty well.'

'You were staying with him in Kenya?'

'For a few months.'

'The climate suits him all right?'

'I think so.'

'That height above sea-level is hard on the blood-pressure,' Sillery said; 'but your father is unexpectedly strong in spite of his light build. Does that shrapnel wound of his ever give trouble?'

'He feels it in thundery weather.'

'He must take care of it,' said Sillery. 'Or he will find himself on his back for a time, as he did after that spill on the Cresta. Has he run across Dicky Umfraville yet?'

'They see a good deal of each other.'

'Well, well,' said Sillery. 'He must take care about that, too. But I must attend to my other guests, and not talk all the time about old friends.'

I had the impression that Sillery regarded Stringham's father as a falling market, so far as business was concerned; and, although he did not mention Buster, he was evidently far more interested in Mrs. Foxe's household than that of her former husband. However, the room was now filling up, and Sillery began introducing some of the new arrivals to each other and to Stringham and myself. There was a sad Finn called—as nearly as I could catch—Vaalkiipaa: Honthorst, an American Rhodes Scholar, of millionaire stock on both sides of his family: one of Sillery's pupils, a small nervous young man who never spoke, addressed as 'Paul', whose surname I did not discover: and Mark Members, of some standing among the freshmen of my year, on account of a poem published in *Public School Verse* and favourably noticed by Edmund Gosse. Up to that afternoon I had only seen Members hurrying about the streets, shaking from his round, somewhat pasty face a brownish, uneven fringe that grew low on his forehead and made him look rather like a rag doll, or marionette: an air augmented by brown eyes like beads, and a sprinkling of freckles. His tie, a broad, loose knot, left the collar of his shirt a little open. I admired this lack of self-consciousness regarding what I then—rather priggishly—looked on as eccentricity of dress. He appeared to have known Sillery all his life, calling him 'Sillers', a form of address which, in spite of several tea-parties attended, I had not yet summoned courage to employ. The American, Honthorst's, hair was almost as uncontrolled as that of Members. It stood up on the top of his head like the comb, or crest, of a hoopoe, or cassowary; this bird-like appearance being increased by a long, bare neck, ending in a white collar cut drastically low. Honthorst had a good-natured, dazed countenance, and it was hard to know what to say to him. Vaalkiipaa was older than the rest of the undergraduates present. He had a round, sallow face with high cheekbones, and, although anxious to be agreeable, he could not understand why he was not allowed to talk about his work, a subject always vetoed by Sillery.

Conversation was now mostly between Sillery and Members; with the awkward long silences which always characterised the teas. During one of these pauses, Sillery, pottering about the room with the plate of rock-buns, remarked: 'There is a freshman named Quiggin who said he would take a dish of tea with me this afternoon. He comes from a modest home, and is, I think, a little sensitive about it, so I hope you will all be specially understanding with him. He is at one of the smaller colleges—I cannot for the moment remember which—and he has collected unto himself sundry scholarships and exhibitions, which is—I think you will all agree—much to his credit.'

This was a fairly typical thumb-nail sketch of the kind commonly dispensed by Sillery, in anticipation of an introduction: true as far as it went, though giving little or no clue to the real Quiggin: even less to the reason why he had been asked to tea. Indeed, at that period, I did not even grasp that there was always a reason for Sillery's invitations, though the cause might be merely to give opportunity for preliminary investigation: sometimes not worth a follow-up.'

No one, of course, made any comment after this speech about Quiggin, because there was really no suitable comment to make. The mention of scholarships once more started off Vaalkiipaa on the subject of his difficulties in obtaining useful instruction from attendance at lectures; while Honthorst, almost equally anxious to discuss educational matters in a serious manner, joined in on the question of gaps in the college library and—as he alleged—out-of-date methods of indexing. Honthorst persisted in addressing Sillery as 'sir', in spite of repeated requests from his host that he should discard this solecism. Sillery was deftly circumventing combined Finnish-American attack, by steering the conversation toward New England gossip by way of hunting in Maine—while at the same time extracting from Vaalkiipaa apparently unpalatable facts about the anti-Swedish movement in Finland—when Quiggin himself arrived: making his presence known by flinging open the door suddenly to its fullest extent, so that it banged against one of the bookcases, knocking over a photograph in a silver frame of three young men in top-hats standing in a row, arm-in-arm.

'Come in,' said Sillery, picking up the picture, and setting it back in its place. 'Come in, Quiggin. Don't be shy. We shan't eat you. This is Liberty Hall. Let me introduce you to some of my young friends. Here is Mr. Cheston Honthorst, who has travelled all the way from America to be a member of my college: and this is Mr. Jenkins, reading history like yourself: and Mr. Stringham, who has been to East Africa, though his home is that beautiful house, Glimber: and Mr. Vaalkiipaa—rather a difficult name, which we shall soon find that we have all got so used to that we shan't be able to understand how we ever found it difficult—and Paul, here, you probably know from Brightman's lectures, which he tells me he loyally attends just as you do; and I nearly forgot Mr. Mark Members, whose name will be familiar to you if you like modern verse—and I am sure you do—so make a place on the sofa, Mark, and Quiggin can sit next to you.'

At first sight, Quiggin seemed to be everything suggested by Sillery's description. He looked older than the rest of us: older, even, than Vaalkiipaa. Squat, and already going bald, his high forehead gave him the profile of a professor in a comic paper. His neck was encircled with a starched and grubby collar, his trousers kept up by a belt which he constantly adjusted. For the first time since coming up I felt that I was at last getting into touch with the submerged element of the university, which, I had sometimes suspected, might have more to offer than was to be found in conventional undergraduate circles. Mark Members was evidently impressed by a similar—though in his case unsympathetic—sense of something unusual so far as Quiggin was concerned; because he drew away his legs, hitherto stretched the length of the sofa, and brought his knees right up to his chin, clasping his hands round them in the position shown in a picture (that used to hang in the nursery of a furnished house we had once inhabited at Colchester) called The Boyhood of Raleigh; while he regarded Quiggin with misgiving.

'Couldn't find the way up here for a long time,' said Quiggin.

He sat down on the sofa, and, speaking in a small, hard voice with a North Country inflexion, addressed himself to Members: seeming to be neither embarrassed by the company, nor by Sillery's sledge-hammer phrases, aimed, supposedly, at putting him at his ease. He went on: 'It's difficult when you're new to a place. I've been suffering a bit here'—indicating his left ear which was stuffed with yellowish cotton-wool—'so that I may not catch all you say too clearly.'

Members offered the ghost of a smile; but there could be no doubt of his uneasiness, as he tried to catch Sillery's eye. However, Sillery, determined that his eye was not to be caught by Members, said: 'The first year is a great period of discovery—and of self-discovery, too. What do you say, Vaalkiipaa? Can you find your way about yet?"

'I make progress,' said Vaalkiipaa, unsmiling: to whom it was perhaps not clear whether Sillery's question referred to discovery in the topographical sense or the more intimate interior examination with which Sillery had linked it. There was a silence, at the end of which Members put in, rather at random: 'Sillers, it is too clever of you to buy a suit the same colour as your loose covers.'

Quiggin sat sourly on the extreme edge of the sofa, glancing round the room like a fierce little animal, trapped by naturalists. He had accepted a rock-bun from Sillery, and for some minutes this occupied most of his attention. Honthorst said: 'They tell me the prospects for the college boat are pretty good, Professor Sillery.'

'Good,' said Sillery, making a deprecatory gesture in our direction to suggest his own unworthiness of this style of address. 'Good. Very good.'

He said this with emphasis, though without in any way committing his opinion on the subject of current aquatics. It was evident that at present Quiggin was the guest who chiefly interested him. Stringham he must have regarded as already in his power because, although he smiled towards him in a friendly manner from time to time, he made no further effort to talk to him individually. Quiggin finished his rock-bun, closely watched by Sillery, picked some crumbs from his trousers, and from the carpet round him:

afterwards throwing these carefully into the grate. Just as Quiggin had dealt with the last crumb, Members rose suddenly from the sofa and cast himself, with a startling bump, almost full length on the floor in front of the fireplace: exchanging in this manner his Boyhood-of-Raleigh posture for that of the Dying Gladiator. Sillery, whose back was turned, started violently, and Members pleaded: 'You don't mind, Sillers? I always lie on the floor.'

'I like my guests to feel at home, Mark,' said Sillery, recovering himself immediately, and playfully pinching the nape of Members's neck between his finger and thumb, so that Members hunched his shoulders and squeaked shrilly. 'And you, Quiggin, are you happy?' Sillery asked.

Quiggin shook his head at the rock-buns, held out towards him once more; and, apparently taking the question to have a more general application than as a mere enquiry as to whether or not he wanted another cup of tea, or was comfortable sitting, as he was, at the springless end of the sofa, said in reply: 'No, I'm not.'

Sillery was enchanted with this answer.

'Not happy?' he said, as if he could not believe his ears.

'Never seem to get enough peace to get any work done,' said Quiggin. 'Always somebody or other butting in.'

Sillery beamed, proffering the plate once more round the room, though without success. Quiggin, as if something had been released within him, now began to enlarge on the matter of his own exasperation. He said: 'All anyone here seems interested in is in messing about with some game or other, or joining some society or club, or sitting up all night drinking too much. I thought people came to the university to study, not to booze and gas all the time.'

'Very good, Quiggin, very good,' said Sillery. 'You find we all fall woefully short of your own exacting standards—formed, no doubt, in a more austere tradition.'

He smiled and rubbed his hands, entranced. It even seemed that he might have been waiting for some such outburst on Quiggin's part: and Quiggin himself somehow gave the air of having made the same speech on other occasions.

'What an extraordinary person,' said Members, under his breath, a remark probably audible only to myself, owing to the fact that the extreme lowness of the armchair in which I was sitting brought my ear almost level with Members's mouth, as he rested with his elbow on the floor. Sillery said: 'What do you think, Mark? Do you find that we are too frivolous?'

Members began to say: 'My dear Sillers——' but, before he could speak the phrase, Sillery cut him short by adding: 'I thought you might be in agreement with Quiggin as your homes are so close, Mark.'

After he had said this, Sillery stood back a bit, as if to watch the effect of his words, still holding the plate of rock-buns in his hand. If he had hoped to strike dismay into the hearts of his listeners, he could hardly have expected a more successful result so far as Quiggin and Members were concerned. Members, thoroughly put out, went pink in the face; Quiggin's expression became distinctly sourer than before, though he did not change colour. 'I had a suspicion that neither of you was aware of this,' said Sillery. 'But you must live *practically* in the same street.'

He nodded his head several times, and changed the subject; or, at least, varied it by asking if I had ever read *Jude the Obscure*. I realised, without achieving any true comprehension of what Sillery was about, that the object of revealing publicly that Members and Quiggin lived close to each other during the vacation was intended in some manner to bring both to heel: in any case I did not know enough of either at the time to appreciate that each might prefer that any details regarding his home life should be doled out by himself alone.

Sillery abandoned the subject after this demonstration of strength on his part, so that the rest of his guests were left in ignorance even of the name of the town Members and Quiggin inhabited. The American and the Finn slipped away soon after this, on the plea that they must work; in spite of protests from Sillery that no one could, or should, work on Sunday evening. As they were leaving, another visitor could be heard coming up the stairs. He must have stood aside for them to pass him, because a moment later, speaking in a resonant, musical voice, like an actor's or practised after-dinner speaker's, he said, as he came through the door: 'Hullo, Sillers, I hoped I might catch you at home.'

This new arrival I recognised as Bill Truscott, who had gone down two or three years before. I had never previously met him, but I had seen him and knew his name well, because he was one of those persons who, from their earliest years, are marked down to do great things; and who so often remain a legend at school, or university, for a period of time after leaving the one or the other: sometimes long after any hope remains, among the world at large, that promise of earlier years will be fulfilled. Sillery was known to be deeply attached to Bill Truscott, though to what extent he inwardly accepted the claims put forward for Truscott's brilliant future, it was not easy to say. Outwardly, of course, he was a strong promoter of these claims; and, in some respects, Truscott could be described as the most characteristic specimen available of what Sillery liked his friends to be; that is to say he was not only successful and ambitious, but was also quite well off for a bachelor (a state he showed no sign of relinquishing), as his father, a Harley Street specialist, recently deceased, had left him a respectable capital. He had gained a good degree, though only by the skin of his teeth, it was rumoured, and, since academical honours represented a good deal of his stock-in-trade, this close shave regarding his 'first' was sometimes spoken of as an ominous sign. However, the chief question seemed still to be how best his brilliance should be employed. To say that he could not make up his mind whether to become in due course Prime Minister, or a great poet, might sound exaggerated (though Short had so described Truscott's dilemma), but in general he was at any rate sufficiently highly regarded in the university, by those who had heard of him, to make him appear a fascinating, and almost alarming, figure.

After sitting down beside Sillery, Truscott at first hardly spoke at all; but at the same time his amused smile acted as a sort of charm on the rest of the company, so that no one could possibly have accused him, on the grounds of this silence, of behaving in an ungracious manner. He was tall and dark, with regular features, caught rather too close together, and the most complete self-assurance that can be imagined. His clothes and hair, even his face, seemed to give out a kind of glossiness, and sense of prosperity, rather like Monsieur Lundquist's. He was already going a little grey, and this added to his air of distinction, preventing him from looking too young and inexperienced. I addressed a remark to him which he acknowledged simply by closing and opening his eyes, making me feel that, the next time I spoke, I ought to make an attempt to find something a trifle less banal to say: though his smile at the same time absolved me from the slightest blame in falling so patently short of his accustomed standards. I was not conscious of being at all offended by this demeanour: on the contrary, Truscott's comportment seemed a kind of spur to encourage all who came to win his esteem; although

—and perhaps because—he was obviously prepared to offer nothing in return.

If Bill Truscott's arrival in the room made a fairly notable impression on myself, chiefly on account of the glowing picture Short had drawn of his charm and brilliance, the rest of Sillery's party treated Truscott, if possible, with even closer attention. Members moved unobtrusively from the floor to a chair, and Quiggin, one of the legs of whose trousers had rucked up, revealing long hirsute pants of grey material, pulled the end of his trouser down towards a black sock, and sat more upright on the sofa. Both he and Members evidently felt that the opportunity had now arrived for Sillery's disclosure regarding the adjacency of their respective homes to be forgotten in discussion of more important matters. Stringham turned out to know Truscott already. He said: 'Hullo, Bill,' and for a minute or two they spoke of some party in London where they had met a month or two before.

'You must tell us about the polite world, Bill," said Sillery, perching on the side of Truscott's chair and slipping an arm round his shoulder. 'Fancy the hostesses allowing you to steal away from their clutches and drop in to visit us here.'

Sillery made this remark gently, through his teeth, so that it was not easy to say whether he intended a compliment, an enquiry, or even an expression of disparagement of the fact that Truscott could spare time for dons and undergraduates at this stage of the Season; when a career had still to be carved out. Truscott certainly accepted the words as tribute to his popularity, and he threw his head back with a hearty laugh to express how great a relief it was for him to escape, even for a short period, from the world of hostesses thus somewhat terrifyingly pictured by Sillery: though he was, at the same time, no doubt aware that a more detailed explanation was required of him to show conclusively that his appearance in the university was due to nothing so ominous as lacking something better to do.

'I have really come on business, Sillers,' he said.

'Indeed?'

'I saw no reason why I should not combine business with pleasure, Sillers. As you know, Pleasure before Business has always been my motto.'

'Pleasure can be so exhausting,' put in Members, fixing Truscott with a winning smile, and thrusting his face forward a little.

However, he seemed a little uncertain, apart from his smile, how best to captivate someone of Truscott's eminence; though clearly determined to make an impression before the opportunity was past. Truscott, for his part, glanced attentively at Members: an appraisal that seemed to result in the decision that, although outwardly Members had not much to offer that was to Truscott's taste, there might be elements not to be despised intellectually. Sillery watched their impact with evident interest. He said: 'I expect you read *Iron Aspidistra,* Bill.'

Truscott nodded; but without producing any keen sense of conviction.

'Mark's poem,' said Sillery. 'It received quite a favourable reception.'

'Surrounded as usual by a brilliant circle of young men, Sillers,' said Truscott, laughing loudly again. 'To tell you the truth, Sillers, I have come up to look for a young man myself.'

Sillery chuckled, pricking up his ears. Truscott stretched out his legs languidly. There was a pause, and muted laughter from the rest of the guests. Truscott looked round, archly.

'For my boss as a matter of fact,' he said.

He laughed quietly to himself this time, as if that were a good joke. Quiggin, who had been silent all the while, though not unattentive, spoke unexpectedly in his grating voice: 'Who is "your boss"?' he asked.

I could not help admiring the cool way in which Truscott turned slowly towards Quiggin, and said, without the slightest suggestion of protest at Quiggin's tone: 'He is called Sir Magnus Donners.'

'The M.P.?'

'I fear that, at the moment, he cannot be so described.'

'But you work for him?' insisted Quiggin.

'Sir Magnus is kind enough to remunerate me as if I worked for him,' said Truscott. 'But you know, really, I scarcely like to describe myself as doing anything that suggests such violent exertions undertaken on his behalf. He is, in any case, the kindest of masters.'

He cocked an eyebrow at Quiggin, apparently not at all displeased by this rather aggressive inquisition. As Truscott had not witnessed Quiggin's arrival and earlier behaviour at the tea-party, I decided that he must find him less odd than he appeared to the rest of us: the thought that perhaps he classed all undergraduate opinion together, as inchoate substance, not to be handled too closely, occurring to me only several years later, after I had come down from the university. Sillery said: 'I don't expect "your master", as you call him, would have much difficulty in returning to the House at any by-election, would he, Bill?"

'His industrial interests take up so much time these days,' said Truscott. 'And really one must admit that ability of his sort is rather wasted in the House of Commons.'

'Isn't he going to get a peerage?' said Stringham, unexpectedly.

Truscott smiled.

'Always a possibility,' he said; and Sillery grinned widely, rubbing his hands together, and nodding quickly several times.

'It's a mortal shame that a big concern like his should be in the hands of a private individual,' said Quiggin, increasing the volume of his North Country accent, and speaking as if he were delivering the opening words of a sermon or address.

'Do you think so?' said Truscott. 'Some people do. Of course, Sir Magnus himself has very progressive ideas, you know.'

'I think you would be surprised, Quiggin, if you ever met Sir Magnus,' said Sillery. 'He has even surprised me at times.'

Quiggin looked as if there was nothing he would like better than to have an opportunity to meet Sir Magnus; but Sillery, who probably feared that conversation might decline from the handling of practical matters, like the disposal of jobs, to one of those nebulous discussions of economic right and wrong, of which he approved in general but obviously considered inopportune at that moment, brought back the subject of Truscott's opening statement by saying: 'And so Sir Magnus wants a man, does he?'

However, Truscott was not disposed to say more of that for the time being. He may even have thought that he had already given away too much. His manner became perceptibly less frivolous, and he said: 'I'll tell you about it later, Sillers.'

Sillery concurred. It was probable that he, too, would prefer the details to be given in private. However, he evidently regarded the acquisition of further information on this matter to be of prime importance; because a minute or two later his impatience got the better of him, and, rising from the arm of Truscott's chair, he announced: 'Bill and I are a pair of very old friends who haven't seen each other for many a long day, so that now I am going to drive you all out into the wind and rain in order that Bill and I can have a chat about matters that would no doubt appear to you all as very tedious.'

He put his head a little on one side. Neither Members nor Quiggin seemed very satisfied by this pronouncement: not at all convinced that they would find any such conversation tedious. Members tried to make some sort of protest by saying: 'Now, Sillers, that is really too bad of you, because you promised that you were going to show me your Gerard Manley Hopkins letter the next time I came to see you.'

'And I wanted to borrow *Fabian Essays,* if it wasn't troubling you,' said Quiggin, very sulky.

'Another time, Mark, another time,' said Sillery. 'And you will find your book in that shelf, Quiggin, with the other Webbs. Take great care of it, because it's a first edition with an inscription.'

Sillery was not at all discomposed, indeed he seemed rather flattered, by these efforts on the part of Members and Quiggin to stay and make themselves better known to Truscott; but he was none the less determined that they should not stand between him and the particulars of why Sir Magnus Donners wanted a young man; and what sort of a young man Sir Magnus Donners wanted. He made a sweeping movement with his hands, as if driving chickens before him in a farmyard, at the same time remarking to Stringham: 'You must come here again soon. There are things I should like to discuss interesting to ourselves.'

He turned quickly, to prevent Quiggin from taking too many of his books, and, at the same time, to say something to the depressed undergraduate called Paul. Stringham and I went down the stairs, followed by Mark Members, who, having failed to prolong his visit, seemed now chiefly interested in escaping from Sillery's without having the company of Quiggin thrust upon him. All three of us left the college through an arched doorway that led to the street. Rain had been falling while we were at tea, but the pavements were now drying under a woolly sky.

'What very Monet weather it has been lately,' said Members, almost to himself. 'I think I must hurry ahead now as I am meeting a friend.'

He disappeared into a side street, his yellow tie caught up over his shoulder, his hands in his pockets and elbows pressed to his sides. In a moment he was lost to sight.

'That must be a lie,' said Stringham. 'He couldn't possibly have a friend.'

'What was Truscott after?'

'He is rather a hanger-on of my mother's,' said Stringham. 'Said to be very bright. He certainly gets about.'

'And Sir Magnus Donners?'

'He was in the Government during the war.'

'What else?'

'He is always trying to get in with my mother, too.'

I had the impression that Stringham was himself quite interested in Bill Truscott, who certainly suggested the existence of an exciting world from which one was at present excluded. We strolled on through the empty streets towards Stringham's college. The air was damp and warm. At the top of the stairs, the sound of voices came from the sitting-room. Stringham paused at the door.

'Somebody has got in,' he said. 'I hope it is not the Boys' Club man again.'

He stood for a moment and listened; then he opened the door. There was a general impression of very light grey flannel suits and striped ties, which resolved itself into three figures, sitting smoking, one of whom was Peter Templer.

'Peter.'

'Bob Duport and Jimmy Brent,' said Peter, nodding towards the other two. 'We thought we would pay a call, to see how your education was getting along.'

He was looking well: perhaps a shade fatter in the face than when I had last seen him; and, having now reached the age for which Nature had, as it were, intended him, he was beginning to lose the look of a schoolboy dressed as a grown man. I should have known Duport and Brent anywhere as acquaintances of Peter's. They had that indefinable air of being up to no good that always characterised Peter himself. Both were a few years older than he; and I vaguely remembered some story of Duport having been involved in a motor accident, notorious for some reason or other. That affair, whatever it was, had taken place soon after he had left school: during my own first year there. He was built on similar lines to Peter, thin and tall, with sandy hair, dressed in the same uncompromising manner, though on the whole less successfully. Brent was big and fat, with spectacles that seemed to have been made with abnormally small circles of glass. Both, it turned out, were business friends, working in the City. They accepted some of Stringham's sherry, and Brent, whose manners seemed on the whole better than Duport's, said: 'What do they rush you for this poison?'

The sum was not revealed, because, almost at the same moment, Duport, who was examining The Pharisee's rider, in one of the pictures that had followed Stringham to this room, remarked: 'I've never seen a jock on land, or sea, sit a horse like that.'

'Put your shirt on him when you do, Bob,' said Peter. 'You may recoup a bit on some of those brilliant speculations of yours that are always going to beat the book.'

'How long are you staying?' asked Stringham, before Duport had time to defend his racing luck.

'Going back to London after dinner.'

I saw that any change that I might have suspected of taking place in the relationship between Templer and Stringham had by now crystallised. It was not that they no longer liked one another, or even that they had ceased to take pleasure in each other's company, so much as the fact that each had grown out of the other's habit of mind: and, in consequence, manner of talking. Stringham had become quieter than he had been at school; though he was, at the same time, more than ever anxious for something new to happen at comparatively short intervals, in order that his attention should be occupied, and depression kept at arm's length. Peter had changed less: merely confirming his earlier attitude towards life. I did not know to what extent, if at all, he was aware of any difference in Stringham. He knew Stringham well, and I could imagine him describing—and laughing over—the warming-up process that seemed to be required that evening: a warming-up that never took place so far as Stringham was concerned. I could, equally, imagine Stringham laughing at the way in which Peter was already shaping along the lines that Stringham had himself so accurately foretold.

'We might all have dinner together,' Stringham said.

'That was the idea.'

In the restaurant, Stringham and I talked to Peter, rather fragmentarily: mainly on the subject of Stringham's stay in Kenya. Duport and Brent grunted to each other from time to time, or, occasionally, to Peter: no sense of fusion quickening the party. Peter told us about his car, recently bought second-hand, and considered a bargain.

'I must take you for a proper run in her,' he said, 'before we go back.'

'Don't forget I want to look in at the Cabaret Club before we hit the hay,' said Brent.

Duport said: 'He's got a girl there who owes him some money.'

'I wish she did,' said Brent: but without elucidating further that cryptic aspiration.

The Vauxhall was, in fact, clearly the foundation of this unpremeditated visit. Peter wanted to try the vehicle out. He continued to assure us how cheap the price had been, inviting admiration of its many good points. This car was adapted for speed, having had the windscreen removed; but it had all the appearance of having passed through a good many hands since the days of its first owner. It certainly put Stringham's two-seater in the shade, and perhaps slightly irritated Stringham on this account. Peter was immensely pleased with the Vauxhall, the purchase of which seemed in some way to have involved Brent. As the evening wore on, Brent's personality became in other respects more determinable. For example, he talked incessantly of women. Peter and Duport treated this preoccupation as something not to be taken at all seriously, making no attempt to hide their concurrent opinion that Brent's attempts to make himself agreeable to girls were entirely unsuccessful: all of which Brent took in fairly good part. His voice managed to be at once deep and squeaky; and he spoke repeatedly of a woman called Flora, who appeared in some manner to have behaved badly to him. On the whole he was undoubtedly preferable to Duport, whose demeanour was aggressive and contradictious. I was not surprised when Duport announced: 'Couldn't stand my place at all. Got sent down my first term. Still it looks worse here.'

I enquired about Jean.

'She's all right,' Peter said. 'In love with a married man twice her age.'

'Is that the sister I'm after?' asked Duport.

'That's the one.'

Towards the end of the meal, things improved a little; though Stringham and I seemed now to know Templer on an entirely different footing from that of the past. Finally, I felt even glad that Duport and Brent had increased the numbers of the party, because their presence alleviated, if it did not conceal, the change that had taken place. Peter was still anxious that we should see how fast the car would travel on a piece of open road, and he promised to deliver us back by midnight; so, after dinner was finished, we agreed to go with him. Stringham and I climbed into the back of the Vauxhall with Duport, not through choice, but because there was more room for everyone if Brent occupied the seat beside the driver. We moved off sharply in the direction of unfrequented roads. I lay back, wishing the seat had been roomy enough to allow sleep. Duport smoked sullenly: Stringham, on the other side of me, was silent: Brent had returned to the subject of Flora, though without receiving much outward sympathy from Peter. We had reached the outskirts of the town, and the car was gathering speed, when—without clearly taking in the meaning of the words —I heard Brent say: 'Let's pick up those two pieces.'

I was scarcely aware that Peter had slowed down, when we stopped with a jerk by the kerb, where, beside a pillar-box at the corner of a side road, two girls were standing. They were wearing flowered dresses, blue and pink respectively, with hats of the same material. Their faces were those of a couple of Dutch dolls. Brent, from the front seat, twisted himself round towards them.

'Would you like to come for half an hour's drive?' he asked, in his unattractive voice, high and oily.

The girls raised no difficulty whatever about falling in with this suggestion. There was not even any giggling to speak of. They jumped in immediately, one of them sitting in front, on Brent's knee; the other joining the three of us at the back, where there was already little enough room to spare. They answered to the names of Pauline and Ena. Ena sat sideways, mainly on Duport, but with her legs stretched across my own knees: her feet, in tight high-heeled shoes, on Stringham's lap. This was a situation similar to many I had heard described, though never previously experienced. In spite of its comparative discomfort, I could not help feeling interest—and some slight excitement—to see how matters would develop. Stringham was obviously not very pleased by the additional company, which left him without the doubtful advantage of any substantial share in either of the girls; but he made the best of things, even attempting some show of pinching Ena's ankles. Neither of the girls had much conversation. However, they began to squeal a little when the car arrived on a more open piece of road, and the engine gathered speed.

'You must admit it was a good buy,' shouted Peter, as we did about seventy-five or eighty.

'All the same we might be returning soon,' said Stringham. 'My physician is insistent that I should not stay up late after my riding accident—especially with anyone, or part of anyone, on my knee.'

'We ought to be getting back, too,' said Duport, freeing himself, apparently dissatisfied, from Ena's long embrace. 'Otherwise it will be tomorrow before we get to London.'

'All right,' said Peter, 'we will turn at the next cross-roads.'

It was on the homeward journey, after making this turn, that the mishap occurred. Peter was not driving specially fast, but the road, which was slippery from rain fallen earlier in the evening, took two hairpin bends; and, as we reached the second of these, some kind of upheaval took place within the car. No one afterwards could explain exactly what happened, though the accepted supposition was that Brent, engaged in kissing Pauline, had disturbed her susceptibilities in some manner, so that she had drawn herself unexpectedly away from him; and, in his effort to maintain their equilibrium, Brent had thrust her against Peter's elbow, in such a way that her head obscured the view. That, at least, was one of the main theories afterwards propounded. Whatever the root of the trouble, the memorable consequence was that Peter—in order to avoid a large elm tree—drove into the ditch: where the car stopped abruptly, making a really horrible sound like a dying monster; remaining stuck at an angle of forty-five degrees to the road.

This was an unpleasant surprise for everyone. The girls could not have made more noise if they had been having their throats cut. Brent, too, swore loudly, in his almost falsetto voice, natural, or assumed to meet the conditions of the moment; though, as it happened, he and Pauline, perhaps owing to their extreme proximity to each other, were the only two members of the party who, when we had at last all succeeded in making our way out of the Vauxhall, turned out to be quite unhurt. Stringham was kicked in the face by Ena, who also managed to give Duport a black-eye by concussion between the back of her head and his forehead. Peter bruised his knuckles against the handle of the door. Ena complained of a broken arm from the violence with which Duport had seized her as the car went over the edge. My own injuries were no worse than a sharp blow on the nose from Ena's knee. However, we were all shaken up more than a little; and, as one of the wheels had buckled, the car clearly could not be driven back that night. There had been some difficulty in getting out of the ditch, and, as I stepped up on to the road, I felt the first drop of rain. Now it began to pour.

This was an exceedingly inconvenient occurrence from everyone's point of view. Probably Stringham and I were in the most awkward position, as there seemed no prospect of either of us reaching college by the required hour; and it would not be easy to convince the authorities that nothing of which they might disapprove had taken place to make us late: or even to keep us out all night, if things should turn out so badly. The girls were, presumably, accustomed to late hours if they were in the habit of accepting lifts at that time of night; but for them, too, this was an uncomfortable situation. Such recrimination that took place was about equally divided between Peter's two friends and Ena and Pauline: although I knew that, in fact, Stringham was far the angriest person present. Rain now began to fall in sheets. We moved in a body towards the elm tree.

'Of all the bloody silly things to do,' said Brent. 'You might have killed the lot of us.'

'I might easily,' said Peter, who was always well equipped for dealing with friends of Brent's kind. 'I wonder I didn't with a lout like you in the boat. Haven't you ever had a girl sitting on your knee before, that you have to heave her right across the car, just because there is a slight bump in the road?'

'What did you want to get a lot of girls in the car for, anyway?' asked Duport, who was holding a rolled-up handkerchief to his eye. 'If you weren't capable of steering?'

'I didn't ask for them.'

'You ought to have some driving lessons.'

Peter replied with a reference to the time when Duport was alleged to have collided with a lamp-post at Henley; and they both went on like this for some minutes. Pauline and Ena, the former of whom was crying, also made a good deal of noise, while they lamented the difficulty of getting home, certainly an insoluble problem as matters stood.

'How far out are we?' Stringham asked, 'and what is the time?'

The hour was a quarter-past eleven; the general view, that we had come about a dozen miles. There was a chance that a car might pass, but we were a large party to be accommodated. In any case, there was no sign of a car. Stringham said: 'We had better make plans for camping out. Brent, you look good at manual labour—will you set to work and construct a palisade?'

'You didn't ought to have brought us here,' said Pauline.

Ena, still complaining of a torn stocking, and bruises on her arm, cried into her handbag. Peter and Duport moved round the car, pulling and pushing its outer surface, or opening the bonnet to inspect the engine. Brent sat panting to himself on the bank.

Peter said: 'The rain seems to be stopping. We may as well walk in the right direction. There is no point in staying here.'

There was not much enthusiasm for this suggestion; and, when attempted, the heel came off one of Ena's shoes, in any case not adapted to a twelve-mile march.

'Can't we change the wheel?' said Duport.

We struggled with the problem of the wheel from different angles of approach. It was impossible to wind the jack into position under the axle. We only managed to embed the car more firmly than ever in the side of the ditch. While we were engaged in these labours, rain began to fall again, a steady, soaking downpour. Once more we retired to the tree, and waited for the shower to clear.

'What a bloody silly thing to do,' said Duport.

'Almost as brilliant as the time you fell into the orchestra on Boat-Race Night.'

Stringham said: 'For my part, I am now in a perfect condition to be received into one of those oriental religions whose only tenet is complete submission to Fate.'

He joined Brent on the bank, and sat with his head in his hands. A minute or two after this, the miracle happened. There was a grinding noise farther up the road, and the glare of powerful headlights appeared. It was a bus. Brent, with surprising agility for so fat a man, jumped up from where he was sitting, and ran out into the centre of the road, holding his arms wide apart as if in supplication. He was followed by Duport, apparently shaking his fist. I felt little interest in possible danger of their being run over: only a great relief that the bus must in any case come to a standstill, whether they were killed or not.

Stringham said: 'What did I foretell? Kismet. It is the Wheel.'

The bus stopped some yards short of Brent. We all clambered up the steps. Inside, the seats were almost empty, and no one seemed to realise from what untold trouble we had all been rescued. The girls now recovered quickly, and were even anxious to make an assignation for another night. They were, however, both set down (with no more than a promise from Brent that he would look them up if again in that neighbourhood) at a point not far from the pillar-box from which they had embarked on that unlucky drive. We reached the centre of the town: Templer, Brent, and Duport still quarrelling among themselves about which hotel they should patronise, and arguing as to whether or not it was worth ringing up a garage that night to arrange for the repair of the Vauxhall. This discussion was still in progress when we left the bus. Stringham and I said good-night to them.

'I'm sorry to have landed you in all this,' Peter said.

'You must come for a drive with us sometime,' said Stringham. 'Anyway, we'll meet soon.'

But I knew that they would not meet soon; and that this was a final parting. Peter, I think, knew this too. A crescent moon came from behind clouds. The others disappeared from sight. Stringham said: 'What a jolly evening, and what nice friends Peter makes.' The clocks were striking midnight at different places all over the town as I stepped through the door of my college. The rain had cleared. Moonlight gave the grass and towers an air of unreality, as if all would be removed in the morning to make way for another scene. My coat hung on me, shapeless and soggy, the damp working down through the cloth to my shoulders.

This incident with Templer's car had two results, so far as Stringham was concerned: it brought an end to his friendship with Peter, and it immensely strengthened his desire to go down as soon as possible from the university. In fact, he was now unwilling even to consider the possibility of staying in residence long enough to take a degree. It was one of those partings of the ways that happen throughout life: in this case, foretold by Peter himself. No doubt Peter, too, had guessed that something had ended, and that his prophecy had come true, while the rain dripped down on all of us, through the branches of that big elm, while we stood in the shadows of the ditch regarding the stranded Vauxhall.

When I say that their friendship came to an end, I do not mean that Stringham no longer spoke of Templer; nor that, when he talked of him, it was with dislike: nor even, in a sense, with disapproval. On the contrary, he used to refer to Peter as frequently as he had done in the past; and the story of the drive, the crash, Ena and Pauline, Brent and Duport, was embroidered by him until it became a kind of epic of discomfort and embarrassment: at the same time, something immensely funny in the light of Peter's chosen manner of life. Nevertheless, there could be no doubt whatever that metamorphosis had taken place; and, sometimes, it was almost as if Stringham were speaking of a friend who had died, or gone beyond the sea to a place from which he would never return. Once he said: 'How appalling Peter will be in fifteen years' time'; and he never spoke, as formerly he had done, of arranging a meeting between the three of us in London.

I was even aware that, in an infinitely lesser degree, I could not avoid being unfavourably included by Stringham in this reorientation; which, almost necessarily, affected anyone who was at once a friend of Peter's and a fellow undergraduate, fated to remain up for at least three years: both characteristics reminding Stringham of sides of life from which he was determined to cut away. Besides, for my own part I shared none of this sense of having seen the last of Peter; though even I had to admit that I did not care for the idea of spending much of my time with his present acquaintances, if Brent and Duport were typical representatives of his London circle. The extent to which Stringham had resolved to settle his own career was brought home to me one morning, through the unexpected agency of Quiggin, next to whom I found myself sitting, when attending one of Brightman's lectures, at which I had not been appearing so regularly as perhaps I should.

On this occasion Quiggin walked back with me towards my college, though without relaxing the harsh exterior he had displayed when we had first met at Sillery's. He seemed chiefly concerned to find out more about Mark Members.

'Where does his stuff appear?' he asked.

'What stuff?'

'His poems have been published, haven't they?'

'The one I read was in *Public School Verse.*'

'Why *"Public"?*' said Quiggin. 'Why *"Public" School Verse?* Why not just *"School Verse"?*'

I was unable to answer that one; and suggested that such a title must for some reason have appealed to the editors, or publisher, of the volume.

'It is not as if they were "public" schools,' said Quiggin. 'They could not be less "public".'

I had heard this objection voiced before, and could only reply that such schools had to have a name of some sort. Quiggin stopped, stuck his hands into his pockets (he was still wearing his black suit) and poked his head forward. He looked thin and unhealthy: undernourished. perhaps.

'Have you got a copy?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Can I borrow it?'

'All right.'

'Now?'

'If you like to come with me.'

We undertook the rest of the journey to my rooms in silence. Arrived there, Quiggin glanced round at the furnishings, as if he did not rate very highly the value of the objects provided by the college to sit, or lie, upon. They were, indeed, shabby enough. Standing by the bookcase, he took out the copy of *Public School Verse,* which he had lighted upon immediately, and began to run rapidly through the rest of the books.

'Do you know Members well?' he asked.

'I've met him once, since we were at Sillery's.'

This encounter with Members had been at a luncheon party given by Short, where Members had much annoyed and mortified his host by eating nearly all the strawberries before the meal began. In addition, he had not spoken at all during luncheon, leaving before coffee was served, on the grounds that he had to play the gramophone to himself for half an hour every afternoon; and that, unless he withdrew at once, he would not have time for his music owing to a later engagement. Short, for a mild man, had been quite cross.

'I understand that Members is a coming poet,' said Quiggin.

I agreed that *Iron Aspidistra* showed considerable promise. Quiggin gloomily turned the pages of the collection. He said: 'I'd be glad to meet Members again.'

It was on the tip of my tongue to answer that he was almost certain to do this, sooner or later, if their homes were so close; but, as Quiggin evidently meant there and then, rather than in the vacation, I thought it wiser to leave the remark unmade. I promised to let him know if a suitable occasion should arise, such as Members visiting my rooms, though that seemed improbable after his behaviour at Short's luncheon party.

'Can I take *The Green Hat* too?' asked Quiggin.

'Don't lose it.'

'It is all about fashionable life, isn't it?'

'Well, yes.'

I had myself not yet fully digested the subject matter of *The Green Hat,* a novel that I felt painted, on the whole, a sympathetic picture of what London had to offer: though much of the life it described was still obscure to me. I was surprised at Quiggin asking for it. He went on: 'In that case I do not expect that I shall like it. I hate anything superficial. But I will take the book and look at it, and tell you what I think of the writing.'

'Do.'

'I suppose that it depicts the kind of world that your friend Stringham will enter when he joins Donners-Brebner,' said Quiggin, as he continued to inspect the bookshelf.

'How do you mean?'

'Well you must have heard that he has taken the job that Truscott was talking about at Sillery's. Surely he has told you that?'

'What, with Sir Magnus Donners?'

It was no use pretending that I knew something of this already. I was, indeed, so surprised that only after Quiggin had gone did I begin to feel annoyance.

'I should have thought he would have told you,' said Quiggin.

'Where did you hear this?'

'At Sillery's, of course. Sillery says Stringham is just the man.'

'He probably is.'

'Of course,' said Quiggin, 'I knew at once there would be no chance of Truscott thinking of *me*. Not good enough, by any manner of means, I suppose.'

'Would you have liked the job?'

I did not know what else to say: the idea of Quiggin being the sort of man Truscott was looking for seeming to me so grotesque.

Quiggin did not bother to reply to this question. He merely repeated, with a sniff: 'Not good enough by a long chalk,' adding: 'You might come and see me some time in my college, if you can find the way to it. You won't get any priceless port, or anything like that.'

I said that I was not particularly fond of port; and began to give an account of my likes and dislikes in the matter of wine, which Quiggin, with what I now see as excusable impatience, cut short by saying: 'I live very quietly. I can't afford to do otherwise.'

'Neither can I.'

Quiggin did not answer. He gave me a look of great contempt; as I supposed, for venturing, even by implication, to draw a parallel between a lack of affluence that might, literally, affect my purchase of rare vintages, and a figure of speech intended delicately to convey his own dire want for the bare necessities of life. He remained silent for several seconds, as if trying to make up his mind whether he could ever bring himself to speak to me again; and then said gruffly: 'I've got to go now.'

As he went off, all hunched up on one side with *Public School Verse* and *The Green Hat* under his arm, I felt rather ashamed of myself for having made such a thoughtless remark. However, I soon forgot about this, at the time, in recalling the news I had learnt about Stringham, which I wanted to verify as soon as possible. In general, however, I continued to feel an interest in Quiggin, and the way he lived. He had something of the angry solitude of spirit that held my attention in Widmerpool.

Stringham, when I next saw him, seemed surprised at the importance with which I invested his decision.

'I thought I'd told you,' he said. 'As a matter of fact it isn't finally fixed yet. What awful cheek of your friend Quiggin, if I may say so.'

'What do you think of him?'

'The man is a closed book to me,' Stringham said. 'And one that I confess I have little temptation to open. Bill Truscott, on the other hand, was rather impressed.'

'With Quiggin?'

'Curiously enough.'

'Will you work with Truscott?'

'I shall be the other personal secretary.'

'Did Sillery put up the suggestion?'

'He is very keen on it. He agrees one's family will have to be consulted.'

'Will your family raise difficulties?'

'For once,' said Stringham, 'I don't think they will. My mother will at last see hopes of getting me settled in life. Buster—most mistakenly—will suppose this to be the first step on the stair to a seat on the Donners-Brebner Board. My father will be filled with frank astonishment that I should be proving myself capable of earning a living in any capacity whatsoever.'

'What about a degree?'

'Bill Truscott reports Sir Magnus as demanding who the hell wants a degree these days; and saying all he needs is men who know the world, and can act and think quickly.'

'Strong stuff.'

'I suppose I can take lessons from Bill.'

'Then you won't come up next term?'

'Not if I can avoid it.'

Sillery's part in this matter was certainly of interest. He might have been expected—as Stringham himself agreed—to encourage as many undergraduates as possible to remain, for as long as possible, within his immediate range. Later on, however, I began to understand something of his reasons for recommending this course. If Stringham remained at the university, it was probable that he would fall under influences other than—and alien to—Sillery's. Even if he remained Sillery's man, he was obviously a person who might easily get involved in some scrape for which Sillery (if too insistent on taking Stringham under his wing) might be held in some degree answerable. Placed in a key position in Donners-Brebner—largely due to Sillery's own recommendation—Stringham could not only supply news of that large concern, but could also keep an eye on Sillery's other man, Truscott. In due course Sillery would no doubt find himself in a position to renew acquaintance in most satisfactory conditions. In short, power without responsibility could hardly be offered to Sillery, within this limited sphere, upon cheaper terms. Such a series of crude images would scarcely have suggested themselves in quite this manner to Sillery's mind—still less did I see them myself in any such clarity—but the apparent paradox of why Sillery threw in his weight on the side of Stringham's going-down became in due course comparatively plain to me.

'Anyway,' said Stringham, 'you'll be in London yourself soon.'

'I suppose so.'

'Then we'll have some fun.'

Somehow, I felt doubts about this. Life no longer seemed to present quite the same uncomplicated façade as at a time when dodging Le Bas and shirking football had been cardinal requirements to make the day tolerable. Although I might not feel, with Stringham, that Peter Templer was gone for good, Peter certainly seemed now to inhabit a world that offered limited attractions. The sphere towards which Stringham seemed to be heading, little as I knew of it, was scarcely more tempting to me. Perhaps Widmerpool had been right in advocating a more serious attitude of mind towards the problem of the future. I thought over some of the remarks he had made on this subject while we had both been staying at La Grenadière.

As it turned out, Mrs. Foxe did not show the complacence Stringham had expected in agreeing, at once, that he should cease to be a member of the university. On the contrary, she wrote to say that she thought him too young to spend all his time in London; even going so far as to add that she had no desire for him to turn into 'something like Bill Truscott': of whom she had always been supposed to approve. However, this was an obstacle not entirely unforeseen; in spite of Stringham's earlier hope that his mother might decide on the spur of the moment that a job was the best possible thing for him.

'Of course that's Buster,' he said, when he spoke of the letter.

I was not sure that he was right. The tone of his mother's remarks did not at all suggest arguments put forward at second-hand. They sounded much more like her own opinions. Stringham reasserted his case. The end of it was that she decided to come and talk things over.

'Really rather good of her,' said Stringham. 'You can imagine how busy she must be at this time of year.'

'Do you think you will persuade her?'

'I'm going to rope in Sillery.'

'Take her to see him?'

'Have him to lunch. Will you come and play for my side?'

'I can't play for your side, if I don't want you to go down.'

'Well, just keep the ring then.'

This was about the stage when I began to become dimly conscious of what Short was trying to convey when he spoke of Sillery's influence, and his intrigues; although, as far as it went, a parent's discussion of her son's future with a don still seemed natural enough. Sillery, I thought, was like Tiresias: for, although predominantly male, for example, in outward appearance, he seemed to have the seer's power of assuming female character if required. With Truscott, for instance, he would behave like an affectionate aunt; while his perennial quarrel with Brightman—to take another instance of his activities—was often conducted with a mixture of bluntness and self-control that certainly could not be thought at all like a woman's row with a man: or even with another woman; though, at the same time, it was a dispute that admittedly transcended somehow a difference of opinion between two men. Certainly Sillery had no dislike for the company of women in the way of ordinary social life, provided they made no personal demands on him. I was anxious to see how he would deal with Mrs. Foxe.

Meanwhile, I continued occasionally to see something of Quiggin, although I came no nearer to deciding which of the various views held about him were true. He was like Widmerpool, as I have said, in his complete absorption in his own activities, and also in his ambition. Unlike Widmerpool, he made no parade of his aspirations, on the contrary, keeping as secret as possible his appetite for getting on in life, so that even when I became aware of the purposeful way in which he set about obtaining what he wanted, I could never be sure where precisely his desires lay. He used to complain of the standard of tutoring, or how few useful lectures were available, and at times he liked to discuss his work in great detail. In fact I thought, at first, that he worked far harder than most of the men I knew. Later I came to doubt this, finding that Quiggin's work was something to be discussed rather than tackled, and that what he really enjoyed was drinking cups of coffee at odd times of day. He had another characteristic with which I became in due course familiar: he was keen on meeting people he considered important, and surprisingly successful in impressing persons—as he seemed to have impressed Truscott—who might have been reasonably expected to take amiss his manner and appearance.

The subject of Quiggin came up at one of those luncheons that Short, who had a comfortable allowance, gave periodically. Mark Members, in spite of his behaviour on the earlier occasion, was again of the party (because Short regarded him as intellectually 'sound'); though Brightman was the guest of honour this time. Two undergraduates, called respectively Smethwyck and Humble, were there, and perhaps others. Short was inclined to become sentimental after he had eaten and drunk a fairly large amount in the middle of the day, and he had remarked: 'Quiggin must find it hard to make two ends meet up here. He told me his father used to work on the railway line outside some Midland town.'

'Not a word of truth,' said Brightman, who was the only don present. 'Quiggin is in my college. I went into the whole question of his financial position when he came up. He has certainly no less money than the average—probably more with his scholarships.'

'What *does* his father do then, Harold?' asked Short, who was quite used to being contradicted by Brightman; and, indeed, by almost everyone else in the university.

'Deceased.'

'But what did he do?'

'A builder—keen on municipal politics. So keen, he nearly landed in jail. He got off on appeal.'

Brightman could not help smiling to himself at the ease with which he could dispose of Short.

'But he may have worked on the railway line all the same.'

'The only work Quiggin the Elder ever did on the railway line,' said Brightman, becoming more assertive at encountering argument, 'was probably to travel without a ticket.'

'But that doesn't prove that his son has got any money,' said Humble, who did not care for Brightman.

'He was left a competence,' Brightman said. 'Quiggin lives with his mother, who is a town councillor. Isn't that true, Mark?'

A more vindictive man than Short might have been suspected of having raised the subject of Quiggin primarily to punish Members for his former attack on the strawberries; but Short was far too good-natured ever to have thought of such a revenge. Besides, he would never have considered baiting anyone whom he admired on intellectual grounds.

Brightman, on the other hand, had no such scruples, and he went on to say: 'Come on, Mark. Let's hear your account of Quiggin. You are neighbours, according to Sillers.'

Members must have seen that there was no way of avoiding the subject. Shaking his hair out of his eyes, he said: 'There is a disused railway-siding that was turned into allotments. He probably worked there. It adjoins one of the residential suburbs.'

There was a general laugh at this answer, which was certainly a neat way of settling the questions of both Quiggin and Brightman himself, so far as Members was concerned. Smethwyck began to talk of a play he had seen in London, and conversation took a new course. However, the feelings of self-reproach that contact with Quiggin, or discussions about him, commonly aroused in me were not entirely set at rest by this description of his circumstances. Brightman's information was notoriously unreliable: and Members's words had clearly been actuated by personal dislike. The work on the railway line might certainly have been of a comparatively recreational nature: that had to be admitted in the light of Mark Members's knowledge of the locality; but, even were this delineation of the background true, that would not prevent Quiggin from finding in his life some element chronically painful to him. Even though he might exaggerate to himself, and to others, his lack of means in relation to the financial circumstances of his contemporaries, this in itself pointed to a need for other—and deeply felt—discontents. It was possible that, in the eyes of Quiggin, money represented some element in which he knew himself deficient: rather in the same way that Widmerpool, when he wanted to criticise Stringham, said that he had too much money: no doubt in truth envying the possession of assets that were, in fact, not material ones. It was some similar course of speculation that seemed to give shape to Quiggin's character and outward behaviour.

Short's luncheon took place the day before I was to meet Mrs. Foxe again, and I thought over the question of Quiggin on my way to Stringham's rooms.

'This may be rather a ghastly meal,' Stringham said, while we waited for his mother, and Sillery, to arrive.

Sillery appeared first. He had cleaned himself up a little for the occasion, trimmed his moustache at the corners, and exchanged his usual blue bow for a black silk tie with white spots. Stringham offered him sherry, which was refused. Like many persons more interested in power than sensual enjoyment, Sillery touched no strong drink. Prowling about the room for a minute or two, he glanced at the invitations on the mantelpiece: a London dance or two, and some undergraduate parties. He found nothing there that appeared to interest him, because he turned, and, stepping between Stringham and myself, took each of us by an arm, resting his weight slightly.

'I hear you have been seeing something of Brother Quiggin,' he said to me.

'We met at one of Brightman's lectures, Sillers.'

'You both go to Brightman's lectures, do you?' said Sillery. 'I hope they are being decently attended.'

'Moderate.'

'Mostly women, I fear.'

'A sprinkling of men.'

'I heard they were getting quite painfully empty. It's a pity, because Brightman is such an able fellow. He won golden opinions as a young man,' said Sillery. 'But tell me, how do you find Brother Quiggin?'

I hardly knew what to say. However, Sillery seemed to require no answer. He said: 'Brother Quiggin is an able young man, too. We must not forget that.'

Stringham did not seem much in the mood for Sillery.

He moved away towards the window. A gramophone was playing in the rooms above. Outside, the weather was hot and rather stuffy.

'I hope my mother is not going to be really desperately late,' he said.

We waited. Sillery began to describe a walking tour he had once taken in Sicily with two friends, one of whom had risen to be Postmaster-General: the other, dead in his twenties, having shown promise of even higher things. He was in the middle of an anecdote about an amusing experience they had had with a German professor in a church at Syracuse, when there was a step on the stairs outside. Stringham went to the door, and out on to the landing. I heard him say: 'Why, hullo, Tuffy. Only you?'

Miss Weedon's reply was not audible within the room. She came in a moment later, looking much the same as when I had seen her in London. Stringham followed. 'My mother is awfully sorry, Sillers, but she could not get away at the last moment,' he said. 'Miss Weedon very sweetly motored all the way here, in order that we should not have a vacant place at the table.'

Sillery did not take this news at all well. There could be no doubt that he was deeply disappointed at Mrs. Foxe's defection; and that he did not feel Miss Weedon to be, in any way, an adequate substitute for Stringham's mother. We settled down to a meal that showed no outward prospect of being particularly enjoyable. Stringham himself did not appear in the least surprised at this miscarriage of plans. He was evidently pleased to see Miss Weedon, who, of the two of them, seemed the more worried that a discussion regarding Stringham's future would have to be postponed. Sillery decided that the first step was to establish his own position in Miss Weedon's eyes before, as he no doubt intended, exploring her own possibilities for exploitation.

'Salmon,' he remarked. 'Always makes me think of Mr. Gladstone.'

'Have some, all the same,' said Stringham. 'I hope it's fresh.'

'Did you arrange all this lunch yourself?' asked Miss Weedon, before Sillery could proceed further with his story. 'How wonderful of you. You know your mother was really distressed that she couldn't come.'

'The boys were at choir-practice when I passed this way,' said Sillery, determined that he should enter the conversation on his own terms. 'They were trying over that bit from *The Messiah'*—he hummed distantly, and beat time with his fork—'you know, those children's voices made me mighty sad.'

'Charles used to have a nice voice, didn't you?' said Miss Weedon: plainly more as a tribute to Stringham's completeness of personality, rather than because the matter could be thought to be of any great musical interest.

'I really might have earned my living that way, if it hadn't broken,' said Stringham. 'I should especially have enjoyed singing in the street. Perhaps I shall come to it yet.'

'There's been a terrible to-do about the way you earn your living,' said Miss Weedon. 'Buster doesn't at all like the idea of your living in London.'

Sillery showed interest in this remark, in spite of his evident dissatisfaction at the manner in which Miss Weedon treated him. He seemed unable to decide upon her precise status in the household: which was, indeed, one not easy to assess. It was equally hard to guess what she knew, or thought, of Sillery; whether she appreciated the extent of his experience in such situations as that which had arisen in regard to Stringham. Sitting opposite him, she seemed to have become firmer and more masculine; while Sillery himself, more than ever, took the shape of a wizard or shaman, equipped to resist either man or woman from a bisexual vantage.

This ineffective situation might have continued throughout Miss Weedon's visit, if Moffet—about whom a word should be said—had not handed Stringham a telegram, when he brought the next course. Moffet, a tall, gloomy man, on account of his general demeanour, which was certainly oppressive enough, had in some degree contributed to Stringham's dislike for university life. Stringham used to call Moffet 'the murderer', not on account of anything outwardly disreputable in his appearance, which might have been that of some ecclesiastical dignitary, but because of what Stringham named 'the cold cruelty of Moffet's eye'. If Moffet decided, for one reason or another, that an undergraduate on his staircase was worth cultivating, there was something sacerdotal about the precision with which he never left him free from attentions; as if the victim must be converted, come what may, to Moffet's doctrines. Moffet had at first sight made up his mind that Stringham was one to be brought under his sway.

One of Moffet's tenets was in connexion with the manner in which Stringham arranged several ivory elephants along the top of his mantelpiece. Stringham liked the elephants to follow each other in column: Moffet preferred them to face the room in line. I had been present, on one occasion, when Moffet, having just finished 'doing the room', had disappeared from it. Stringham walked over to the fireplace, where the elephants stood with their trunks in line, and turned them sideways. As he completed this rearrangement, Moffet came in once more through the door. Stringham had the last elephant in his hand. Moffet stared across at him forbiddingly.

'I am afraid I do not arrange ornaments very well, sir,' said Moffet.

'Just a whim of mine regarding elephants.'

'I will try to remember, sir,' said Moffet. 'They take a powerful lot of dusting.'

He retired again, adding: 'Thank you, sir,' as he closed the door. The incident disturbed Stringham. 'Now I shall have to go down,' he said.

However, Moffet was in an excellent mood at having an opportunity to wait on Sillery, of whom, for some reason, he approved more than of most dons. He brought in the telegram with a flourish. The message was from Stringham's mother: she would be arriving, after all: Buster was driving her down. At this, Sillery cheered up at once; and Miss Weedon, too, saw hope that negotiations might now take place. Stringham himself seemed as indifferent as before.

'If Buster is coming,' he said, 'he will certainly queer the pitch.'

'I am looking forward to meeting Buster,' said Sillery, smiling straight across the table to Miss Weedon. 'I think I shall persuade him to our point of view.'

He put the tips of his fingers together. Miss Weedon looked a little surprised at this whole-hearted way in which Sillery offered himself as an ally. She had perhaps assumed that, as a don, he would inevitably attempt to prevent Stringham from going down. She said: 'Commander Foxe's great regret is that he never went to the university.'

I did not know whether this remark was intended to excuse Buster, or to suggest to Sillery a line of attack.

'No doubt he acquired a very useful education in a different sphere,' said Sillery. 'I have made enquiries, and find that we have many friends in common. Bill Truscott, for example.'

Miss Weedon did not feel equally enthusiastic about Bill Truscott. I wondered if they had crossed swords.

'Mr. Truscott has been in the house a lot lately,' she said, guardedly.

'Bill knows the situation perfectly,' said Sillery. 'It would be a great advantage to work in harness with him.'

All Miss Weedon was prepared to admit was the statement that 'Mr. Truscott is always very kind'. However, Sillery's changed mood much improved the atmosphere; luncheon continuing with less sense of strain.

Mrs. Foxe and Buster arrived just as Moffet was clearing the table. They brought with them a hamper; caviare, grapes, a bottle of champagne. The effect of their entrance was immediate. Sillery and Miss Weedon at once abjured a great proportion of the hermaphroditic humours assumed by each of them for the purpose of more convenient association with the other: Miss Weedon relapsing into her normal rôle of attendance on Mrs. Foxe: Sillery steering himself more decidedly towards the part of eccentric professor, and away from the comparatively straightforward manner in which he had been discussing Stringham's affairs. This was the first time I had seen Mrs. Foxe and Buster together. They made an unusual couple. This was not due to the fact that she was a few years the elder of the two, which was scarcely noticeable, because Buster, though he had lost some of his look of anxiety, was distinctly fatter, and less juvenile in appearance, than he had seemed in London a year or more before. He was still dressed with care, and appeared in a more amenable temper than at our earlier meeting.

'We brought some grub down,' he said to Stringham, putting the hamper on a chair; and, turning to me, he remarked: 'I think one can always use caviare, don't you?'

It was clear that he accepted the fact that in the presence of his wife he was a subordinate figure, wherever he might rank away from her. Mrs. Foxe's ownership of

Buster seemed complete when they were in a room together. From time to time she would glance at him as if to make sure that he were behaving himself; but her look was one of complete assurance that a word from her would be sufficient to quell even the smallest outbreak of conduct of a kind which she might disapprove. I found out, much later, that the circumstances of their marriage had been, so far as they went, respectable enough; and that nothing could have been farther from the truth than Widmerpool's suggestion that her divorce had been a particularly scandalous one. At that time, however, I had not heard any of the story; and I was still curious to know where she and Buster had met, and what romantic climax had been the cause of their going off together.

Sillery now showed great activity. He moved quickly forward to Mrs. Foxe, for a moment or two engaging her in conversation that took up the threads of their acquaintanceship of years before. Then he made for Buster, on whom he evidently intended to concentrate his forces, manœuvring him to the far end of the room; and, after a short while, taking his arm. Moffet had come in to ask if more coffee was required. He was in his element in this somewhat confused scene. Mrs. Foxe and Buster not yet having lunched, some sort of a picnic was now organised among the remnants of the meal just consumed.

Sillery must have made his point, whatever it was, with Buster almost immediately, because soon he led him back to the food, assuring us that it was extraordinary that, during his war work with the Y.M.C.A., they had never met, though how this meeting could possibly have happened he did not explain. Whatever they had found in common was satisfactory to Buster, too, since he laughed and talked with Sillery as if he had known him for years. I have sometimes wondered whether Sillery made some specific offer on that occasion: a useful business introduction, for example, might have been dangled before Buster, then, as I knew from Stringham, contemplating retirement from the Navy. On the whole it is probable that nothing more concrete took place than that the two of them were aware, as soon as they set eyes on one another, of mutual sympathy: Sillery confining himself to flattery, and perhaps allowing Buster to hear the names of some of the more impressive specimens in his collection. Whatever the reason, Stringham's fate was settled in these first few minutes, because it was then that Buster must have decided to withdraw opposition. How serious this opposition was likely to be, if Sillery had not stepped in, is another question hard to answer. Buster might be in comparative subjection to his wife, but he was not necessarily without influence with her on that account. On the contrary, his subjection was no doubt a source of power to him in such matters. It was not surprising that he was against Stringham going down; his change of heart was much less to be expected. However, by the time Mrs. Foxe decided to leave, after scarcely any discussion over the caviare, champagne and grapes (the last of which Sillery consented to share), it was agreed that Stringham should go down at the end of the term. When he said good-bye, Sillery assured Mrs. Foxe that he was always at her service: when he took Buster's hand he put his own left hand over their combined grip, as if to seal it: to Miss Weedon he was polite and friendly, though less demonstrative. Moffet was waiting on the stairs. Something in the dignity of his bow must have moved Buster, because a coin changed hands.

Although a letter from Uncle Giles was by no means unknown, he did not write often; and only when he wanted something done for him: requiring details of an address he had lost, for example, or transmitting an account of some project in which he was commercially interested at that moment and wished recommended to all persons his relations might come across. He possessed a neat, stiff, old-fashioned handwriting, not at all suggestive of vagaries of character. There was usually a card from him at Christmas, undecorated, and very small in size: sent out in plenty of time. When, towards the end of the Michaelmas term, an envelope arrived addressed in his angular hand, I supposed at first that he had now taken to dispatching these Christmas greetings more than a month in advance. 'I am staying in London for some weeks,' he wrote, 'and I should like to see you one evening. After all, I have only three nephews. I dine every night at the Trouville Restaurant. Just drop in. It is very simple, of course, but you get good value for your money. We must take care of the pennies, these days. Any night will do.' Sunny Farebrother, I remembered, had made the same remark about the pennies. The fact that I might not be in a position to 'drop in' to a restaurant in London 'any night' did not appear to have struck my uncle, never very good at grasping principles that might govern other people's lives and movements. His letter was written from Harrods, so that there was no means of sending an answer; and I made up my mind that, even if I were to visit London—as I was doing, so it happened, the following day, to dine with Stringham—I should not spend the evening at the Trouville Restaurant. Uncle Giles did not state the reason for his wish to meet me, which may have sprung from completely disinterested affection for a member of his family not seen for some time. I suspected, perhaps unjustly, that such was not the motive; and, since at that age behaviour of older people seems, more often than not, entirely meaningless, I dismissed Uncle Giles's letter from my mind, as I now think, rather inexcusably. I had not seen Stringham since the summer, and had heard very little from him on the subject of his job. For one reason or another arrangements to meet had fallen through, and I felt, instinctively, that he was passing into an orbit where we should from now on see less of each other. I was thinking about this subject that afternoon, feeling disinclined for work, watching the towers of the neighbouring college, with the leaden sky beyond, when there was a knock on the door.

'Come in.'

It was Le Bas.

'I've been lunching with your Dean,' he said. 'He mentioned your name. I thought I would look you up.'

For some reason I felt enormously surprised to see him standing there. He had passed so utterly from daily life. This surprise was certainly not due to Le Bas having altered in appearance. On the contrary, he looked the same in all respects: except that he seemed to have shrunk slightly in size, and to have developed a kind of deadness I had not remembered in the texture of his skin. He stood by the door, as if he had just glanced in to make sure that no misbehaviour was in progress, and would proceed immediately on his way to other rooms in the college, to see that there, too, all was well. I asked him to sit down. He came farther into the room, but appeared unwilling to seat himself; standing in one of his characteristic poses, holding up both his hands, one a little above the other, like an Egyptian god, or figure from the Bayeux tapestry.

'How are you getting on, Jenkins?' he asked, at last agreeing, though with apparent reluctance, to occupy an armchair. 'You have a nice view from here, I see.'

He rose again, and stared out of the window for a minute or two, at the place where clouds had begun to darken the sky. The sound of undergraduate voices came up from below. Le Bas turned his gaze down on the passers-by.

'I expect you know the story of Calverley throwing pebbles at the Master of Balliol's window,' he said. 'Just to make him look out for the benefit of some visitors. Parkinson was some sort of a connexion of Calverley's, I believe. I saw Parkinson the other day. In fact I rowed in a Duffers' Eight with him. Parkinson was in your time, wasn't he? Or am I confusing dates?'

'Yes, he was. He only went down from here last year.'

'He missed his "blue", didn't he?'

'I think he was only tried out a couple of times.'

'Who else is there from my house?'

'Stringham went down last term.'

'Went down, did he? Was he sent down?'

'No, he——'

'Of course I remember Stringham,' said Le Bas. 'Wrote a shocking hand. Never saw such a fist. What was he sent down for?'

'He wasn't sent down. He got a job with Donners-Brebner. I am going to see him tomorrow.'

'Who else?' insisted Le Bas, who had evidently never heard of Donners-Brebner.

'I saw Templer not long ago. He is in the City now.'

'Templer?' said Le Bas. 'Oh, yes, Templer. In the City, is he? Did he go up to the university?'

'No.'

'Probably just as well,' said Le Bas. 'Still it might have toned him down a bit. I suppose as it is he will spend the rest of his life wearing those startling socks. It was Templer, wasn't it, who always wore those dreadful socks?'

'Yes—it was.'

'Still, he may grow out of it,' said Le Bas.

'Or them,' I said; and, since Le Bas did not smile, added: 'I stayed in the same French family as Widmerpool, the summer after I left.'

'Ah yes, Widmerpool.'

Le Bas thought for a long time. He climbed up on to the fender, and began to lift himself by the edge of the mantelpiece. I thought for a moment that he might be going to hoist himself right on to the shelf; perhaps lie there.

'I was never quite happy about Widmerpool,' he admitted at last.

This statement did not seem to require an answer.

'As you probably know,' said Le Bas, 'there were jokes about an overcoat in the early days.'

'I remember being told something about it.'

'Plenty of keenness, but somehow——'

'He used to train hard.'

'And a strong—well——' Le Bas seemed rather at a loss, ending somewhat abruptly with the words: 'Certain moral qualities, admirable so far as they went, but——'

I supposed he was thinking of the Akworth affair, which must have caused him a good deal of trouble.

'He seemed to be getting on all right when I saw him in France.'

This statement seemed in the main true.

'I am glad to hear it,' said Le Bas. 'Very glad. I hope he will find his level in life. Which college did you say?'

'He didn't go to the university.'

'What is he going to be?'

'A solicitor.'

'Do none of my pupils consider a degree an advantage in life? I hope you will work hard for yours.'

Facetiously, I held up a copy of Stubbs's *Charters* that happened to be lying at hand on the table.

'Do you know Sillery?' I asked.

'Sillery? Sillery? Oh, yes, of course I know Sillery,' Le Bas said; but he did not rise to this bait.

There was a pause.

'Well, I have enjoyed our talk,' Le Bas said. 'I expect I shall see you on Old Boy Day.'

He got up from the chair, and stood for a few seconds, as if undecided whether or not to bring his visit to an end.

'Friendships have to be kept up,' he said, unexpectedly.

I suppose that his presence had recalled—though unconsciously—the day of Braddock alias Thorne; because for some reason, inexplicable to myself, I said: 'Like Heraclitus.'

Le Bas looked surprised.

'You know the poem, do you?' he said. 'Yes, I remember you were rather keen on English.'

Then he turned and made for the door, still apparently pondering the questions that this reference to Heraclitus had aroused in his mind. Having reached the door, he stopped. There was evidently some affirmation he found difficulty in getting out. After several false starts, he said: 'You know, Jenkins, do always try to remember one thing—it takes all sorts to make a world.'

I said that I would try to remember that.

'Good,' said Le Bas. 'You will find it a help.'

I watched him from the window. He walked quickly in the direction of the main entrance of the college: suddenly he turned on his heel and came back, very slowly, towards my staircase, at the foot of which he stopped for about a minute: then he moved off again at a moderate pace in another quarter: finally disappearing from sight, without leaving any impression of decision as to his next port of call. The episode of Braddock alias Thorne, called up by Le Bas's visit, took on a more grotesque aspect than ever, when thought of now. I wondered whether Le Bas had himself truly accepted his own last proposition. Nothing in his behaviour had ever suggested that his chosen principles were built up on a deep appreciation of the diversity of human character. On the contrary, he had always demanded of his pupils certain easily recognisable conventions of conduct: though, at the same time, it occurred to me that the habit of making just such analyses of motive as this was precisely what Le Bas had a moment before so delicately deprecated in myself.

There are certain people who seem inextricably linked in life; so that meeting one acquaintance in the street means that a letter, without fail, will arrive in a day or two from an associate involuntarily harnessed to him, or her, in time. Le Bas's appearance was one of those odd preludes that take place, and give, as it were, dramatic form to occurrences that have more than ordinary significance. It is as if the tempo altered gradually, so that too violent a change of sensation should not take place; in this case, that some of the atmosphere of school should be reconstructed, although only in a haphazard fashion, as if for an amateur performance, in order that I should not meet Stringham in his new surroundings without a reminder of the circumstances in which we had first known one another.

For some reason, during the following day in London, I found myself thinking all the time of Le Bas's visit; although it was long before I came to look upon such transcendental manipulation of surrounding figures almost as a matter of routine. The weather was bad. When the time came, I was glad to find myself in the Donners-Brebner building, although the innate dejection of spirit of that part of London was augmented by regarding its landscape from this huge and shapeless edifice, recently built in a style as wholly without ostensible order as if it were some vast prehistoric cromlech. Stringham's office was on one of the upper storeys, looking north over the river. It was dark now outside, and lights were reflected in the water, from the oppressive and cheerless, as well as beautiful, riverside. Stringham looked well: better than I had seen him for a long time.

'Let's get out of here,' he said.

'I'm a bit late.'

'We'll have a drink.'

'Where shall we make for?'

For a brief second, for an inexpressibly curtailed efflux of time, so short that its duration could be appreciated only in recollection, being immediately engulfed at the moment of birth, I was conscious of a sensation I had never before encountered: an awareness that Stringham was perhaps a trifle embarrassed. He took a step forward, and made as if to pat my head, as one who makes much of an animal.

'There, there,' he said. 'Good dog. Don't growl. The fact is I am cutting your date. Cutting it in slow motion before your eyes.'

'Well?'

'It is an absolutely inexcusable thing to do. I've been asked to rather a good party at short notice—and have to dine and go to a play first. As the party can hardly fail to be rather fun, I thought you wouldn't mind.'

'Of course not.'

'An intolerable act, I admit.'

'Not if it's a good party.'

'I thought the thing to do would be for you to come back and talk while I changed. Then I could drop you wherever you are going to dine.'

'Let's do that.'

I could pretend to Stringham that I did not mind: within, I was exceedingly annoyed. This was quite unlike him. A rearrangement of plans would now be necessary. His car was parked outside. We drove northward.

'How are things at the old coll.?'

'Le Bas visited me yesterday.'

'Our former housemaster?'

'Braddock alias Thorne.'

'Good heavens, I had forgotten all about that.'

'I wonder if he has.'

'Did you tell him how it happened?'

'No.'

'How extraordinary for him to swim to the surface.'

'He asked about you.'

'No?'

Stringham was not interested. Le Bas was scarcely a memory. I began to realise that considerable changes had indeed been taking place.

'What is it like in London?'

'I'm rather enjoying myself. You must come and live here soon.'

'I suppose I shall in due course.'

'Can't you get sent down? No one could stand three years of university life.'

We arrived at the house, and, passing between the pillars of the doorway, collected drinks in the dining-room. Then we went upstairs. The place seemed less gloomy than on my earlier visit. Stringham's bedroom was a rather comfortless apartment, looking out on to the roofs of another row of large houses.

'Who are you dining with?'

'The Bridgnorths.'

'Haven't I seen pictures of a rather captivating daughter called Lady Peggy Stepney?'

'The last photograph was taken at Newmarket. I've been wondering whether it wasn't time for her to get married and settle down,' said Stringham. 'I seem to have been a bachelor an awfully long time.'

'What does Lady Peggy think about it?'

'There are indications that she does not actively dislike me.'

'Why not, then?'

We talked in a desultory way, Stringham walking to and fro, wearing only a stiff shirt, and some black silk socks, while he washed his hands, and brushed his hair. I did not know how serious he might be with regard to the Bridgnorths' daughter. The idea of one of my friends getting married had scarcely occurred to me, even as a possibility. I saw now that such a thing was not absolutely out of the question. From time to time a footman appeared, offering different collars, because Stringham could find none he liked.

'I suppose this must be one of Buster's,' he said, at last accepting a collar that satisfied him. 'I shall sell the rest of mine off cheap to the clergy to wear back-to-front.'

He slipped on his tail-coat, pulling at the cuffs of his shirt.

'Come on,' he said; 'we'll have another drink on the way out.'

'Where is your dinner-party?'

'Grosvenor Square. Where shall I drop you?'

'Grosvenor Square will do for me.'

'But what will you do?'

'Dine with an uncle of mine.'

'Does he live there?'

'No—but he isn't expecting me just yet.'

'He was expecting you then?'

'A standing invitation.'

'So I really haven't left you too high and dry?'

'Not in the least.'

'You are jolly lucky to have relations you can drop in on at any time,' said Stringham. 'My own are much too occupied with their own affairs to care for that.'

'You met Uncle Giles once. He suddenly arrived one night when we were having tea. It was the day of Peter's "unfortunate incident".'

Stringham laughed. He said: 'I remember about Peter, but not about your uncle.'

We reached the car again, and drove for a time in silence. 'We'll meet soon,' Stringham said. 'I suppose you are going back tonight—otherwise we might have lunched tomorrow.'

'I'll be up in a week or two.'

'We will get together then.'

We had reached Grosvenor Square, and he slowed up.

'Now where?'

'I'll climb down here.'

'I expect it will be a really frightful party, and Peggy will have decided not to turn up.'

He waved, and I waved, as the car went on to the far side of the square.

The evening was decidedly cool, and rain was half-heartedly falling. I knew now that this parting was one of those final things that happen, recurrently, as time passes: until at last they may be recognised fairly easily as the close of a period. This was the last I should see of Stringham for a long time. The path had suddenly forked. With regret, I accepted the inevitability of circumstance. Human relationships flourish and decay, quickly and silently, so that those concerned scarcely know how brittle, or how inflexible, the ties that bind them have become. Lady Bridgnorth, by her invitation that night, had effortlessly snapped one of the links—for practical purposes the main one—between Stringham and myself; just as the accident in Templer's car, in a rather different manner, had removed Templer from Stringham's course. A new epoch was opening: in a sense this night was the final remnant of life at school.

I was glad to have remembered Uncle Giles. It was, I suppose, justification of the family as a social group that, upon such an occasion, my uncle's company seemed to offer a restorative in the accidental nature of our relationship and the purely formal regard paid by him to the fact that I was his nephew. Finding a telephone box, I looked up the address of the Trouville Restaurant, which turned out to be in Soho. It was fairly early in the evening. Passing slowly through a network of narrow streets, and travelling some distance, I came at last to the Trouville. The outside was not inviting. The restaurant's façade was boarded up with dull, reddish shutters. At the door hung a table d'hôte menu, slipped into a brass frame that advertised Schweppes' mineral waters—Blanchailles—Potage Solférino—Sole Bercy—Côtelettes d'Agneau Reform—Glace Néapolitaine—Café. The advertised charge seemed very reasonable. The immense depression of this soiled, claret-coloured exterior certainly seemed to meet the case; for there is always something solemn about change, even when accepted.

Within, the room was narrow, and unnaturally long, with a table each side, one after another, stretching in perspective into shadows that hid the service lift: which was set among palms rising from ornate brass pots. The emptiness, dim light, silence—and, to some extent, the smell—created a faintly ecclesiastical atmosphere; so that the track between the tables might have been an aisle, leading, perhaps, to a hidden choir. Uncle Giles himself, sitting alone at the far end of this place, bent over a book, had the air of a sleepy worshipper, waiting for the next service to begin. He did not look specially pleased to see me, and not at all surprised.

'You're a bit late,' he said. 'So I started.'

It had not occurred to him that I should do otherwise than come straight up to London, so soon as informed that there was an opportunity to see him again. He put his book face-downwards on the tablecloth. I saw that it was called *Some Things That Matter*. We discussed the Trust until it was time to catch my train.

A Buyer's Market

For
Osbert and Karen

1.

The last time I saw any examples of Mr. Deacon's work was at a sale, held obscurely in the neighbourhood of Euston Road, many years after his death. The canvases were none of them familiar, but they recalled especially, with all kinds of other things, dinner at the Walpole-Wilsons', reviving with a jerk that phase of early life. They made me think of long-forgotten conflicts and compromises between the imagination and the will, reason and feeling, power and sensuality; together with many more specifically personal sensations, experienced in the past, of pleasure and of pain. Outside, the spring weather was cool and sunny: Mr. Deacon's favourite season of the year. Within doors, propped against three sides of a washstand, the oil-paintings seemed, for some reason, appropriate to those surroundings, dusty, though not displeasing; even suggesting, in their way, the kind of home Mr. Deacon favoured for himself and his belongings: the sitting-room over the shop, for example, informal, not too permanent, more than a trifle decayed. His haunts, I remembered, had bordered on these northern confines of London.

Accumulations of unrelated objects brought together for auction acquire, in their haphazard manner, a certain dignity of their own: items not to be tolerated in any inhabited dwelling finding each its own level in these expansive, anonymous caverns, where, making no claim to individual merit, odds and ends harmonise quietly with each other, and with the general sobriety of background.

Such precincts have something of museums about them, the roving crowd on the whole examining the assembled relics with an expert, unselfconscious intensity, not entirely commercial or acquisitive.

On these particular premises almost every man-made thing seemed represented. Comparatively new mowing machines: scabbardless and rusty cavalry sabres: ebony fragments of African fetish: a nineteenth-century typewriter, poised uncertainly on metal stilts in the midst of a tea-set in Liverpool ware, the black-and-white landscapes of its design irreparably chipped. Several pillows and bolsters covered with the Union Jack gave a disturbing hint that, somewhere beneath, a corpse awaited burial with military honours. Farther off, high rolls of linoleum, coloured blue, green and pink, were ranged against the wall like pillars, a Minoan colonnade from which wicker arm-chairs and much-used pieces of luggage formed a semicircle. Within this open space, placed rather like an emblem arranged for worship, stood the washstand round which the pictures were grouped. On its marble top rested an empty bird-cage, two men-at-arms in lead, probably German, and a dog-eared pile of waltz music. In front of a strip of Axminster carpet, displayed like faded tapestry from the side of a near-by wardrobe in pitch pine, a fourth painting stood upside down.

All four canvases belonged to the same school of large, untidy, exclusively male figure compositions, light in tone and mythological in subject: Pre-Raphaelite in influence without being precisely Pre-Raphaelite in spirit: a compromise between, say, Burne-Jones and Alma-Tadema, with perhaps a touch of Watts in method of applying the paint. One of them—ripping away from its stretcher at the top—was dated 1903. A decided weakness of drawing was emphasised by that certitude—which overtakes, after all, some of the greatest artists—that none of Mr. Deacon's pictures could possibly have been painted at any epoch other than its own: this hallmark of Time being specially attributable to the painter's inclination towards large, blank expanses of colour, often recklessly laid on. Yet, in spite of obvious imperfections, the pictures, as I have said, were not utterly unsympathetic in that situation. Even the forest of inverted legs, moving furiously towards their goal in what appeared to be one of the running events of the Olympic Games, were manifested to what might easily have been greater advantage in that reversed position, conveying, as they did, an immense sense of nervous urgency, the flesh tints of the athletes' straining limbs contrasting strangely with pink and yellow contours of three cupids in debased Dresden who tripped alongside on top of a pedestal cupboard.

In due course two bucolic figures in cloth caps, shirt-sleeves, and green baize aprons held up Mr. Deacon's pictures, one by one, for examination by a small knot of dealers: a depressed gang of men, looking as if they had strayed into that place between more congenial interludes on the race-course. I was not sure how this display might strike other people, and was glad, when exposure took place, that no unfriendly comment was aroused. The prodigious size of the scenes depicted might in itself reasonably have provoked laughter; and, although by that time I knew enough of Mr. Deacon to regard his painting as nothing more serious than one of a number of other warring elements within him, open ridicule of his work would have been distressing. However, all four elevations were received, one after another, in apathetic silence; although the 'lot' was finally knocked down for a few pounds only, bidding was reasonably brisk: possibly on account of the frames, which were made of some black substance, ornamented with gold in a floral pattern, conceivably of the painter's own design.

Mr. Deacon must have visited the house at least half a dozen times when I was a child, occasions when, by some unlikely chance, I had seen and spoken with him more than once; though I do not know why our paths should have crossed in this manner, because he was always reported 'not to like children', so that our meetings, such as they were, would not have been deliberately arranged on the part of my parents. My father, amused by his conversation, was in the habit of referring to Mr. Deacon's painting without enthusiasm; and when, as he sometimes did, Mr. Deacon used to assert that he preferred to keep—rather than sell—his own works, the remark usually aroused mildly ironical comment at home after he was gone. It would not be fair, however, to suggest that, professionally, Mr. Deacon was unable to find a market for his classical subjects. On the contrary, he could always name several faithful patrons, mostly business people from the Midlands. One of these, especially, spoken of as a 'big iron man'—whom I used to envisage as physically constructed of the metal from which he derived his income—would, for example, come down from Lancashire once a year: always returning northward in possession of an oil sketch of Antinous, or sheaf of charcoal studies of Spartan youth at exercise. According to Mr. Deacon, one of these minor works had even found its way into the ironmaster's local art gallery, a fulfilment which evidently gave great satisfaction to the painter; although Mr. Deacon would mention the matter in a deprecatory sort of way, because he disapproved of what he called 'official art', and used to speak with great bitterness of the Royal Academy. When I met him in later life I discovered that he disliked the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists almost equally; and was, naturally, even more opposed to later trends like Cubism, or the works of the Surrealists. In fact Puvis de Chavannes and Simeon Solomon, the last of whom I think he regarded as his master, were the only painters I ever heard him speak of with unqualified approval. Nature had no doubt intended him to be in some manner an adjunct to the art movement of the Eighteen-Nineties; but somehow Mr. Deacon had missed that spirit in his youth: a moral separateness that perhaps accounted for a later lack of integration.

He was not rich; although his income, in those days, allowed the preservation of a fairly independent attitude towards the more material side of being an artist. He had once, for example, turned down the opportunity to decorate the interior of a fish restaurant in Brighton—where he lived—on grounds that the sum offered was incommensurate with the demeaning nature of the work demanded. His means had also enabled him to assemble what was said to be an excellent little collection of hour-glasses, silhouettes, and bric-à-brac of various kinds. At the same time he liked to describe how, from time to time, in order to avoid the expense and responsibility of domestic staff, he deliberately underwent long periods of undertaking his own cooking. 'I could always earn my living as a chef,' he used to say; adding, in joke, that he would look 'enormously ornamental' in a white cap. When travelling on the Continent he commonly went on foot with a haversack on his back, rather than by trains, which he found 'stuffy and infinitely filled with tedious persons'. He was careful, even rather fussy, about his health, especially in relation to personal cleanliness and good sanitation; so that some of the more sordid aspects of these allegedly *terre-à-terre* excursions abroad must at times have been a trial to him. Perhaps his Continental visits were, in fact, more painful for managers of hotels and restaurants frequented by him; for he was a great believer in insisting absolutely upon the minute observance by others of his own wishes. Such habits of travelling, in so much as they were indeed voluntary and not to some degree enforced by financial consideration, were no doubt also connected in his mind with his own special approach to social behaviour, in which he was guided by an aversion, often expressed, for conduct that might be looked upon either as conventional or conservative.

In this last respect Mr. Deacon went further than my Uncle Giles, whose creed of being 'a bit of a radical' was also well publicised within his own family circle; or, indeed, wherever he might find himself. My uncle, however, dealt in substance he knew and, although he would never have admitted as much, even to some extent revered, merely desiring most aspects of that familiar world to be more nicely adjusted to his own taste. Mr. Deacon, on the other hand, was in favour of abolishing, or ignoring, the existing world entirely, with a view to experimenting with one of an entirely different order. He was a student of Esperanto (or, possibly, one of the lesser-known artificial languages), intermittently vegetarian, and an advocate of decimal coinage. At the same time he was strongly opposed to the introduction of 'spelling reform' for the English language (on grounds that for him such changes would mar *Paradise Lost*), and I can remember it said that he hated 'suffragettes'.

These preferences, with the possible exception of decimal coinage, would have been regarded as mere quirks in my uncle; but, as they were presented in what was almost always a moderately entertaining manner, they were tolerated by my parents to a far greater degree than were similar prejudices disseminated by Uncle Giles, whose heartily deplored opinions were naturally associated in the minds of most of his relatives with threat of imminent financial worry for themselves, not to mention potential scandal within the family. In any case, aggressive personal opinions, whatever their kind, might justly be regarded as uncalled for, or at best allowed only slight weight, when voiced by a man whose career had been so uniformly unsuccessful as had that of my uncle. Mr. Deacon's persuasions, on the other hand, could be regarded with tolerance as part of the stock-in-trade of a professional artist, by no means a failure in life, and to be accepted, however unwillingly, as the inevitable adjunct of a Bohemian profession: even valuable in their way as illustrating another side of human experience.

At the same time, although no doubt they rather enjoyed his occasional visits, my parents legitimately considered Mr. Deacon an eccentric, who, unless watched carefully, might develop into a bore, and it would not be precisely true to say that they liked him; although I believe that, in his way, Mr. Deacon liked both of them. The circumstances of their first meeting were unrecorded. An introduction may have taken place at one of the concerts held at the Pavilion, which they sometimes attended when my father was stationed near Brighton in the years before the war. During that period a call was certainly paid on Mr. Deacon in his studio: several small rooms converted to that use at the top of a house in one of the quiet squares remote from 'the front'. He had chosen this retired position because the sight of the sea disturbed him at his work: a prejudice for which psychological explanation would now certainly be available.

I never saw the studio myself, but often heard it spoken of as well stocked with curiosities of one kind or another. We moved from that neighbourhood before the war came in 1914, and, I suppose, lost touch with Mr. Deacon; but for a long time I remembered the impression of height he gave when, one day after tea, he presented me with a wooden paint-box—the pigments contained in tubes—the heavy scent of the tobacco he smoked hanging round the pleats and belt of his Norfolk jacket, a garment already beginning to look a little old-fashioned, and the sound of his voice, deep and earnest, while he explained the range of colours to be found within the box, and spoke of the principles of light and shade: principles—I could not help reflecting as I examined the canvases in the sale-room—which his brush must have so often and so violently abused.

By the stage of life when I happened on these four pictures, I had, of course, during our brief latter-day acquaintance, had opportunity to observe Mr. Deacon in surroundings rather different from my parents' domestic interior, where I had first heard his peculiarities discussed; and I had also, by the time I found myself in the auction-room, talked over his character with persons like Barnby, who knew him at closer range than I myself ever experienced. All the same, I could not help pondering once again the discrepancy that existed between a style of painting that must have been unfashionable, and at best aridly academic, even in his early days; and its contrast with the revolutionary principles that he preached and—in spheres other than æsthetic—to some considerable extent practised. I wondered once again whether this apparent inconsistency of approach, that had once disconcerted me, symbolised antipathetic sides of his nature; or whether his life and work and judgment at some point coalesced with each other, resulting in a standpoint that was really all of a piece—as he himself would have said—that 'made a work of art'.

Certainly I could not decide that question there and then in the auction-room among the furniture and linoleum, to the sound of bidding and taps of the hammer, even in the light of later circumstances in which I had known him; and I have never really succeeded in coming to a positive conclusion on the subject. Undoubtedly his painting, in its own direction, represented the farthest extremity of Mr. Deacon's romanticism; and I suppose it could be argued that upon such debris of classical imagery the foundations of at least certain specific elements of twentieth-century art came to be built. At the same time lack of almost all imaginative quality in Mr. Deacon's painting resulted, finally, in a product that suggested not 'romance'—far less 'classicism'—as some immensely humdrum pattern of everyday life: the Greek and Roman episodes in which he dealt belonging involuntarily to a world of cosy bar-parlours and 'nice cups of tea'—'At least when thought of,' as Barnby used to say, 'in terms of pictorial reproduction in, say, photogravure'—even though Barnby himself, in some moods, would attempt a defence at least of certain aspects of Mr. Deacon's art. In short, the pictures recalled something given away with a Christmas Number, rather than the glories of Sunium's marbled steep, or that blue Sicilian sea that had provided a back-cloth for the Victorian Hellenism propagated at school by my housemaster, Le Bas. Mr. Deacon's painting might, indeed, have been compared, though at a greatly inferior level of the imagination's faculties, with Le Bas's day-dreams of Hellas; and perhaps, in the last resort, Mr. Deacon, too, would have been wiser to have chosen teaching as a career. Undeniably there was something didactic about his manner, although, as a child, I had naturally never speculated on his idiosyncrasies, of which I knew only by hearing them particularised by my parents or the servants.

This touch of pedantry had been apparent at a later date, when we ran across Mr. Deacon in the Louvre, during summer holidays taken soon after the termination of the war, when my father was still on duty in Paris. That afternoon, although I did not immediately recognise him, I had already wondered who might be the tall, lean, rather bent figure, moving restlessly about at the far end of the gallery; and his name, spoken again after so many years, at once identified him in my mind. When we had come up with him he was inspecting with close attention Perugino's St. Sebastian, for the better examination of which, stooping slightly, he had just produced a small magnifying-glass with a gold rim. He wore a thickish pepper-and-salt suit—no longer cut with belt and side-pleats—and he carried in his hand a hat, broad-brimmed and furry, the general effect of the whole outfit being, perhaps intentionally, a trifle down-at-heel: together with the additionally disturbing suggestion that his slightly curved torso might be enclosed within some form of imperfectly fitting corset. His grey hair, which needed cutting, was brushed straight back, showing off a profile distinguished rather than otherwise: a little like that of an actor made up to play the part of Prospero, the face heavily lined and grave, without conveying any sense of dejection.

He recognised my parents at once, greeting them with an odd, stilted formality, again like an old-fashioned actor's. My father—who was not in uniform—began to explain that he was attached to the staff of the Conference. Mr. Deacon, listening with an absorbed expression, failed or, perhaps it would be truer to say, pretended for reasons of his own to misunderstand the nature of this employment. In his resonant, faintly ironical voice, he asked: 'And what might you be conferring about?'

At that period Paris was full of missions and delegates, emissaries and plenipotentiaries of one kind and another, brought there by the traffic of the Peace Treaty; and probably my father could not imagine why Mr. Deacon should appear to want further details about his job (which had, I believe, something to do with disarmament), a matter which could, after all, at least in its details, be only of professional interest. He certainly did not guess that Mr. Deacon must have decided for the moment to close his eyes to the Conference, together with much—if not all—that had led to its existence; or, at least, preferred, anyway at that juncture, to ignore all its current circumstances. My father's reply, no doubt intentionally discreet, was therefore worded in general terms; and the explanation, so far as could be seen, took Mr. Deacon no farther in discovering why we were at that hour in the Louvre.

'In connexion with those *expositions* the French love so much?' he suggested. 'So you are no longer *militaire?*'

'As a matter of fact, they have not given nearly so much trouble as you might expect,' said my father, who must have taken this query to be a whimsical manner of referring to some supposed form of intransigence over negotiation on the part of the French staff-officer constituting his 'opposite number'.

'I don't know much about these things,' Mr. Deacon admitted.

The matter rested there, foundations of conversation changing to the delineation of St. Sebastian: Mr. Deacon suddenly showing an unexpected grasp of military hierarchy—at least of a somewhat obsolete order—by pointing out that the Saint, holding as he did the rank of centurion—and being, therefore, a comparatively senior non-commissioned or warrant officer—probably possessed a less youthful and altogether more rugged appearance than that attributed to him by Perugino: and, indeed, commonly, by most other painters of hagiographical subjects. Going on to speak more generally of the Peruginos to be found throughout the rest of the gallery, Mr. Deacon alleged that more than one was labelled "Raphael'. We did not dispute this assertion. Questioned as to how long he had himself been living in Paris, Mr. Deacon was vague; nor was it clear how he had occupied himself during the war, the course of which he seemed scarcely to have noticed. He implied that he had 'settled abroad' more or less permanently; anyway, for a long time.

'There really are moments when one feels one has more in common with the French than with one's own countrymen,' he said. 'Their practical way of looking at things appeals to a certain side of me—though perhaps not the best side. If you want something here, the question is: Have you got the money to pay for it? If the answer is "yes", all is well; if "no", you have to go without. Besides, there is a freer atmosphere. That is something that revolutions do. There is really nowhere else in the world like Paris.'

He was living, he told us, 'in a little place off the Boul' Mich'.'

'I'm afraid I can't possibly ask you there in its present state,' he added. 'Moving in always takes an age. And I have so many treasures.'

He shook his head after an enquiry regarding his painting.

'Much more interested in my collections now,' he said. 'One of the reasons I am over here is that I have been doing a little buying for friends as well as for myself.'

'But I expect you keep your own work up now and then.'

'After all, why should one go on adding to the detritus in this transitory world?' asked Mr. Deacon, raising his shoulders and smiling. 'Still I sometimes take a sketch-book to a café—preferably some little estaminet in one of the working-class quarters. One gets a good head here, and a vigorous pose there. I collect heads—and necks—as you may remember.'

He excused himself politely, though quite definitely, from an invitation to luncheon at the Interallié, a club of which he had, apparently, never heard; though he complained that Paris was more expensive than formerly, expressing at the same time regret at the 'Americanisation' of the Latin Quarter.

'I sometimes think of moving up to Montmartre, like an artist of Whistler's time,' he said.

Conversation waned after this. He asked how long we were staying in France, seeming, if anything, relieved to hear that we should all of us be back in England soon. On parting, there was perhaps a suggestion that the encounter had been, for no obvious reason, a shade uncomfortable; in this respect not necessarily worse than such meetings are apt to turn out between persons possessing little in common who run across each other after a long separation, and have to rely on common interests, by then half-forgotten. This faint sense of tension may also have owed something to Mr. Deacon's apparent unwillingness to go even so far in comparing autobiographical notes as might have been thought allowably free from the smallest suggestion of an undue display of egotism; especially when conversation was limited chiefly because one side lacked any idea of what the other had been doing for a number of years.

'I was glad to see Deacon again,' my father said afterwards, when, that afternoon, we were on our way to tea at the Walpole-Wilsons' flat in Passy. 'He looked a lot older.'

That must have been almost the last time that I heard either of my parents refer to Mr. Deacon or his affairs.

However, the meeting at the Louvre, among other experiences of going abroad for the first time, remained in my mind as something rather important. Mr. Deacon's reappearance at that season seemed not only to indicate divorce of maturity from childhood, but also to emphasise the dependence of those two states one upon the other. 'Grown-up' in the 'old days', Mr. Deacon was grown-up still: I myself, on the other hand, had changed. There was still distance to travel, but I was on the way to drawing level with Mr. Deacon, as a fellow grown-up, himself no longer a figment of memory from childhood, but visible proof that life had existed in much the same way before I had begun to any serious extent to take part; and would, without doubt, continue to prevail long after he and I had ceased to participate. In addition to this appreciation of his status as a kind of milestone on the winding and dusty road of existence, I found something interesting—though not entirely comfortable—about Mr. Deacon's personality. He had given me a long, appraising glance when we shook hands, an action in itself, for some reason, rather unexpected, and later he had asked which were my favourite pictures in the gallery, and elsewhere, in the same deep, grave voice with which he had formerly explained his views on tone values: listening to the reply as if the information there contained might possess considerable importance for himself.

This apparent deference to what was necessarily unformed opinion seemed so flattering that I remembered him clearly long after our return to England; and, six or seven years later, when I saw the signature 'E. Bosworth Deacon' in the corner of an oil-painting that hung high on the wall of the innermost part of the hall in the Walpole-Wilsons' house in Eaton Square, the atmosphere of that occasion in the Louvre, the talk about the Conference and St. Sebastian, the feeling of constraint—of embarrassment, almost—the visit, later in the day, to the Walpole-Wilsons themselves, came back all at once very clearly: even the illusion of universal relief that belonged to that historical period: of war being, surprisingly, at an end: of the imminence of 'a good time': of all that odd sense of intellectual emancipation that belonged, or, at least, seemed, perhaps rather spuriously, to belong, to the art of that epoch: its excitement and its melancholy mingling with kaleidoscopic impressions of a first sight of Paris. All these thoughts briefly and speedily suggested themselves, when, taking off my overcoat on my first visit to the house in Eaton Square—after I had come to live in London—I observed Mr. Deacon's picture. The canvas, comparatively small for a 'Deacon', evidently not much considered by its owners, had been placed beyond the staircase above a Victorian barometer in a polished mahogany case. The subject was in a similar vein to those other scenes lying in the sale-room: the gold tablet at the foot of the frame baldly stating, without mentioning the artist's name, *'Boyhood of Cyrus'*. This was, in fact, the first 'Deacon' I had ever set eyes upon.

The importance that *Boyhood of Cyrus* eventually assumed had, however, nothing to do with the painter, or the merits, such as they were, of the picture itself: its significance being attained simply and solely as symbol of the probable physical proximity of Barbara Goring, Lady Walpole-Wilson's niece. This association of ideas was, in deed, so powerful that even years after I had ceased to be a guest at the Walpole-Wilson table I could not hear the name 'Cyrus' mentioned—fortunately, in the circumstances, a fairly rare occurrence in everyday life—without being reminded of the pains of early love; while at the time of which I write almost any oil-painting illustrative of a remotely classical scene (such as one sees occasionally in the windows of dealers round St. James's normally specialising in *genre* pictures) would be liable to recall the fact, if by some unlikely chance forgotten, that I had not seen Barbara for a longer or shorter period.

I must have been about twenty-one or twenty-two at the time, and held then many rather wild ideas on the subject of women: conceptions largely the result of having read a good deal without simultaneous opportunity to modify by personal experience the recorded judgment of others upon that matter: estimates often excellent in their conclusions if correctly interpreted, though requiring practical knowledge to be appreciated at their full value.

At school I had known Tom Goring, who had later gone into the Sixtieth, and, although we had never had much to do with each other, I remembered some story of Stringham's of how both of them had put up money to buy a crib for Horace—or another Latin author whose works they were required to render into English—and of trouble that ensued from the translation supplied having contained passages omitted in the official educational text-book. This fact of her elder brother having been my contemporary—the younger son, David, was still at school—may perhaps have had something to do with finding myself, immediately after our first meeting, on good terms with Barbara; though the matter of getting on well with young men in no circumstances presented serious difficulty to her.

'Do be quick, if you are going to ask me for a dance,' she had said, when her cousin, Eleanor Walpole-Wilson, had first introduced us. 'I can't wait all night while you make up your mind.'

I was, I must admit, enchanted on the spot by this comportment, which I found far from discouraging. On some earlier occasion a dowager had referred to Barbara in my presence as 'that rather noisy little Goring girl', and the description was a just one. She was small and dark, with hair cut in a square 'bob', which—other girls used to complain—was always hopelessly untidy. Her restlessness was of that deceptive kind that usually indicates a fundamental deficiency, rather than surplus of energy, though I cannot claim, either in principle, or with particular reference to Barbara herself, to have speculated on this diagnosis until many years later. I remember, however, that when we met fortuitously in Hyde Park one Sunday afternoon quite a long time later (as it seemed to me), I still retained some sense of proportion about her, although we had by then seen a good deal of each other. She was walking in the Park that afternoon with Eleanor Walpole-Wilson, fated apparently to be witness of the various stages of our relationship. I had not managed to get away from London that week-end, and to fall in by chance with these two seemed a wonderful piece of luck. That was the last day for many months that I woke up in the morning without immediately thinking of Barbara.

'Oh, what fun to meet like this,' she had said.

I felt immediately a sense of extraordinary exhilaration at this harmless remark. It was June, and there had been rain the day before, so that the grass smelt fresh and luxuriant. The weather, though warm, was not disagreeably hot. The precise location of our meeting was a spot not far from the Achilles statue. We strolled, all three, towards Kensington Gardens. The Row was empty. Sparkles of light radiated this way and that from the clusters of white statuary and nodular gilt pinnacles of the Albert Memorial, towards which we were steadily moving. Eleanor Walpole-Wilson, a square, broad-shouldered girl, rather above the average in height, wore her hair plaited in a bun at the back, which always looked as if it were about to come down at any moment: and did sometimes, in fact, descend piecemeal. She had brought with her Sultan, a labrador, and was trying to train this dog by blasts on a whistle, which she accompanied with harsh, monosyllabic shouting. That enterprise, the training of Sultan, was in keeping with Eleanor's habit of behaviour, as she was always accustomed to act, in principle, as if London were the country: an exercise of will she rarely relaxed.

We ascended the steps of the Albert Memorial and inspected the figures of the Arts and Sciences loitering in high relief round the central mass of that monument. Eleanor, still blowing her whistle fitfully, made some comment regarding the muscles of the bearded male figure belonging to the group called 'Manufactures' which caused Barbara to burst out laughing. This happened on the way down the steps at the south-east corner, approaching the statues symbolising Asia, where, beside the kneeling elephant, the Bedouin forever rests on his haunches in hopeless contemplation of Kensington Gardens' trees and thickets, the blackened sockets of his eyes ranging endlessly over the rich foliage of these oases of the mirage.

For some reason Eleanor's words seemed immensely funny at that moment. Barbara stumbled, and, for a brief second, took my arm. It was then, perhaps, that a force was released, no less powerful for its action proving somewhat delayed; for emotions of that kind are not always immediately grasped. We sat on chairs for a time; and then walked to the north side of the park, in the direction of the Budds' house in Sussex Square, where the girls were invited to tea. When I said good-bye at the gates I experienced a sense of unaccountable loss, similar in its suddenness to that earlier exhilaration of our meeting. The rest of the day dragged, that feeling of anxiety—which haunts youth so much more than maturity—descending, coupled with almost unbearable nervous fatigue. I dined alone, and retired early to bed.

My parents' acquaintance—not a very close one—with the Walpole-Wilsons dated from that same period of the Peace Conference during which we had run across Mr. Deacon in the Louvre, a time when Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson had also been working in Paris. He had by then already left the Diplomatic Service, and was associated with some voluntary organisation—of dubious practical importance, so my father used to hint—devoted to the assistance of certain specialised categories of refugee; for Sir Gavin's career had been brought to a close soon after receiving his K.C.M.G., as Minister to a South American republic. There had been trouble connected with the dispatch of a telegram; His Majesty's Government, so it subsequently appeared, having already recognised the Leader of the Opposition as Head of the State in place of the Junta that had enjoyed power for some years previously. It was generally agreed that Sir Gavin, whatever the misdemeanour, had been guilty of nothing worse than a perfectly correct effort to 'keep in' with both sides: coupled, possibly, with a certain denseness of comprehension regarding potential fallibility of Foreign Secretaries, and changes recently observable in the political stature of General Gomez; but he had taken the matter to heart, and resigned. Pressure from above may have made this course involuntary, a point upon which opinion varied.

Although not at all inclined to under-estimate the personal part he had played in the Councils of Europe, or, indeed, of the World, Sir Gavin was apt to give the impression that he was always anxious, even in the smallest matters, to justify himself; so that an air of supposing life to have treated him less generously than his talents deserved made him, although a far more forceful personality, sometimes seem to resemble Uncle Giles. He was, for example, also fond of proclaiming that he set little store by rank—rank, at least, when contrasted with ability—a taste which he shared with my uncle. It was possible that in days before his marriage Sir Gavin may have suffered similar financial anxieties, for I believe his own family had been far from rich, with difficulty scraping together the money then required for entering the Diplomatic Service. After retirement—I had, of course, not known him before—he wore his hair rather long, and favoured loose, shaggy suits. A firm belief that things were more likely than not to go wrong was another characteristic of Sir Gavin's approach to life, induced no doubt by his own regrets. Indeed, he could not be entirely absolved from suspicion of rather enjoying the worst when it happened: at times almost of engineering disaster of a purely social kind.

'For lust of knowing what we should not know,' he was fond of intoning, 'we take the Golden Road to Samarkand.'

This quotation may have offered to his mind some explanation of human adversity, though scarcely applicable in his own case, as he was a man singularly lacking in intellectual curiosity, and it was generally supposed that the inopportune step in his career had been the result of too much caution rather than any disposition to experiment in that exploration, moral or actual, to which the lines seem to refer. That trait, as it happened, was more noticeable in his wife. She was one of the two daughters of Lord Aberavon, a shipping magnate, now deceased, to whom, as I had discovered in due course, *Boyhood of Cyrus* had once belonged; Mr. Deacon's picture, for some inexplicable reason, being almost the sole residue from wholesale disposal on the collector's death of an accumulation of paintings unsympathetic to the taste of a later generation. Lady Walpole-Wilson suffered from 'nerves', though less oppressively than her sister, Barbara's mother, who even regarded herself as a semi-invalid on that account. Indeed, I had scarcely ever seen Lady Goring, or her husband: for, like his niece, Eleanor, Lord Goring shunned London whenever possible. He was said to be an expert on scientific methods of cultivation, and possessed an experimental fruit farm that was, I believe, rather famous for daring methods.

Uncle Giles was fond of calling people richer or in a general way more advantageously placed than himself, against whom he could at the same time level no specifically disparaging charge, 'well connected enough, I don't doubt', a descriptive phrase which he would sometimes indiscriminately apply; but I suppose that the Gorings might truthfully have been so labelled. They used to take a house in Upper Berkeley Street for the first part of the summer, though dinner-parties were rare there, and not as a rule convivial. Most of the responsibility for Barbara's 'season' fell on her aunt, who probably regarded her niece's lively character as an alleviation of difficulties posed by her own daughter, rather than any additional burden on the household.

Lady Walpole-Wilson, for whom I felt a decided affection, was a tall, dark, distinguished-looking woman, with doe-like eyes, to whose appearance some vice-regal or ambassadorial marriage seemed appropriate. Her comparative incapacity to control her own dinner-parties, at which she was almost always especially discomposed, seemed to me a kind of mute personal protest against circumstances—in the shape of her husband's retirement—having deprived her of the splendours, such as they were, of that position in life owed to her statuesque presence; for in those days I took a highly romantic view, not only of love, but also of such things as politics and government: supposing, for example, that eccentricity and ineptitude were unknown in circles where they might, in fact, be regarded—at least so far as the official entertaining of all countries is concerned—almost as the rule rather than the exception. I can now see that Lady Walpole-Wilson's past experience may have made her aware of this tendency on the part of wives of distinguished public figures to be unable, or unwilling, to make suitable hostesses: a knowledge, coupled with her natural diffidence, that caused her to give an impression sometimes that at all costs she would like to escape from her own house: not because dispensation of hospitality was in itself in the least disagreeable to her as much as on account of accumulated memories from the past of wounded feelings when matters had 'gone wrong'.

To these sentiments was no doubt added the self-inflicted embarrassment implicit in the paraphernalia of launching a daughter—and, if it could be remarked without unkindness, 'what a daughter'—on to an obdurate world; not to mention grappling with purely hypothetical questions, such as the enigma, universally insoluble, of what other mothers would think of the manner in which she herself, as a mother, was sustaining this load of care. In this last affliction Sir Gavin's attitude was often of no great help, and it is hard to say whether either of them really believed that Eleanor, who had always been more or less of a 'problem'—there were endless stories of nose-bleeds and headaches—would ever find a husband. Eleanor had always disliked feminine pursuits. When we had met in Paris before either of us had grown up, she had told me that she would at that moment much prefer to be staying with her cousins in Oxfordshire: an attitude of mind that had culminated in detestation of dances. This resentment, since I had known her in those early days, did not seem as strange to me as to many of the young men who encountered her for the first time at the dinner-table, where she could be both abrupt and sulky. Barbara used to say: 'Eleanor should never have been removed from the country. It is cruelty to animals.' She was also fond of remarking: 'Eleanor is not a bad old girl when you get to know her,' a statement unquestionably true; but, since human life is lived largely at surface level, that encouraging possibility, true or false, did not appreciably lighten the burden of Eleanor's partners.

The Walpole-Wilsons, accordingly, provided not only the foundation, but frequently the immediate locality, also, for my association with Barbara, whom I used to meet fairly often at dances, after our walk together in the park. Sometimes we even saw a film together, or went to a matinée. That was in the summer. When she came to London for a few weeks before Christmas, we met again. By the opening of the following May I was beginning to wonder how the situation was to be resolved. Such scuffles as had, once in a way, taken place between us, on the comparatively rare occasions when we found ourselves alone together, were not exactly encouraged by her; in fact she seemed only to like an intermittent attack for the pleasure of repulsing it. Certainly such aggression carried neither of us any farther. She liked ragging; but ragging—and nothing more—these rough-and-tumbles remained. 'Don't get sentimental,' she used to say; and, so far as it went, avoidance of sentiment—as much as avoidance of sentimentality—appeared, on her side, a genuine inclination.

This affair with Barbara, although taking up less than a year, seemed already to have occupied a substantial proportion of my life; because nothing establishes the timelessness of Time like those episodes of early experience seen, on re-examination at a later period, to have been crowded together with such unbelievable closeness in the course of a few years; yet equally giving the illusion of being so infinitely extended during the months when actually taking place.

My frame of mind—perhaps I should say the state of my heart—remained unchanged, and dances seemed pointless unless Barbara was present. During that summer *Boyhood of Cyrus* developed its mystic significance, representing on my arrival in front of it a two-to-one chance of seeing Barbara at dinner. If we both ate at the Walpole-Wilsons', she was at least under my eye. She herself was always quite unaware of the sentimental meaning thus attached to Mr. Deacon's picture. When first asked about it, she could not for a long time make out what picture I spoke of; and once, when we were both in the hall at the same time and I drew her attention to where it hung, she assured me that she had never before noticed its existence. Eleanor was equally vague on the subject.

'Are they going bathing?' she had asked. 'I don't care for it.'

This matter of being able to establish Barbara's whereabouts for a specific number of hours brought at least limited relief from agonies of ignorance as to what her movements might be, with consequent inability to exercise control over her in however slight a degree; for love of that sort—the sort where the sensual element has been reduced to a minimum—must after all, largely if not entirely, resolve itself to the exercise of power: a fact of which Barbara was, of course, more aware than I.

These torments, as I have said, continued for a number of months, sometimes with great severity; and then one afternoon, when I was correcting proofs in the office, Barbara rang up and asked if I would dine at Eaton Square that evening for the Huntercombes' dance. I decided immediately that I would put off Short (an undergraduate acquaintance, who had now become a civil servant), with whom, earlier in the week, I had arranged to have a meal, and at once agreed to come. I had experienced the usual feeling of excitement while talking with her on the telephone; but suddenly as I hung up the receiver—thinking that perhaps I had left Short rather ruthlessly in the lurch so far as his evening was concerned—I found myself wondering whether I was still in love. Barbara's voice had sounded so peremptory, and it was clear that someone else had failed her at the last moment. In that there was, of course, nothing to be taken reasonably amiss. Obviously I could not expect to sit next to her at dinner every night of our lives—unless I married her; perhaps not even then. And yet my heart seemed a shade lighter. Was the fever passing? I was myself still barely conscious of its declension. I had not at that time met Barnby, nor had opportunity to digest one of his favourite maxims: 'A woman always overplays her hand.'

I had, naturally, given a good deal of thought at one time or another to the question of love. Barbara did not represent the first attack. There had been, for example, Peter Templer's sister, Jean, and Madame Leroy's niece, Suzette; but Jean and Suzette now seemed dim, if desirable, memories; and I felt, for no particular reason, more sure now of the maturity of my approach. At the same time there was certainly little to boast about in my handling of the problem of Barbara. I could not even make up my mind—should anything of the sort have been practicable—whether or not I really wanted to marry her. Marriage appeared something remote and forbidding, with which desire for Barbara had little or no connexion. She seemed to exist merely to disturb my rest: to be possessed neither by lawful nor unlawful means: made of dreams, yet to be captured only by reality. Such, at least, were the terms in which I thought of her as I approached the Walpole-Wilsons' that evening.

Taxis were drawing up in the late sunshine before several of the houses in the square, and young men in tails and girls in evening dress, looking rather selfconscious in the bright daylight, were paying fares or ringing front-door bells. It was that stagnant London weather without a breath of air. One might almost have been in the Tropics. Even Archie Gilbert, who had immediately preceded me in the hall—he had never been known to be late for dinner—looked that night as if he might be feeling the heat a little. His almost invisibly fair moustache suggested the same piqué material as the surface of his stiff shirt; and, as usual, he shed about him an effect of such unnatural cleanliness that some secret chemical process seemed to have been applied, in preparation for the party, both to himself and his clothes: making body and its dazzling integument, sable and argent rather than merely black and white, proof against smuts and dust. Shirt, collar, tie, waistcoat, handkerchief, and gloves were like snow: all these trappings, as always, apparently assumed for the first time: even though he himself looked a shade pinker than usual in the face owing to the oppressive climatic conditions.

His whole life seemed so irrevocably concentrated on 'débutante dances' that it was impossible to imagine Archie Gilbert finding any tolerable existence outside a tail-coat. I could never remember attending any London dance that could possibly be considered to fall within the category named, at which he had not also been present for at least a few minutes; and, if two or three balls were held on the same evening, it always turned out that he had managed to look in at each one of them. During the day he was said to 'do something in the City'—the phrase 'non-ferrous metals' had once been hesitantly mentioned in my presence as applicable, in some probably remote manner, to his daily employment. He himself never referred to any such subordination, and I used sometimes to wonder whether this putative job was not, in reality, a polite fiction, invented on his own part out of genuine modesty, of which I am sure he possessed a great deal, in order to make himself appear a less remarkable person than in truth he was: even a kind of superhuman ordinariness being undesirable, perhaps, for true perfection in this rôle of absolute normality which he had chosen to play with such *éclat*. He was unthinkable in everyday clothes; and he must, in any case, have required that rest and sleep during the hours of light which his nocturnal duties could rarely, if ever, have allowed him. He seemed to prefer no one woman—débutante or chaperone—to another; and, although not indulging in much conversation, as such, he always gave the impression of being at ease with, or without, words; and of having danced at least once with every one of the three or four hundred girls who constituted, in the last resort, the final cause, and only possible justification, of that social organism. He appeared also to be known by name, and approved, by the mother of each of these girls: in a general way, as I have said, getting on equally well with mothers and daughters.

Even Eleanor's consistently severe manner with young men was modified appreciably for Archie Gilbert, and we had hardly arrived in the drawing-room before she was asking him to help her in the forcible return of Sultan to the huge wicker hutch, occupying one complete corner of the room, in which the labrador had his being. Together Archie Gilbert and Eleanor dragged back the dog, while Sultan thumped his tail noisily on the carpet, and Lady Walpole-Wilson protested a little that the struggle would mar the beauty of Archie Gilbert's clothes.

Her own eagerness of manner always suggested that Lady Walpole-Wilson would have enjoyed asking congenial people to her parties if only she could have found people who were, indeed, congenial to her; and she was, of course, not the only hostess who must, from time to time, have suffered a twinge of misgiving on account of more than one of the young men who formed the shifting male population of the London ballrooms. Supposing most other people to live a more amusing life than herself, her humility in this respect was combined with a trust, never entirely relinquished, that with a different collection of guests in the house things might take a turn for the better. This inward condition, in which hope and despair constantly gave place to one another, undeniably contributed to a lack of ease in her drawing-room.

Sir Gavin was moving about dramatically even rather tragically in the background. He was, as I have suggested, inclined to affect a few mild eccentricities of dress. That evening, for example, he was wearing an old-fashioned straight-ended white tie like a butler's: his large, almost square horn-rimmed spectacles, tanned complexion, and moustache, bristling, but at the same time silky, giving him a rather fierce expression, like that of an angry rajah. Although deeper-chested and more weather-beaten, he certainly recalled Uncle Giles. Walking, as he did at times, with a slight limp, the cause of which was unknown to me—possibly it was assumed to indicate a certain state of mind—he took my arm almost fiercely, rather as if acting in an amateur production of Shakespeare; and, no doubt because he prided himself on putting young men at their ease, drew my attention to another guest, already arrived in the room before Archie Gilbert and myself. This person was standing under Lavery's portrait of Lady Walpole-Wilson, painted at the time of her marriage, in a white dress and blue sash, a picture he was examining with the air of one trying to fill in the seconds before introductions begin to take place, rather than on account of a deep interest in art.

'Have you met Mr. Widmerpool?' asked Sir Gavin, disconsolately, suddenly dropping his energetic demeanour, as if suffering all at once from unaccountable foreboding about the whole party.

Widmerpool's advent in Eaton Square that night did not strike me at the time as anything more than a matter of chance. He had cropped up in my life before, and, if I considered him at all as a recurrent factor, I should have been prepared to admit that he might crop up again. I did not, however, as yet see him as one of those symbolic figures, of whom most people possess at least one example, if not more, round whom the past and the future have a way of assembling. We had not met for years; since the summer after I had left school, when both of us had been trying to learn French staying with the Leroys in Touraine—the place, in fact, where I had supposed myself in love with Suzette. I had hardly thought of him since the moment when he had climbed ponderously into the *grognard's* taxi, and coasted in a cloud of white dust down the hill from La Grenadière. Now he had exchanged his metal-edged glasses for spectacles with a tortoise-shell frame, similar, though of lesser proportions, to those worn by his host, and in general smartened up his personal appearance. True to the old form, there was still something indefinably odd about the cut of his white waistcoat; while he retained that curiously piscine cast of countenance, projecting the impression that he swam, rather than walked, through the rooms he haunted.

Just as the first sight of *Boyhood of Cyprus,* by its association with Mr. Deacon and life before the war, had brought back memories of childhood, the sight of Widmerpool called up in a similar manner—almost like some parallel scene from Mr. Deacon's brush entitled *Boyhood of Widmerpool*—all kind of recollections of days at school. I remembered the interest once aroused in me by Widmerpool's determination to become a success in life, and the brilliance with which Stringham used to mimic his movements and manner of speech. Indeed, Widmerpool's presence in the flesh seemed even now less real than Stringham's former imitations of him: a thought that had often struck me before, now renewed unexpectedly in the Walpole-Wilsons' drawing-room. Widmerpool still represented to my mind a kind of embodiment of thankless labour and unsatisfied ambition. When we had met at La Grenadière, he had talked of his activities in London, but somehow I had never been able to picture his life as an adult; idly fancying him, if thought of at all, forever floundering towards the tape in races never won. Certainly it had not once occurred to me that I should meet him at a dinner-party given for a dance, although I recalled now that he had talked of dances; and, when I came to consider the matter, there was not the smallest reason why he should not turn up upon an occasion such as this—at the Walpole-Wilsons' house or anywhere else. That had to be admitted without question. He seemed in the best of spirits. We were immediately left together by Sir Gavin, who wandered off muttering to himself in a dissatisfied undertone about some impenetrable concerns of his own.

'Good gracious, Jenkins,' said Widmerpool, in that thick voice of his which remained quite unchanged, 'I had no idea that you were a dancing man.'

'I had formed the same wrong impression about yourself.'

'But I have never seen you anywhere before.' He sounded rather aggrieved.

'We must be asked to different parties.'

This reply, made on the spur of the moment without any suggestion of seriousness—certainly not intended to discredit the dances frequented by Widmerpool—must, for some reason, have sounded caustic to his ears. Perhaps I had inadequately concealed surprise felt on learning from his manner that he evidently regarded himself as a kind of standard 'spare man': in short something closely akin to Archie Gilbert. Whatever the cause, the words had obviously given offence. He went red in the face, and made one of those awkward jerks of the body which Stringham used to imitate so deftly.

'As a matter of fact, I have been about very little this summer,' he said, frowning. 'I found I had been working a shade too hard, and had to—well—give myself a bit of a rest.'

I remembered the interest he had always taken, even while still a schoolboy, in his own health and its diurnal changes. In France it had been the same. A whole afternoon had been spent in Tours trying to find the right medicine to adjust the effect on him of the local wine, of which the Leroys' vintage, drunk the night before, had been of disastrously recent growth.

'Then, the year before, I got jaundice in the middle of the season.'

'Are you fit again now?'

'I am better.'

He spoke with gravity.

'But I intend to take care of myself,' he added. 'My mother often tells me I go at things too hard. Besides, I don't really get enough air and exercise—without which one can never be truly robust.'

'Do you still go down to Barnes and drive golf-balls into a net?'

'Whenever feasible.'

He made not the smallest acknowledgment of the feat of memory on my part—with which, personally, I felt rather satisfied—that had called to mind this detail (given years before at the Leroys') of his athletic exercises in outer London. The illusion that egoists will be pleased, or flattered, by interest taken in their habits persists throughout life; whereas, in fact, persons like Widmerpool, in complete subjection to the ego, are, by the nature of that infirmity, prevented from supposing that the minds of others could possibly be occupied by any subject far distant from the egoist's own affairs.

'Actually, one can spend too much time on sport if one is really going to get on,' said Widmerpool. 'And then I have my Territorials.'

'You were going to be a solicitor when we last met.'

'That would hardly preclude me from holding a Territorial officer's commission,' said Widmerpool, smiling as broadly as his small mouth would allow, as if this were a repartee of quite unusual neatness.

'Of course it wouldn't.'

His remark seemed to me immensely silly.

'I am with a firm of solicitors—Turnbull, Welford and Puckering, to be exact,' he said. 'But you may be sure that I have other interests too. Some of them not unimportant, I might add.'

He smiled with some self-satisfaction, but clearly did not wish to be questioned further, at least there and then, regarding his professional activities. That was reasonable enough in the circumstances. However, his next words surprised me. Giving a short intake of breath, he said in a lower voice, with one of those unexpected outbursts of candour that I remembered from La Grenadière: 'Do you know our host and hostess well? I have been on excellent terms with the family for a number of years, but this is the first time I have been asked to dinner. Of course I really know the Gorings better.'

This admission regarding his invitation to dine at Eaton Square was apparently intended to convey some hint, or confession, of past failure; although at the same time Widmerpool seemed half inclined by his tone to impart the news of his better acquaintance with the Gorings equally as a matter for congratulation. Indeed, he was evidently unable to decide in his own mind whether this allegedly long familiarity with the Walpole-Wilsons was—in the light of this being his first appearance in the house—something to boast of, or conceal.

Our conversation, taking place intermittently, while people continually arrived in the room, was several times broken off when one or other of us was introduced to, or spoke with, another guest. Two of the girls present I had not met before. The taller, Lady Anne Stepney, wore an evening dress that had seen better days: which looked, indeed, rather like an old nightdress furbished up for the occasion. She seemed quite unconcerned about her decidedly untidy appearance, her bearing in some respects resembling Eleanor's, though she was much prettier than Eleanor, with large dark eyes and reddish hair. Her name was familiar to me; for what reason I could not at first recall. The lively, gleaming little Jewess in a scarlet frock, who came into the room on the heels of Lady Anne, was announced as 'Miss Manasch', and addressed by the Walpole-Wilsons as 'Rosie'. Both girls were immediately, and simultaneously, engaged by Archie Gilbert, who happened to be free at their moment of entering the room.

Over by the window, Margaret Budd, a beauty, was talking to Pardoe, a Grenadier; and laughing while he demonstrated with a small shovel taken from the fireplace a scooping shot, successful or the reverse, that he, or someone known to him, had recently performed on the links. When she laughed, Margaret looked like an immensely—almost ludicrously—pretty child. She was, as it were, the female equivalent of Archie Gilbert: present at every dance, always lovely, always fresh, and yet somehow quite unreal. She scarcely spoke at all, and might have been one of those huge dolls which, when inclined backwards, say 'Ma-ma' or 'Pa-pa': though impossible to imagine in any position so undignified as that required for the mechanism to produce these syllables: equally hard to conceive her dishevelled, or bad-tempered, or, indeed, capable of physical passion—though appearances may be deceptive in no sphere so much as the last. Never without a partner, usually booked up six or seven dances ahead, this was her third or fourth season—so Barbara had once pointed out—and there had, as yet, been no sign of her getting engaged. 'Margaret is rather a Guardee's girl,' Barbara had added, evidently intending the label to imply no great compliment in her own eyes.

Widmerpool's presence reminded me that Margaret was cousin of the Budd who had been Captain of the Eleven one year at school; and I remembered the story Stringham had told me, years before, of Widmerpool's pleased acceptance—delight almost—on being struck in the face with a banana thrown by that comparatively notable cricketer. I could not help toying with the fantasy that some atavistic strain, deep-seated in the Budd family, might cause Margaret to assail Widmerpool in similar manner; perhaps later in the evening when dessert, tempting as a missile, appeared at the Walpole-Wilsons' table. Such a vision was improbable to an almost infinite degree, because Margaret was the kindest, quietest creature imaginable; really, I think, almost wholly unaware, in gentle concentration on herself, of the presence of most of the people moving about her. Even her laughter was rare, and its audible provocation before dinner that evening by his strokes in the air with the shovel did Pardoe credit.

From a girl's point of view, there was no doubt something to be said for considering Pardoe the most interesting person present that evening. He had recently inherited a house on the Welsh Border (Jacobean in architecture, though with more ancient historical associations going back to the Wars of the Roses), together with enough money, so it was said, to 'keep up' the estate. He was an agreeable, pink-faced ensign, very short, square, and broad-shouldered, with a huge black moustache, brushed out so forcibly that it seemed to be false and assumed for a joke. Such affluent young men were known to have a tendency to abandon dances and frequent night-clubs. Pardoe, however, was still available, so it appeared; no one could tell for how long. Unlike Archie Gilbert, he had a great deal to say for himself—though his newly acquired possessions made small-talk scarcely necessary—and, as he modestly treated his own appearance as a matter for laughter, the moustache was a considerable asset in his anecdotes. He had at last abandoned the shovel, and, mildly interested in music, had become engaged in some operatic argument with Miss Manasch. To this discussion Sir Gavin, from the background where he had been hovering, his moustache bristling more than ever, now cut in with the emphatic words:

'No one could sing it like Slezak.'

'Did you ever hear him in *Lohengrin*?' demanded Pardoe, taking the ends of his own moustache with both hands, as if about to tear it off and reveal himself in a new identity.

'Many a time and oft,' said Sir Gavin, defiantly. 'But what was that you were saying about *Idomeneo*?'

All three of them embarked clamorously on a new musical dispute. The rest of us chatted in a desultory way. Barbara arrived late. She was wearing her gold dress that I knew of old did not suit her; and that spirit of contradiction that especially governs matters of the heart caused the fact that she was not looking her best to provoke in me a stab of affection. Even so, I was still able to wonder whether the situation between us—between myself and her, would perhaps be more accurate—remained quite unchanged; and, as I let go of her small cluster of fingers—each one of which I was conscious of as a single entity while I held her hand—I thought that perhaps that night I should not, as in past months, experience the same recurrent torments as she danced with other men. As soon as she had come into the room, Widmerpool skirted the sofa and made towards her, leaving me with the impression that I might in some manner have appeared unfriendly to him after our comparative intimacy in France. I decided to try to correct this apprehension, should it exist, later in the evening when suitable opportunity might arise.

The minutes passed: conversation flagged. The Louis Seize clock standing on a wall-bracket gave out a threatening tick-tock. One of the male guests had still not yet turned up. In those days, at that sort of party, there were no drinks before dinner; and, while Eleanor told me about her Girl Guides, the evening sun deflected huge golden squares of phosphorescent colour (spread rather in the manner advocated by Mr. Deacon, giving formal juxtaposition to light and shade) against the peacock-green shot-silk shadows of the sofa cushions. Outside, the detonation of loudly-slammed taxi doors, suggesting the opening of a cannonade, had died down. In place of those sounds some cats were quarrelling, or making love, in the gardens running the length of the square. I began to long for the meal to begin. After total silence had fallen on the room for the second time, Lady Walpole-Wilson, apparently with an effort, for her lips faltered slightly when she spoke, came to a decision to await the late-comer no further.

'Let's go down in a troop,' she said, 'and—as Mr. Tompsitt is so unpunctual—not bother about "taking in". I really do not think we can delay dinner any longer.'

In speaking to each other the Walpole-Wilsons were inclined to give an impression that they were comparative strangers, who had met for the first time only a week or two before, but at this remark her husband, no doubt wanting food as much as—perhaps even more than—the rest of those present, replied rather gruffly: 'Of course, Daisy, of course.'

He added, without any suggestion of complaint—on the contrary, if anything, with approbation: 'Young Tompsitt is always late.'

The news that Tompsitt had been invited would once have filled me with dismay. Even at that moment, sudden mention of his name caused an instinctive hope that his absence was due to illness or accident, something that might prevent him from putting in any appearance at all, preferably grave enough to exclude him from dances for many months: perhaps for ever. He was one of various young men moving within Barbara's orbit whose relationship with her, though impossible to estimate at all precisely, was yet in a general way disturbing for someone who might have claims of his own to put forward in that quarter. In that respect Tompsitt's connexion was of a particularly distasteful kind in that Barbara evidently found him not unattractive; while his approach to her, or so it seemed to me, was conditioned entirely by the ebb and flow of his own vanity: no inconsiderable element when gauged at any given moment, though laying a course hard for an unsympathetic observer to chart. That is to say he was obviously flattered by the fact that Barbara found him, apparently, prepossessing enough; and, at the same time, not sufficiently stirred within himself to spend more than comparatively brief spells in her company, especially when there were other girls about, who might be supposed, for one reason or another, to represent in his eyes potentially superior assets.

That was what I used, perhaps unjustly, to reflect; at the same time having to admit to myself that Tompsitt's attitude towards Barbara posed, from my own point of view, a dilemma as to what, short of his own bodily removal, would constitute a change for the better. His relative lack of enthusiasm, though acceptable only with all kinds of unpalatable reservations, had, in its way, to be approved; while apprehension that his feelings towards Barbara might suddenly undergo some violent emotional stimulation was—or had certainly been until that evening—an ever-present anxiety. At last, however, I felt, anyway on second thoughts, fairly indifferent as to whether or not Tompsitt turned up. Inwardly I was becoming increasingly convinced of this, and I might even have looked forward to Tompsitt's entry if there had been serious threat of dinner being further delayed on his account.

In the dining-room I found myself sitting at the oval-ended table between Barbara and Anne Stepney, the second of whom was on Sir Gavin's right. The Walpole-Wilsons defied prevailing mode by still employing a table-cloth, a preference of Sir Gavin's, who prided himself on combining in his own home tastes of 'the old school' with a progressive point of view in worldly matters. The scented geranium leaf usually to be found floating in the finger-bowls could be attributed to his wife's leaning towards a more exotic way of life. Beyond Barbara was Archie Gilbert, probably placed on Lady Walpole-Wilson's left to make up for having Tompsitt—or rather an empty chair, where in due course he would sit, if he had not forgotten the invitation—on her right. Tompsitt, a protégé of Sir Gavin's, was not greatly liked either by Eleanor or her mother.

This chasm left by Tompsitt divided Margaret Budd, who had Widmerpool on her other side, from her hostess. Widmerpool's precise channel of invitation to the house was still obscure, and the fact that he himself seemed on the whole surprised to find himself dining there made his presence even more a matter for speculation. He had been placed next to Eleanor, who had presumably been consulted on the subject of seating accommodation at the dinner table, though he seemed by his manner towards her to know her only slightly; while she herself showed signs, familiar to me from observing her behaviour on past occasions, of indifference, if not dislike, for his company. Barbara had been the only member of the party greeted by him as an old acquaintance; though she had done no more than wring him rather warmly by the hand when she arrived, quickly passing on to someone else, at which he had looked discouraged. Pardoe sat between Eleanor and Miss Manasch—who brought the party round once more to Sir Gavin. The table had perhaps not been easy to arrange. Its complications of seating must have posed problems that accounted for Lady Walpole-Wilson's more than usually agitated state.

'There does not seem any substantial agreement yet on the subject of the Haig statue,' said Widmerpool, as he unfolded his napkin. 'Did you read St. John Clarke's letter?'

He spoke to Eleanor, though he had glanced round the table as if hoping for a larger audience to hear his views on the matter. The subject, as it happened, was one upon which I knew Eleanor to hold decided opinions, and was therefore a question to be avoided, unless driven to conversational extremities, as she much preferred statement to discussion. The fact of broaching it was yet another indication that Widmerpool could not have seen a great deal of her at all recently.

'Surely they can find someone to carve a horse that looks like a horse.'

She spoke with truculence even at the outset.

'The question, to my mind,' said Widmerpool, 'is whether a statue is, in reality, an appropriate form of recognition for public services in modern times.'

'Don't you think great men ought to be honoured?' Eleanor asked, rather tensely. 'I do.'

She clenched her lips tightly together as if prepared to contest the point to the death—with Widmerpool or anyone else.

'Nobody—least of all myself—denies the desirability of honouring great men,' he said in return, rather sharply, 'but some people think the traffic problem—already severe enough in all conscience—might be adversely affected if any more space is taken up by monuments in busy thoroughfares.'

'I can't see why they can't make a model of a real horse,' said Barbara. 'Couldn't they do it in plaster of Paris or something. Don't you think?'

This last question, propitiatory in tone, and addressed in a fairly low voice to myself, could still make me feel, for reasons quite subjective in origin, that there might be something to be said for this unconventional method of solving what had become almost the chief enigma of contemporary æsthetic.

'Need there be a horse?' asked Lady Walpole-Wilson, putting a brave face on the discussion, though evidently well aware, even apart from Eleanor's potential pronouncements on the subject, of its manifold dangers.

'You can't very well have him sitting at his desk,' said Sir Gavin, bluffly, 'though I expect that was where he spent a good deal of his time. When I saw him in Paris at the time of the Conference——'

'Why shouldn't he be on a horse?' demanded Eleanor, angrily. 'He used to ride one, didn't he?'

'We all agree that he used to ride one,' said Widmerpool, indulgently this time. 'And that, if commemoration is to take the form proposed, the Field-Marshal should certainly be represented mounted on his charger. I should have supposed there was no doubt upon that point.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Pardoe, shooting out his moustache once more. 'Why not put him in a staff-car? You could have the real thing, with his flag flying at the bonnet.'

'Of course if you want to make a joke of it . . .' said Eleanor, casting a look of great contempt in Pardoe's direction.

Archie Gilbert and Margaret Budd appeared to hold no strong convictions regarding the statue. Miss Manasch made the practical suggestion that they should pay off the sculptor of the work under discussion, if—as it certainly appeared—this had not met with general approval, and make a fresh start with another candidate who might provide something of a more popular nature.

'I think they ought to have got Mestrovic in the first place,' said Lady Anne, coldly, during the silence that followed Miss Manasch's proposal.

This unexpected opinion was plainly issued as a challenge; but controversy regarding the memorial was now cut short by the sudden arrival in the dining-room of Tompsitt.

After somewhat perfunctory apology for his lateness, he sat down between Lady Walpole-Wilson and Margaret Budd, though without taking a great deal of notice of either of them. Lady Walpole-Wilson shot him a look to suggest her collusion in his apparent inclination to assume that the time for regrets and excuses was now long past; though her glance was also no doubt intended to urge—even to plead with—him to make amends best by showing himself agreeable to his neighbour, since Eleanor had relapsed into further argument that demanded Widmerpool's close attention, leaving Margaret Budd, for all her beauty, high and dry so far as personal attention was concerned.

However, now that he had arrived, formal conversation seemed the last thing to which Tompsitt was at all disposed. He smiled across the table to Barbara, who had crooked her finger at him as he entered the room. Then, picking up the menu, he studied it carefully. The card was inscribed for some reason—probably because she had looked in at tea-time and Eleanor hated the job—in Barbara's own scratchy, laborious hand that I knew so well; not because I had ever received many letters from her in the course of our relationship, but on account of the fact that such scrawled notes as I possessed used to live for months in my pocket, seeming to retain in their paper and ink some atom of Barbara herself to be preserved and secreted until our next meeting. I wondered whether that schoolgirl script breathed any such message to Tompsitt, as it broke the news that he was about to eat the identical meal he must have consumed at every dinner-party—if given specifically for a London dance—that he had ever attended.

He was a large, fair young man, with unbrushed hair and a grey smudge on the left-hand side of his shirt-front: cramming for—perhaps by then even admitted to—the Foreign Office. Sir Gavin held strong views on 'broadening the basis' of the selection of candidates for governmental service, and he took an interest in Tompsitt as prototype of a newer and less constricted vehicle for handling foreign affairs. Certainly Tompsitt's appearance was calculated to dispose effectually of the myth, dear to the public mind, of the 'faultlessly dressed diplomat', and he had been educated—the details were elusive—in some manner not absolutely conventional: though his air of incivility that so delighted Sir Gavin could no doubt have been inculcated with at least equal success at any public school. It was perhaps fair to regard him a young man rather different from those normally recruited for the purpose, and, in return for this patronage, Tompsitt, supercilious in his manner to most people, accorded a deep respect to Sir Gavin's utterances; although, a posture not uncommon in such dual relationships, this deference sometimes took the more flattering form of apparent disagreement. They had met a year or two before at a gathering of some local branch of the League of Nations Union, where Sir Gavin had given a talk on 'Collective Security'.

All the time he was reading the menu, Tompsitt smiled to himself, as if exceedingly content to exist in a world from which most, if not all, surrounding distractions had been effectively eliminated. It had to be agreed that there was some forcefulness in his complete disregard for the rest of the party. Lady Walpole-Wilson began to look rather despairing. Widmerpool, on the other hand, seemed to share, as if by instinct, Sir Gavin's approbation for Tompsitt, or at least felt distinct interest in his personality, because after a time he ceased to give his views on the Horse in Sculpture, and cast several searching glances down the table. Sir Gavin, whose conversation was habitually diversified by a murmur of 'm'm . . . m'm . . . m'm . . .' repeated under his breath while his interlocutor was speaking—a technique designed to discourage over-long disquisitions on the other side—did no more than nod approvingly at Tompsitt. For the first few minutes of dinner Sir Gavin had contrived to monopolise the conversation of the girls he sat between. Now, however, he concentrated more particularly on Miss Manasch, from whom, with much laughter and by-play on his part, he appeared to be attempting to extract certain concrete opinions supposedly held by her father regarding the expansion of the Donners-Brebner Company in the Balkans. His attitude suggested that he also found Miss Manasch rather unusually attractive physically.

Now that the small, though appreciable, disturbance caused by Tompsitt's entry had finally settled down, the moment had come for some sort of conversational skirmish to begin between Lady Anne Stepney and myself. Ever since we had been introduced, I had been wondering why her name suggested some episode in the past: an incident vaguely unsatisfactory or disturbing. The mention of Donners-Brebner now reminded me that the uneasy recollections were in connexion with this girl's sister, Peggy, whom Stringham on that night years before at the Donners-Brebner building had spoken, perhaps not very seriously, of marrying. In fact, I remembered now that he had been on his way to dinner with their parents, the Bridgnorths. That was the last time I had seen Stringham; it must have been—I tried to remember—four or five years before. The link seemed to provide a suitable topic to broach.

'Have you ever come across someone called Charles Stringham? I think he knows your sister.'

'Oh, yes,' she said, 'one of Peggy's pompous friends, isn't he?'

I found this a staggering judgment. There were all kinds of things to be said against Stringham's conduct—he could be offhand, even thoroughly bad-mannered—but 'pompous' was the last adjective in the world I ever expected to hear applied to him. It occurred to me, a second later, that she used the word with specialised meaning; or perhaps—this was most probable—merely intended to imply that her sister and Stringham were asked to grander parties than herself. Possibly she became aware that her remark had surprised me, because she added: 'I hope he isn't a great friend of yours.'

I was about to reply that Stringham was, indeed, a 'great friend' of mine, when I remembered that by now this description could scarcely be held to be true, since I had not seen nor heard of him for so long that I had little or no idea what he was doing with himself; and, for all I knew, he might almost have forgotten my existence. I had to admit to myself that, for my own part, I had not thought much about him either, since we had last met; though this sudden realisation that we now barely knew one another was, for a moment, oddly painful. In any event, nothing seemed to have come out of his talk of wanting to marry Peggy Stepney, and mention of his name had been, in the circumstances, perhaps tactless.

'I haven't seen him for three or four years.'

'Oh, I thought you might know him well.'

'I used to.'

'As a matter of fact, Peggy hasn't spoken of Charles Stringham for ages,' she said.

She did not actually toss her head—as girls are sometimes said to do in books—but that would have been the gesture appropriate to the tone in which she made this comment. It was evident that the subject of Stringham could supply no basis for discussion between us. I searched my mind for other themes. Lady Anne herself showed no sign of making any immediate contribution. She left the remains of her clear soup, and fixed her eyes on Miss Manasch; whether to satisfy herself about technical detail regarding the red dress, or to observe how well she was standing up to Sir Gavin's interrogation—which hovered between flirtation and apprisement how best to handle his investments, I was unable to decide. Whatever the question, it was settled fairly quickly in her mind during the brief period in which soup plates were removed and fried sole presented.

'What do you do?' she asked. 'I think men always enjoy talking about their work.'

I had the disturbing impression that she was preparing for some sort of a war between the sexes—as represented by herself and me—to break out at any moment. What vehement rôle she saw herself as playing in the life that surrounded us was problematical; some deep-felt resentment, comparable to Eleanor's and yet widely differing from hers, clearly existed within her: her clothes, no doubt outward and visible sign of this rebellion against circumstance. I told her my firm specialised in art books, and attempted to steer a line from Mestrovic, with unsuccessful results. We talked for a time of Botticelli, the only painter in whom she appeared to feel any keen interest, a subject which led to the books of E. St. John Clarke, one of which was a story of Renaissance Italy. This was the author mentioned by Widmerpool as writing to *The Times* regarding the Haig statue.

'And then there was one about the French Revolution.'

'I was on the side of the People,' she said, resolutely.

This assertion opened the road to discussion deeper, and altogether more searching, than I felt prepared to pursue at that stage of dinner. As it happened, there were by then signs all round the table of conversation becoming moribund. Lady Walpole-Wilson must have noticed this falling off, because she remarked at large that there were two dances being given that evening.

'And both in Belgrave Square,' said Archie Gilbert.

He sounded relieved that for once at least his self-imposed duties would not keep him travelling all over London; his worst nights being no doubt those experienced—as must happen once in a way—on occasions when a party was given in some big house at Richmond or Roehampton, while there was also, on the same night, perhaps more than one ball to be attended in the heart of London.

'The Spaniards are having some sort of a reception there, too,' said Tompsitt, who, having satisfied his immediate hunger, seemed disposed to show himself more genial than earlier. 'At their new Embassy.'

'I'm rather glad we don't have to attend those big official crushes any more as a duty,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson, with a sigh. 'We had to turn out in honour of Prince Theodoric the other night, and, really, it was too exhausting. Now that one is rather out of touch with that world one does so much prefer just to see one's own friends.'

'Is Prince Theodoric over for long?' asked Widmerpool, assuming an air of importance. 'I understand he is here largely for economic reasons—I believe Donners-Brebner are considering big expansions in his country.'

'Base metals, for one thing,' said Tompsitt, with at least equal *empressement*. 'There has also been talk of installing a railway to the coast. Am I right, Sir Gavin?'

At the phrase 'base metals' there had passed over Archie Gilbert's face perhaps the most imperceptible flicker of professional interest, that died down almost immediately as he turned once more to speak with Barbara of dance bands.

'No doubt about it,' said Sir Gavin. 'I used to see a lot of Theodoric's father when I was chargé d'affaires there. We often went fishing together.'

'Gavin was a great favourite with the old King,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson, as if it were a matter of mild surprise to her that her husband could be a favourite with anyone. 'I am afraid Prince Theodoric's brother is quite a different sort of person from their father. Do you remember that awkward incident when Janet was staying with us and how nice the King was?'

Sir Gavin glanced across the table at his wife, possibly apprehensive for a moment that she seemed inclined to particularise more precisely than might be desirable at the dinner table this contrast between father and son. Perhaps he did not wish to bring up the episode, whatever it had been, in which 'Janet'—his sister—had been involved.

'Theodoric, on the other hand, is a serious young man,' he said. 'A pity, really, that he is not King. The party given for him at their Legation was certainly dull enough—though personally I enjoy such jollifications as, for example, the court ball when our own King and Queen visited Berlin in 1913.'

'For the wedding of the Kaiser's daughter?' Tompsitt asked, briskly.

'Princess Victoria Louise,' said Sir Gavin, nodding with approval at this scoring of a point by his satellite. 'I went quite by chance, in place of Saltonstall, who——'

'Though, of course, it makes one feel quite ill to think of dancing with a German now,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson, anxiously.

She had taken the war hard.

'Do you really think so, Lady Walpole-Wilson?' said Widmerpool. 'Now, you know, I can feel no prejudice against the Germans. None whatever. French policy, on the other hand, I regard at the moment as very mistaken. Positively disastrous, in fact.'

'They did the Torch Dance,' said Sir Gavin, not to be put off nostalgic reminiscences so easily. 'The King and the Tsar danced, with the bride between them. A splendid sight. Ah, well, little we thought . . .'

'I loved the Swiss Guard when we were in Rome last winter,' said Miss Manasch. 'And the Noble Guard were divine, too. We saw them at our audience.'

'But what a demoralising life for a young man,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson. 'I am sure many of them must make unsuitable marriages.'

'I can just imagine myself checking a Papal Guardsman's arms and equipment,' said Pardoe. 'Sergeant-Major, this halbert is filthy.'

'I'd love to see you in those red and yellow and blue stripes, Johnny,' said Miss Manasch, with perhaps a touch of unfriendliness. 'They'd suit you.'

Discussion as to whether or not ceremony was desirable lasted throughout the cutlets and ice. Lady Anne and Tompsitt were against pomp and circumstance; Eleanor and Widmerpool now found themselves on the same side in defending a reasonable degree of outward show. Tompsitt was rather pleased at the general agreement that he would go to pieces in the Tropics as a result of not changing for dinner, and certainly, so far as his evening clothes were concerned, he put his principles into practice.

'You should cart our Regimental Colour round,' said Pardoe. 'Then you'd all know what heavy ceremonial means. It's like a Salvation Army banner.'

'I'm always trying to get a decent Colour for the Guides,' said Eleanor, 'and not have to carry about a thing like a child's Union Jack. Not that anyone cares.'

'You won't be too long, Gavin, will you?' said Lady Walpole-Wilson at this, hastily rising from the table.

By then I had only exchanged a word or two with Barbara, though this, in a way, was a mark of intimacy rather than because she had been unwilling to talk, or because any change had already consciously taken place in our relationship. Most of dinner she had spent telling Archie Gilbert rather a long story about some dance. Now she turned towards me, just before she went through the door, and gave one of those half-smiles that I associated with moments—infrequent moments—when she was not quite sure of herself: smiles which I found particularly hard to resist, because they seemed to show a less familiar, more mysterious side of her that noisiness and ragging were partly designed to conceal. On that occasion her look seemed to be intended perhaps to reconcile the fact that throughout the meal she had allowed me so little of her attention. Sir Gavin assured his wife that we would 'not be long' in further occupation of the dining-room; and, when the door was closed, he moved the port in the direction of Pardoe.

'I hear you're letting your shooting,' he remarked.

'Got to cut down somewhere,' said Pardoe. 'That seemed as good a place as anywhere to begin.'

'Outgoings very heavy?'

'A lot of things to be brought up to date.'

The two of them settled down to discuss Shropshire coverts, with which Sir Gavin had some familiarity since his father-in-law, Lord Aberavon, had settled on the borders of that county during the latter part of his life; though the house had been sold at his death. Archie Gilbert, having successfully undertaken the operation of releasing the ladies from the room, returned to the chair next to mine. I asked who was giving the other dance that night.

'Mrs. Samson.'

'What will it be like?'

'Probably better than the Huntercombes'. Mrs. Samson has got Ambrose—though of course the band is not everything.'

'Are you going to Mrs. Samson's.'

He gave the ghost of a smile at what he must have regarded as a question needlessly asked.

'I expect I shall look in.'

'Is it for Daphne?'

'For Cynthia, the youngest girl,' he said, with gentle reproof at the thoughtlessness once more shown in putting this enquiry, which betrayed an altogether insufficiently serious approach to the world of dances. 'Daphne has been out for ages.'

On the other side of the table Widmerpool seemed, for some reason, determined to make a good impression on Tompsitt. Together they had begun to talk over the question of the Far East; Tompsitt treating Widmerpool's views on that subject with more respect than I should have expected him to show.

'I see the Chinese marshals have announced their victory to the spirit of the late Dr. Sun Yat-sen,' Widmerpool was saying.

He spoke rather as if he had himself expected an invitation to the ceremony, but was prepared to overlook its omission on this occasion. Tompsitt, pursing his lips, rather in Widmerpool's own manner, concurred that such solemn rites had indeed taken place.

'And the Nationalists have got to Pekin,' Widmerpool pursued.

'But who are the Nationalists?' asked Tompsitt, in a measured voice, gazing round the table with an air of quiet aggression. 'Can anyone tell me that?'

Neither Archie Gilbert nor I ventured any attempt to clarify the confused situation in China; and not even Widmerpool seemed disposed to hazard any immediate interpretation of conflicting political aims there. There was a pause, at the end of which he said: 'I dare say we shall have to consider tariff autonomy—with reservations, of course.'

Tompsitt nodded, biting his lip a trifle. Widmerpool's face assumed a dramatic expression that made him look rather like a large fish moving swiftly through opaque water to devour a smaller one. Sir Gavin had begun to grow restive as scraps of this stimulating dialogue were wafted across to him, and he now abandoned the subject of Salopian pheasants in favour of trenchant examination of Celestial affairs.

'To speak of treaty-revision before China has put her house in order,' he announced rather slowly, between puffs of his cigarette, 'is thought by some—having regard to the *status quo*—substantially to put the cart before the horse. The War-Lords——'

'A cousin of mine in the Coldstream went out last year,' Pardoe interrupted. 'He said it wasn't too bad.'

'Was that at Kowloon?' asked Widmerpool, speaking somewhat deferentially. 'I hear, by the way, they are sending the Welsh Guards to Egypt instead of a Line regiment.'

'You spoke of treaty revision, Sir Gavin,' said Tompsitt, ignoring Widmerpool's adumbrations on the incidence of the trooping season. 'Now it seems to me that we should strike when the iron is hot. The iron has never been hotter than at this moment. There are certain facts we have got to face. For example——'

'Some of them were under canvas on the race-course,' said Pardoe. 'Not that there were any starters, I should imagine.' And, presumably with a view to disposing finally of the Chinese question and turning to subjects of more local interest, he added: 'You know, legalising the tote is going to make a big difference to racing.'

Sir Gavin looked dissatisfied with the turn taken by—or rather forced on—the conversation; possibly, in fact certainly, possessing further views on the international situation in the East which he was not unwilling to express. However, he must have decided that time did not allow any return to these matters, for he made, as it were, a mystic circle before himself in the air with the decanter, as if to show that the fate of China—and of racing, too for that matter—was in the lap of the gods.

'Nobody having any port,' he stated, rather than asked. 'Then I suppose we shall be getting into trouble if we don't make a move. Anyone for along the passage?'

'Yes,' said Tompsitt, setting off impatiently.

While we waited for him, Sir Gavin expatiated to Pardoe whom he seemed, for some reason, particularly to enjoy lecturing, on the advantages to be gained for the country by mustering young men of Tompsitt's kind.

'Had the smooth type too long,' he remarked, shaking his head a number of times.

'Need something crisper these days, do we?' enquired Pardoe, who, standing on tiptoe, was straightening his white tie reflected in the glass of the barometer hanging under *Boyhood of Cyrus*.

'All very well a century ago to have a fellow who could do the polite to the local potentate,' explained Sir Gavin. 'Something a bit more realistic required these days.'

'A chap who knows the man-in-the-street?'

Sir Gavin screwed his face into an expression calculated to convey that such was the answer.

'Where does he come from?' asked Pardoe, who did not seem absolutely convinced by these arguments, and still fiddled with his tie.

Sir Gavin seemed rather pleased by this question, which gave him further opportunity for stating uncompromisingly his confidence in Tompsitt's almost congenital *bona fides*.

'Goodness knows where he comes from,' he affirmed vigorously. 'Why should you or I be concerned with that—or any of us, for that matter? What we need is a man who can do the job.'

'I quite agree with you, sir,' said Widmerpool, breaking unexpectedly into this investigation. 'Professionalism in diplomacy is bad enough, in all conscience, without restricting the range of the country's diplomatic representation to a clique of prize pupils from a small group of older public schools.'

Sir Gavin looked rather taken aback, as I was myself, at such a sudden assertion of considered opinion regarding the matter in hand—and also at being called 'sir'—even though Widmerpool's views seemed so closely identified with his own. However, Widmerpool did not attempt to amplify his proposition; and circumstances, represented by the return of Tompsitt, prevented a more exhaustive examination of the problem.

In his distrust of 'smoothness' and hankering for 'realism', Sir Gavin once more reminded me of Uncle Giles, but such reflections were interrupted by the necessity of making a decision regarding means of transport to the Huntercombes' house. The Walpole-Wilsons' cars were both, for some reason, out of commission—Eleanor had driven one of them against the mounting-block in the stable yard at Hinton Hoo—and Pardoe's sports-model two-seater was not specially convenient for a girl in a ball dress; although I could imagine Barbara wishing to travel in it if she had a chance. As it happened, Pardoe's general offer of 'a lift' was immediately accepted by Tompsitt, which settled the matter so far as the rest of the party were concerned: this residue being divided between two taxis. I found myself in Lady Walpole-Wilson's vehicle, with Barbara, Miss Manasch, and Archie Gilbert; Eleanor, Anne Stepney, Margaret Budd, and Widmerpool accompanying Sir Gavin. We all packed ourselves in, Archie Gilbert and I occupying the tip-up seats. The butler slammed the taxi door as if glad to be rid of us.

'I hope the others will be all right,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson, as our conveyance moved off uncertainly; though I could not guess what her fears might be for potential ill that could befall the group under the command of her husband.

'Aren't we going to be too early, Aunt Daisy?' Barbara said. 'It is so awful when you are the first to arrive. We did it at the Cecils.'

I thought I could feel her foot against mine; but, a moment later, found the shoe in question to belong to Miss Manasch, who immediately removed her own foot; whether because aware of a pressure that had certainly been quite involuntary, if, indeed, it had taken place at all, or merely by chance, I was unable to tell.

'I do hope Eleanor will not insist on going home as soon as we arrive,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson, more to herself than to the rest of the company in the taxi.

As we covered the short distance to Belgrave Square, she dropped her bag on the floor, recovering it before anyone else could help, opened the clasp, and began to rummage in its depths. There she found whatever she had been seeking. Archie Gilbert was sitting next to the door by which we should descend, and now she made as if to offer him some object concealed in her hand, the thing, no doubt a coin, for which she had been searching in the bag. However, he strenuously denied acceptance of this.

'Please,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson. 'You must.'

'On the contrary.'

'I insist.'

'No, no, absurd.'

'Mr. Gilbert!'

'Really.'

'I shall be very cross.'

'Not possibly.'

During the several seconds that elapsed before we finally drew up, delayed for a time by private cars and other taxis waiting in a queue in front of our own, the contest continued between them; so that by the moment when the taxi had at last stopped dead in front of the Huntercombes' house, and Archie Gilbert, flinging open the door, had reached the pavement, I was still doubtful whether or not he had capitulated. Certainly he had ejected himself with great rapidity, and unhesitatingly paid the taxi-driver, brushing aside a proffered contribution.

There seemed no reason to suppose, as Barbara had suggested, that we might have come too early. On the contrary, we went up the carpeted steps into a hall full of people, where Sir Gavin, whose taxi had arrived before our own, was already waiting impatiently for the rest of his party. His reason for personal attendance at a dance which he would not have normally frequented was presumably because the Huntercombes lived near the Walpole-Wilsons in the country. In fact there could be no doubt that a good many country neighbours had been asked, for, even on the way up the stairs, densely packed with girls and young men, some of them already rather hot and flushed, there was that faint though perceptible flavour of the hunt ball to be observed about some of the guests. While putting away our hats, curiosity had overcome me, and I asked Archie Gilbert whether he had, in fact, refused or accepted Lady Walpole-Wilson's money. At the coarseness of the question his smile had been once again somewhat reproving.

'Oh, I took it,' he said. 'Why not? It wasn't enough. It never is.'

These words made me wonder if, after all, some faint trace of dissatisfaction was concealed deep down under that armour of black-and-white steel that encased him; and, for a moment, the terrible suspicion even suggested itself that, night after night, he danced his life away through the ballrooms of London in the unshakable conviction that the whole thing was a sham. Was he merely stoical like the Spartan boy—clad this time in a white tie—with the fox of bitterness gnawing, through stiff shirt, at his vitals. It was a thought in its horror to be dismissed without further examination. Such cynicism could hardly be possible. His remark, however, had for some reason recalled the occasion when I had been leaving the Templers' house and Mr. Farebrother had added his shilling to the chauffeur's tip.

'Have you ever come across someone called Sunny Farebrother?' I asked.

'Of course I've met him. Quite interested in the metal market, isn't he? He is rather well known in the City for his charm.'

I saw that I had been right in supposing that the pair of them had something in common. Archie Gilbert had, indeed, sounded surprised that I should ever have been in doubt about his knowing Farebrother. Meanwhile, we had proceeded almost to the top of the stairs and were about to reach the first-floor landing, where a big man-servant with a huge bottle nose was bawling out the names of the guests in a contemptuous, raucous voice that well suggested his own keen enjoyment of the duty.

'. . . Sir Gavin and Lady Walpole-Wilson . . . Miss Walpole-Wilson . . . Captain Hackforth . . . Mr. Cavendish . . . Lady Anne Stepney . . . Miss Budd . . . Miss Manners . . . Mr. Pardon . . . Mr. Tompsey . . . Lady Augusta Cutts . . . Miss Cutts . . . Lord Erridge . . . Miss Mercy Cutts . . . Lord and Lady Edward Wentworth . . . Mr. Winterpool . . .'

It was a fearful struggle to get through the door into the ballroom. Even the bottle-nosed man, familiar with such tumult as he must have been, had to pause and smile broadly to himself once or twice; but whether amused at the confusion of the crowd, or at the hash he was himself making of their individual names, it was impossible to guess. The whining of the band seemed only to encourage the appalling tussle taking place on stairs and landing.

'I took one look at you—
That's all I meant to do—
And then my heart—stood still . . .'

Hanging at the far end of the ballroom was a Van Dyck—the only picture of any interest the Huntercombes kept in London—representing Prince Rupert conversing with a herald, the latter being, I believe, the personage from whom the surviving branch of the family was directly descended. The translucent crystals of the chandeliers oscillated faintly as the dancers below thumped by. A knot of girls were standing not far from the door, among them Eleanor, who, in a purposeful manner, was pulling on a pair of long white gloves. These gloves, always affected by her, were evidently a kind of symbol assumed in connexion with her own attitude towards dances; at once intended to keep her partners physically farther from her, at the same time creaking ominously, as if voicing the audible disapproval of their wearer, whenever she moved her arms. We took the floor together. Eleanor danced well, though implacably. I asked how long she had known Widmerpool, mentioning that we had been at school together.

'Uncle George used to get his liquid manure from Mr. Widmerpool's father when he was alive,' said Eleanor curtly. 'We tried some at home, but it was a failure. Different soil, I suppose.'

Widmerpool's old acquaintance with Barbara's family, and his own presence that night at the Walpole-Wilsons', were now both satisfactorily explained. There could be no doubt that the fertiliser mentioned by Eleanor was the basic cause of the secrecy with which he had always been inclined to veil his father's business activities; for, although there was, of course, nothing in the faintest degree derogatory about agricultural science—Lord Goring himself was, after all, evidence of that fact—I had been associated with Widmerpool long enough to know that he could not bear to be connected personally with anyone, or anything, that might be made, however remotely, the subject of ridicule which could recoil even in a small degree upon himself. He was, for example, as I discovered much later, almost physically incapable of making himself agreeable to a woman whom he regarded as neither good-looking nor, for some other reason, worth cultivating: a trait that was vested, perhaps, in a kind of natural timidity, and a nature that required a sense of support from the desirable qualities of company in which he found himself. This characteristic of his, I can now see, was an effort to obtain a kind of vicarious acquisition of power from others. Accordingly, any sense of failure or inadequacy in his surroundings made him uncomfortable. The mere phrase 'artificial manure' told the whole story.

However, when it became clear that Eleanor did not much like him, I found myself, I hardly knew why, assuring her that Widmerpool, at school and in France, had always been quite an amiable eccentric; though I could not explain, then or now, why I felt his defence a duty; still less why I should have arbitrarily attributed to him what was, after all, an almost wholly imaginary personality: in fact one in many respects far from accurate. At that time I still had very little idea of Widmerpool's true character: neither its qualities nor defects.

'They had a small house on the Pembringham estate while experimenting with the manure,' said Eleanor. 'Aunt Constance is frightfully kind, when she isn't feeling too ill, you know, and used to ask them over quite often. That was where I first met him. Now his mother has taken a cottage near *us* at Hinton. Barbara doesn't mind Mr. Widmerpool. Of course, she has often met him. I don't really care for him very much. We were absolutely at our wits' end for a man tonight, so he had to come. Have you ever seen his mother?'

I did not hear Eleanor's views on Mrs. Widmerpool, because at that moment the music ceased; and, after clapping had died down and couples round us dispersed, the subject of Widmerpool and his family was quickly forgotten.

The ball took its course; dance-tune following dance-tune, and partner following partner. From time to time, throughout the course of the evening, I saw Widmerpool ploughing his way round the room, as if rowing a dinghy in rough water, while he talked energetically to girls more often than not unknown to me; though chosen, no doubt, with the care devoted by him to any principle in which he was interested. He did not, as it happened, appear to be dancing much with any member of the Walpole-Wilson dinner-party, perhaps regarding them, when considered as individuals, as unlikely to lead to much that he could personally turn to profit. Later on in the evening, while sitting out with Miss Manasch, I was suddenly made aware of him again when he stumbled over her foot on his way upstairs.

'I know who he is!' she said, when he had apologised and disappeared from sight with his partner. 'He is the Frog Footman. He ought to be in livery. Has he danced with Anne yet?'

'Anne Stepney?'

'They would be so funny together.'

'Is she a friend of yours?'

'We were at the same finishing school in Paris.'

'They didn't do much finishing on her, surely?'

'She is so determined to take a different line from that very glamorous sister of hers.'

'Is Peggy Stepney glamorous?'

'You must have seen pictures of her.'

'A friend of mine called Charles Stringham used to talk about her.'

'Oh, yes—Charles Stringham,' said Miss Manasch. '*That* has been over a long time. I think he is rather a fast young man, isn't he? I seem to have heard.'

She laughed, and rolled her beady little eyes, straightening her frock over plump, well-shaped little legs. She looked quite out of place in this setting; intended by nature to dance veiled, or, perhaps, unveiled, before the throne of some Oriental potentate—possibly one of those exacting rulers to whom Sir Gavin's well-mannered diplomatists of the past might have appealed—or occupying herself behind the scenes in all the appetising labyrinth of harem intrigue. There existed the faintest suspicion of blue hairs upon her upper lip, giving her the look of a beauty of the Byronic era.

'Anne Stepney said he was pompous. As a matter of fact, I haven't seen him for ages.'

'Anne thinks Charles Stringham pompous, does she?' said Miss Manasch, laughing again quietly to herself.

'What do you think?'

'I don't know him. At least only by reputation. I have met his mother, who is, of course, too wonderful. They say she is getting rather tired of Commander Foxe and thinking of having another divorce. Charles was more or less engaged to Anne's sister, Peggy, at one stage, as I suppose you know. That's off now, as I said. I hear about Peggy occasionally from a cousin of mine, Jimmy Klein, who has a great passion for her.'

'Is Charles about to marry anyone at the moment?'

'I don't think so.'

I had the impression that she knew more about Stringham than she was prepared to divulge, because her face assumed an expression that made her features appear more Oriental than ever. It was evident that she possessed affiliations with circles additional to—perhaps widely different from—those to be associated with Walpole-Wilsons, Gorings, or Huntercombes. Only superficially invested with the characteristics of girls moving within that world, she was at once coarser in texture and at the same time more subtle. Up to that moment she had been full of animation, but now all at once she became melancholy and silent.

'I think I shall leave.'

'Have you had enough?'

'Going home seems the only alternative to sitting among the coats,' she said.

'Whatever for?'

'I comb my hair there.'

'But does it need combing?'

'And while I tug at it, I cry.'

'Surely not necessary tonight?'

'Perhaps not,' she said.

She began to laugh softly to herself once more; and, a minute or two later, went off with some partner who appeared satisfied that the moment had come to claim her. I set about looking for Barbara, with whom at the beginning of the evening I had danced only once. She was in one of the rooms downstairs, talking excitedly to a couple of young men, but she seemed not unwilling to leave their company.

'Let's sit this one out,' she said.

We made our way outside and to the garden of the square. Guests like Archie Gilbert, who had been asked to both dances, and no doubt also a few who had not enjoyed that privilege—were passing backwards and forwards from one party to another. The reception at the Spanish Embassy, mentioned by Tompsitt, was still in full swing, so far as could be seen. Now and then a breath of air lightened the heavy night, once even causing the shrubs to sway in what was almost a breeze. The windows of both ballrooms stood open, music from the rival bands playing sometimes in conflict, sometimes appearing to belong to some system of massed orchestras designed to perform in unison.

'We'll have a—Blue Room a——
New room for—two room——
Where we will raise a family . . .
Not like a—ballroom a——
Small room a—hall room . . .'

An equally insistent murmur came from the other side of the square:

'In the mountain greenery——
Where God makes the scenery . . .
Ta-rum . . . Ta-roo . . .'

'Why are you so glum?' said Barbara, picking up some pebbles and throwing them into the bushes. 'I must tell you what happened at Ranelagh last week.'

In the face of recent good resolutions, I tried to take her hand. She snatched it away, laughing, and as usual in such circumstances said: 'Oh, don't get sentimental.'

This tremendous escape, quite undeserved, sobered me. We walked round the lawns. Barbara talked of Scotland, where she was going to stay later in the summer-time.

'Why not come up there?' she said. 'Surely you can find someone to put you up?'

'Got to work.'

'Of course they don't need you all the time at the office.'

'They do.'

'Have you ever danced reels? Johnny Pardoe is going to be there. He says he'll teach me.'

She began to execute capers on the lawn. Stopping at last she examined her arm, holding it out, and saying: 'How blue my hand looks in the moonlight.'

I found myself wondering whether, so far from loving her, I did not actually hate her. Another tune began and we strolled back through the garden. At the gate Tompsitt came up from somewhere among the shadows.

'This is ours, I think.'

In his manner of speaking, so it seemed to me, he contrived to be at once uncivil and pedantic. Barbara began to jump about on the path as if leaping over imaginary puddles; while almost at the top of her small, though shrill, voice she said: 'I can't, really I can't. I must have made a muddle. I am dancing with Mr. Widmerpool. I have put him off till now, and I really must.'

'Cut him,' said Tompsitt.

He sounded as if taking Barbara away from her rightful partner would give him even more pleasure than that to be derived from dancing with her himself. I wondered if she had called Widmerpool 'Mister' because her acquaintance with him had never been brought to a closer degree of intimacy, or if she spoke facetiously. From what Eleanor had said, the latter seemed more probable. It suddenly struck me that after all these years of knowing him I still had no idea of Widmerpool's Christian name.

'Shall I?' said Barbara. 'He would be terribly angry.'

Suddenly she took each of us by the hand, and began to charge along the pavement. In this unusual manner we reached the door of the Huntercombes' house. By the time we had ceased running even Tompsitt seemed, in the last resort, rather taken aback; the combined movement of the three of us—rather like that of horses in a troika—being probably as unexpected for him as for myself. Barbara, for her part, was delighted with her own violent display of high spirits. She broke free and rushed up the steps in front of us.

In the hall, although the hour was not yet late, a few people were already making preparations to leave. As it happened, Widmerpool was standing by the staircase, looking, I thought, a little uneasy, and fingering a tattered pair of white gloves. I had seen him with just that expression on his face, waiting for the start of one of the races for which he used so unaccountably to enter: finishing, almost without exception, last or last but one. When he saw Barbara, he brightened a little, and moved towards us.

'The Merry Widow Waltz,' he said. 'I always like that, don't you? I wish I had known Vienna in the old days before the war.'

Barbara once more seized Tompsitt and myself by whichever arm was nearest to her. She said to Widmerpool: 'My dear, I have made a muddle again. I have told all sorts of people that I will dance this one with them, but—as I can't possibly dance with all three of you—let's all go and have some supper instead.'

'But I've already had supper——' began Widmerpool.

'So have I,' said Barbara. 'Of course we have all had supper. We will have some more.'

'*I* haven't had supper,' said Tompsitt.

Widmerpool did not look at all pleased at Barbara's proposal; nor, for that matter, did Tompsitt, who must have realised now that instead of carrying Barbara gloriously away from a dashing rival—he had probably failed to catch Widmerpool's name at the dinner-party—he was himself to be involved in some little game played by Barbara for her own amusement. Perhaps for that reason he had felt it more dignified to deny a previous supper; for I was fairly sure that I had seen him leaving the supper-room earlier that night. I could not help feeling pleased that Barbara had insisted on my joining them, although I was at the same time aware that even this pleasure was a sign that I was by now myself less seriously concerned with her; for a few weeks before I should have endured all kind of vexation at this situation. Widmerpool, on the other hand, was by no means prepared to give in at once, though his struggles to keep Barbara to himself were feeble enough, and quite ineffectual.

'But look here,' he said. 'You promised——'

'Not another word.'

'But——'

'Come along—all of you.'

Almost dragging Widmerpool with her, she turned, and set off towards the door of the supper-room; bumped heavily into two dowagers on their way out, and said: 'Oh, sorry', but did not pause. As I passed these ladies, I caught the words 'Constance Goring's girl,' spoken by the dowager who had suffered least from the impact. She was evidently attempting to explain, if not excuse, this impetuosity on some hereditary ground connected with Barbara's grandfather. Her more elderly and bedraggled companion, who seemed to have been badly shaken, did not appear to find much solace in this historical, or quasi-scientific, approach to Barbara's indifferent manners. They went off together up the stairs, the elder one still muttering angrily, while Tompsitt and I followed Barbara and Widmerpool to one of many tables decorated with blue hydrangeas in gilt baskets.

The room was still fairly full of people, but we found a place in the corner underneath a picture of Murillo's school in which peasant boys played with a calf. A large supper-party, making a good deal of noise, were seated at the next table, among them Pardoe, who was telling a complicated story about something that had happened to him—or possibly a brother officer—when 'on guard' at the Bank of England.

'The first thing is to get some lemonade,' said Barbara, who never touched any strong drink, in spite of behaviour that often suggested the contrary.

Clearly Widmerpool had been outraged by the loss of his dance. This annoyance, on the face of it, seemed scarcely reasonable, because by that stage of the evening several 'extras' had been played, causing the numbers of dances to become confused, so that there had been plenty of excuse for an unimpeachable mistake to have been made; and obviously Barbara was the kind of girl, at best, to be expected to be in a chronic state of tangle about her partners. However, such considerations seemed to carry no weight whatever with Widmerpool, who sat in silence, refusing food and drink, while he gloomily crumbled a roll of bread. Barbara, who possessed a healthy appetite at all times of day or night, ordered lobster salad. Tompsitt drank—in which I joined him—a glass of what he called 'The Widow'. The wine had the effect of making him discourse on racing, a subject regarding which I was myself unfortunately too ignorant to dispose as summarily as I should have wished of the almost certainly erroneous opinions he put forward. Barbara embarked upon an account of her own experiences at Ascot, of no great interest in themselves, though at the same time hardly justifying the splenetic stare which Widmerpool fixed on her, while she unfolded a narrative based on the matter of starting prices for runners in the Gold Cup, associated at the same time with the question whether or not she had been finally swindled by her bookmaker.

She was, as usual, talking at the top of her voice, so that people at surrounding tables could hear most of what she said. Owing to this very general audibility of her remarks, she became in some way drawn into an argument with Pardoe, who had apparently been a member of the same Ascot party as herself. Although Barbara's voice was not without a penetrating quality, and Pardoe, who spoke, as it were, in a series of powerful squeaks, could no doubt make the welkin ring across the parade-grounds of Wellington Barracks or Caterham, they did not, for some reason, contrive to reach any mutual understanding in their attempts to make their respective points of view plain to each other; so that at last Barbara jumped up from her seat, saying: 'I'm going across to tell him just what did happen.'

There was a vacant chair next to the place where Pardoe sat. If Barbara ever reached that place, there could be little doubt that she would spend the rest of her time in the supper-room—perhaps the remains of her time at the dance—discussing with Pardoe bets, past, present, and future; because he had abandoned any effort to talk to the girl next to him, who was, in fact, amusing herself happily enough with two or three other young men in the neighbourhood. The consequence of these various circumstances was for a decidedly odd incident to take place, with Widmerpool for its central figure: an incident that brought back to me once more expressive memories of Widmerpool as he had been at school. This crisis, as it might reasonably be called, came about because Widmerpool himself must have grasped immediately that, if Barbara abandoned our table at that moment, she would be lost to him for the rest of the time both of them were under the Huntercombes' roof. That, at least, seemed the only possible explanation of the action he now took, when—just as Barbara stood up, in preparation to leave us—he snatched her wrist.

'Look here, Barbara,' he said—and he sounded in actual pain. 'You can't leave me like this.'

Certain actions take place outside the normal course of things so unexpectedly that they seem to paralyse ordinary capacity for feeling surprise; and I watched Widmerpool seize hold of Barbara in this way—by force—without at the precisely operative moment experiencing that amazement with which his conduct on this occasion afterwards, on reconsideration, finally struck me. To begin with, his act was a vigorous and instantaneous assertion of the will, quite out of keeping with the picture then existing in my mind of his character; for although, as I have said before, I no longer thought of him exactly as that uneasy, irrelevant figure he had seemed when we were both schoolboys, his behaviour in France, even when latent power of one kind or another had been unquestionably perceptible in him, had equally suggested a far more plodding manner of getting what he wanted.

In any case, he had been always inclined to shrink from physical contact; and I remembered well how, one day at La Grenadière, Madame Leroy's niece, Berthe, standing in the garden and pointing to the river, which shone distantly in a golden glow of evening light, had remarked: 'Quel paysage féerique', and touched his arm. Widmerpool, at that instant, had started violently, almost as if Berthe's plump fingers were red-hot, or her pointed nails had sharply entered his flesh. That had been several years before; and there was no reason why he should not have changed in this, as in certain outward respects. All the same, it was wholly unexpected—and perhaps a little irritating, even in the light of comparative emancipation from regarding Barbara as my own especial concern—to watch him catch hold of her with those blunt, gnarled fingers. Tompsitt, at that critical moment attempting to get hold of more champagne, did not notice this gesture of Widmerpool's. The grabbing movement had, indeed, taken only a fraction of a second, Widmerpool having released Barbara's wrist almost as soon as his fingers had closed upon it.

If she had been in a calmer mood, Barbara would probably, in the light of subsequent information supplied on the subject, have paid more attention to the strength, and apparent seriousness, of Widmerpool's feelings at that moment. As it was, she merely said: 'Why are you so sour tonight? You need some sweetening.'

She turned to the sideboard that stood by our table, upon which plates, dishes, decanters, and bottles had been placed out of the way before removal. Among this residue stood an enormous sugar castor topped with a heavy silver nozzle. Barbara must suddenly have conceived the idea of sprinkling a few grains of this sugar over Widmerpool, as if in literal application of her theory that he 'needed sweetening', because she picked up this receptacle and shook it over him. For some reason, perhaps because it was so full, no sugar at first sprayed out. Barbara now tipped the castor so that it was poised vertically over Widmerpool's head, holding it there like the sword of Damocles above the tyrant. However, unlike the merely minatory quiescence of that normally inactive weapon, a state of dispensation was not in this case maintained, and suddenly, without the slightest warning, the massive silver apex of the castor dropped from its base, as if severed by the slash of some invisible machinery, and crashed heavily to the floor: the sugar pouring out on to Widmerpool's head in a dense and overwhelming cascade.

More from surprise than because she wished additionally to torment him, Barbara did not remove her hand before the whole contents of the vessel—which voided itself in an instant of time—had descended upon his head and shoulders, covering him with sugar more completely than might have been thought possible in so brief a space. Widmerpool's rather sparse hair had been liberally greased with a dressing—the sweetish smell of which I remembered as somewhat disagreeable when applied in France—this lubricant retaining the grains of sugar, which, as they adhered thickly to his skull, gave him the appearance of having turned white with shock at a single stroke; which, judging by what could be seen of his expression, he might very well in reality have done underneath the glittering incrustations that enveloped his head and shoulders. He had writhed sideways to avoid the downpour, and a cataract of sugar had entered the space between neck and collar; yet another jet streaming between eyes and spectacles.

Barbara was, without doubt, dismayed by the consequences of what she had done; not, I think, because she cared in the least about covering Widmerpool with sugar, an occurrence, however deplorable, that was hard to regard, with the best will in the world, as anything other than funny at that moment. This was the kind of incident, however, to get a girl a bad name; a reputation for horseplay having, naturally, a detrimental effect on invitations. So far as everyone else, among those sitting near us, were concerned, there was a great deal of laughter. Even if some of the people who laughed may also have felt sorry for Widmerpool in his predicament, there was no escape from the fact that he looked beyond words grotesque. The sugar sparkled on him like hoar-frost, and, when he moved, there was a faint rustle as of snow falling gently from leaves of a tree in some wintry forest.

It was a hard situation for anyone to carry off with dignity and good temper. Widmerpool did not exactly attempt to conform to either of these two ideal standards; though in a rather specialised sense—to the eye of an attentive observer—he displayed elements of both qualities. His reaction to circumstances was, in its way, peculiarly characteristic of his nature. He stood up, shook himself like an animal, sending out specks of sugar over many persons in the immediate vicinity, and, smiling slightly, almost apologetically, to himself, took off his spectacles and began to rub their lenses with his handkerchief.

For the second time that night I recalled Stringham's story of Budd and the banana. It must have been, I could now appreciate, just such a moment as this one. I remembered Stringham's exact phrase: 'Do you know, an absolutely *slavish* look came into Widmerpool's face.' There could have been no better description of his countenance as he shook off the sugar on to the carpet beneath him. Once again the same situation had arisen; parallel acceptance of public humiliation; almost the identically explicit satisfaction derived from grovelling before someone he admired; for this last element seemed to show itself unmistakably—though only for a flash—when he glanced reproachfully towards Barbara: and then looked away. This self-immolation, if indeed to be recorded as such, was displayed for so curtailed a second that any substance possessed by that almost immediately shifting mood was to be appreciated only by someone, like myself, cognisant already of the banana incident; so that when Widmerpool pushed his way between the chairs, disappearing a minute later through the doors of the supper-room, he seemed to the world at large, perhaps correctly, to be merely a man in a towering rage.

However, reaction took place so soon as he was gone. There fell all at once a general public dejection similar in every respect, as recorded by Stringham, to that evoked by

Widmerpool's former supposedly glad acceptance of the jolt from Budd's over-ripe fruit. This frightful despondency appeared to affect everyone near enough the scene of action to share a sense of being more or less closely concerned in the affair. For my own part, oddly enough, I was able to identify this sudden sensation of discomfort, comparable to being dowsed with icy water, as instantaneous realisation—simultaneously and most emphatically conveyed in so objective a form—that I had made an egregious mistake in falling in love with Barbara. Up to that moment the situation between us had seemed to be on the way to resolving itself, on my side at least, rather sadly, perhaps not irretrievably, with excusably romantic melancholy. Now I felt quite certain that Barbara, if capable of an act of this sort, was not—and had never been—for me. This may have been a priggish or cowardly decision. Certainly I had had plenty of opportunity to draw similar conclusions from less dramatic occasions. It was, however, final. The note struck by that conclusion was a disagreeable one; totally unlike the comparatively acceptable sentiments of which it took the place.

Barbara herself at first made no serious effort to repair, morally or physically, any of the damage she had caused. Indeed, it was not easy to see what she could do. Now she went so far as to pick up the top of the sugar-castor, and, before she sat down again, returned, in their separate states, the upper and lower halves of this object to the sideboard.

'It really wasn't my fault,' she said. 'How on earth was I to know that the top of the wretched thing would fall off like that? People ought to screw everything of that sort on tight before they give a party.'

She abandoned her project of going to sit with Pardoe, who was still very red in the face from laughter, changing her topic of conversation from racing to that of good works of some kind or other, with which she was, as I already knew, irregularly occupied in Bermondsey. There was no reason whatever to doubt the truth of her own account of the generous proportion of her time spent at the girls' club, or some similar institution, situated there; nor her popularity with those thereby brought within her orbit. All the same, this did not seem to be the ideal moment to hear about her philanthropic activities. Barbara herself may have felt this transition of mood to have been effected with too much suddenness, because quite soon she said: 'I'm going to rescue Aunt Daisy now. It isn't fair to keep her up all night. Besides, Eleanor must have been longing to go home for hours. No—no—don't dream of coming too. Good-night to both of you. See you soon.'

She ran off before either Tompsitt or I could even rise or say good-night. We sat for a minute or two together, finishing our wine: Tompsitt smiling rather acidly to himself, as if aware of the answer to a great many questions, some of them important questions at that.

'Do you know the chap Barbara poured sugar on?' he asked, at last.

'I was at school with him.'

'What was he like?'

'Rather the kind of man people pour sugar on.'

Tompsitt looked disapproving and rather contemptuous. I thought at the time that his glance had reference to Widmerpool. I can now see that it was directed, almost certainly, towards my own remark, which he must have regarded, rather justly, as an answer quite inadequate to his question. Looking back on this exchange, I have no doubt that Tompsitt had already recognised as existing in Widmerpool some potential to which I was myself still almost totally blind; and, although he may neither have liked nor admired Widmerpool, he was at the same time aware of a shared approach to life which supplied a kind of bond between them. My own feeling that it would have been unjustifiable to mention the story of the banana, because I felt myself out of sympathy with Tompsitt, and, although often irritated by his behaviour, was conscious of a kind of uncertain loyalty, even mild liking, for Widmerpool, probably represented a far less instinctive and more artificial or unreal understanding between two individuals.

It would, indeed, be hard to over-estimate the extent to which persons with similar tastes can often, in fact almost always, observe these responses in others: women: money: power: whatever it is they seek; while this awareness remains a mystery to those in whom such tendencies are less highly, or not at all, developed. Accordingly, Tompsitt's acceptance of Widmerpool, and indifference, even rudeness, to many other persons of apparently greater outward consideration—in so much as I reflected on it—seemed to me odd; but this merely because, at that time, I did not understand the foundations required to win Tompsitt's approval. In any case, I saw no advantage in enquiring further into the matter at that hour, having myself already decided to go home to bed as soon as possible. Tompsitt, too, had no doubt had enough of the *tête-à-tête*. He rose, as a matter of fact, before I did, and we walked out together, separating as soon as we had passed through the door: Tompsitt strolling upstairs again towards the ballroom, while I made for the cloak-room. Eleanor was crossing the hall.

'Off to get my bonnet and shawl,' she remarked, delighted that for her, at least, another dance was at an end.

I handed in the ticket, and was waiting while they looked for my hat, when Widmerpool himself appeared from the back regions of the house. He, and no doubt others too, had engaged in a thorough scouring of his person and clothes: most of the sugar having been by now removed, though a few grains still glistened round the button-hole of his silk lapel. He appeared also to have recovered his normal self-possession, such as it was. One of the servants handed him an opera hat, which he opened with a sharp crepitation, placing it on his head at a tilt as we went down the steps together. The night was a little cooler, though still mild enough.

'Which way do you go?' he asked.

'Piccadilly.'

'Are you taxi-ing?'

'I thought I might walk.'

'It sounds as if you lived in a rather expensive area,' said Widmerpool, assuming that judicial air which I remembered from France.

'Shepherd's Market. Quite cheap, but rather noisy.'

'A flat?'

'Rooms—just beside an all-night garage and opposite a block of flats inhabited almost exclusively by tarts.'

'How convenient,' said Widmerpool; rather insincerely, I suspected.

'One of them threw a lamp out of her window the other night.'

'I go towards Victoria,' said Widmerpool.

He had evidently heard enough of a subject that might reasonably be regarded as an unpleasant one, because the local prostitutes were rowdy and aggressive: quite unlike the sad sisterhood of innumerable novels, whose members, by speaking of the days of their innocence, bring peace to lonely men, themselves compromised only to unburden their hearts. My neighbours quarrelled and shouted all night long; and, when business was bad, were not above tapping on the ground-floor window in the small hours.

'My mother's flat is near the Roman Catholic Cathedral,' Widmerpool added. 'We usually let it for a month or two later on in the summer, if we can find a tenant, and take a cottage in the country. Last year we went quite near the Walpole-Wilsons at Hinton Hoo. We are going to do the same next month. I take my holiday then, and, if working, come up every day.'

We strolled towards Grosvenor Place. I hardly knew whether or not to condole with him on the sugar incident. Widmerpool marched along, breathing heavily, rather as if he were taking part in some contest.

'Are you going to the Whitneys' on Thursday?' he asked suddenly.

'No.'

'Neither am I.'

He spoke with resignation; perhaps with slight relief that he had met another who remained uninvited to the Whitneys' dance.

'What about Mrs. Soundness?'

'I can't think why, but I haven't been asked to Mrs. Soundness's,' said Widmerpool, almost petulantly. 'I was taken to dinner there not so long ago—at rather short notice, I agree. But I expect I shall see you at Bertha, Lady Drum's and Mrs. Arthur Clinton's.'

'Probably.'

'I am dining with Lady Augusta Cutts for the Drum-Clinton dance,' said Widmerpool. 'One eats well at Lady Augusta's. But I feel annoyed—even a little hurt—about Mrs. Soundness. I don't think I could possibly have done or said anything at dinner to which exception might have been taken.'

'The card may have gone astray in the post.'

'As a matter of fact,' said Widmerpool, 'one gets very tired of these dances.'

Everyone used to say that dances bored them; especially those young men—with the honourable exception of Archie Gilbert—who never failed to respond to an invitation, and stayed, night after night, to the bitter end. Such complaints were made rather in the spirit of people who grumble at the inconvenience they suffer from others falling in love with them. There was, of course, nothing out of the way in Widmerpool, who had apparently been attending dances for several years, showing by that time signs of disillusionment, especially in the light of his experience at the Huntercombes'; although the way he was talking suggested that he was still keen enough to receive invitations. This projection of himself as a 'dancing man', to use his own phrase, was an intimation—many more were necessary before the lesson was learnt—of how inadequate, as a rule, is one's own grasp of another's assessment of his particular rôle in life. Widmerpool's presence at the Walpole-Wilsons' had at first struck me, rather inexcusably perhaps, as just another proof of the insurmountable difficulties experienced by hostesses in their untiring search for young men at almost any price. It had never occurred to me, when at La Grenadière he had spoken of London dances, that Widmerpool regarded himself as belonging to the backbone of the system.

'You must come and lunch with me in the City,' he said. 'Have you an office in that part of the world?'

Thinking it unlikely that he would ring up, I gave him the telephone number, explaining that my work did not take place in the City. He made some formal enquiries about the firm, and seemed rather disapproving of the nature of the business.

'Who exactly buys "art books"?'

His questions became more searching when I tried to give an account of that side of publishing, and of my own part in it. After further explanations, he said: 'It doesn't sound to me a very serious job.'

'Why not?'

'I can't see it leading to much.'

'What ought it to lead to?'

'You should look for something more promising. From what you say, you do not even seem to keep very regular hours.'

'That's its great advantage.'

Widmerpool shook his head, and was silent for a time. I supposed him to be pondering my affairs—trying to find a way in which my daily occupation could be directed into more ambitious avenues—and I felt grateful, indeed rather touched, at any such interest. However, it turned out that he had either dismissed my future momentarily from his mind when he spoke again, or the train of thought must somehow have led him back to his own problems, because his words were quite unexpected.

'To tell the truth,' he said, 'I was upset—very upset—by what happened tonight.'

'It was silly of Barbara.'

'It was more than silly,' said Widmerpool, speaking with unusual intensity, his voice rising in tone. 'It was a cruel thing to do. I shall stop seeing her.'

'I shouldn't take it all too seriously.'

'I shall certainly take it seriously. You are probably not aware of the situation.'

'What situation?'

'As I think I told you before dinner, Barbara and I used to live near each other in the country. She knows well what my feelings are for her, even though I may not have expressed them in so many words. Of course I see now that it was wrong to take hold of her as I did.'

This disclosure was more than a little embarrassing, both for its unexpectedness and also in the light of my own sentiments, or at least former sentiments, on the subject of Barbara. At that stage of life all sorts of things were going on round about that only later took on any meaning or pattern. Thus some people enjoyed distinctly public love affairs, often quickly forgotten, while others fell in love without anyone, perhaps even including the object of their love, knowing or caring anything about these covert affections. Only years later, if at all, could the consequences of such bottled-up emotions sometimes be estimated: more often, of course, they remained entirely unknown. In Widmerpool's case, for example, I had no idea, and could, I suppose, have had no idea, that he had been in love with Barbara all the time that I myself had adored her. Moreover, in those days, as I have already indicated, I used to think that people who looked and behaved like Widmerpool had really no right to fall in love at all, far less have any success with girls—least of all a girl like Barbara—a point of view that in due course had, generally speaking, to be revised: sometimes in mortifying circumstances. This failure to recognise Widmerpool's passion had, of course, restricted any understanding of his conduct, when at the supper table he had appeared so irritable from the mere consequence of the loss of a dance. I could now guess that, while we sat there, he had been burning in the fires of hell.

'Of course I appreciate that the Gorings are a family of a certain distinction,' said Widmerpool. 'But without the Gwatkin money they would never be able to keep up Pembringham Woodhouse as they do.'

'What was the Gwatkin money?'

'Gwatkin was Lord Aberavon's family name. The peerage was one of the last created by Queen Victoria. As a matter of fact the Gwatkins were perfectly respectable landed stock, I believe. And, of course, the Gorings have not produced a statesman of the first rank since their eighteenth-century ancestor—and he is entirely forgotten. As you probably know, they have no connexion whatever with the baronets of the same name.'

He produced these expository facts as if the history of the Gorings and the Gwatkins offered in some manner a key to his problem.

'What about Barbara's father?'

'As a young man he was thought to show promise of a future in the House of Lords,' said Widmerpool. 'But promise in that Chamber has become of late years increasingly difficult to develop to any satisfactory end. He performed, I have been told, a lot of useful work in committee, but he never held office, and sank into political obscurity. As I heard Sir Horrocks Rusby, K.C., remark at dinner the other night: "It's no good being useful if you don't achieve recognition." Sir Horrocks added that this maxim was a natural corollary of the appearance of sin being as bad as sin itself. On the other hand the farming at Pembringham is some of the most up-to-date in the country, and that is well known.'

'Were you going to propose to Barbara?'

'You don't suppose I have the money to marry, do you?' he said violently. 'That is why I am telling you all this.'

He spoke as if everyone ought already to be familiar with his emotional predicament; indeed, as if it were not only unobservant, but also rather heartless on my part, to have failed to comprehend the implications of his earlier ill-humour. By some curious manipulation of our respective positions—a trick of his I remembered from our time together at the Leroys'—his manner contrived also to suggest that I was being at once callous and at the same time unnecessarily inquisitive about his private affairs.

Such aspects of this sudden revelation about himself and Barbara occurred to me only after I had thought things over the following day. At that moment I was not even particularly struck by the surprising fact that Widmerpool should suddenly decide to unburden himself on the subject of a love affair to someone whose relationship to him was neither that of an intimate friend, nor yet sufficiently remote to justify the man-to-man methods of imparting confidences employed by the total stranger who unfolds his life story in a railway carriage or bar. However, I was impressed at that point chiefly by the fact that Widmerpool had described so closely my own recently passed dilemma: a problem formerly seeming to admit of no solution, from which I had now, however, been freed as abruptly and absolutely as its heavy obligation had so mysteriously arisen in the months before.

By this time we had come to Grosvenor Place, in sight of the triumphal arch, across the summit of which, like a vast paper-weight or capital ornament of an Empire clock, the Quadriga's horses, against a sky of indigo and silver, careered desperately towards the abyss. Here our ways divided. It was on the tip of my tongue to say something of my own position regarding Barbara; for it is always difficult to hear anyone lay claim to having endured the agonies of love without putting forward pretensions to similar experience: especially when the same woman is in question. Whether or not some such reciprocal confidence, advisable or the contrary, would finally have passed between us is hard to say. Probably any material I could have contributed to the subject would have proved all but meaningless, or at best merely irritating, to Widmerpool in his current mood. That is my opinion in face of subsequent dealings with him. However, at that stage in the walk one of those curious changes took place in circumstances of mutual intercourse that might almost be compared, scientifically speaking, with the addition in the laboratory of one chemical to another, by which the whole nature of the experiment is altered: perhaps even an explosion brought about.

For a minute or two we had been standing by the edge of the pavement. Widmerpool was no doubt preparing to say good-night, because he took a sudden step backward. Like so many of his movements, this one was effected awkwardly, so that he managed to precipitate himself into the path of two persons proceeding, side by side, in the direction of Hyde Park Corner. There was, in fact, a minor collison of some force, in which the other parties were at once established as a comparatively elderly man, unusually tall, and a small woman, or girl. Upon the last of these Widmerpool had apparently trodden heavily, because she exclaimed in a raucous voice: 'Hi, you, why the bloody hell can't you go where you're looking!'

So aggressive was the manner in which this question was put that at first I thought the pair of them were probably drunk: a state which, in addition, the discrepancy between their respective heights for some reason quite illogically helped to suggest. Widmerpool began to apologise; and the man now answered at once in a deep tone: 'No, no. Of course it was an accident. Gypsy, I have told you before that you must control yourself when you are out with me. I will not tolerate gratuitous rudeness.'

There was something strangely familiar about these words. He was grey-haired and hatless, carrying a fairly bulky parcel of newspapers, or so they appeared, under his left arm. His voice bore with it memories of time long past. Its tone was, indeed, laden with forgotten associations of childhood; those curious, rather fearful responses weighted with a sense of restriction and misgiving. Even so, there was also something about the stranger that seemed to belong to the immediate present; something that made me feel that a matter which had to do with him, even on that very evening, had already been brought to my notice. Yet his presence conveyed, too, an instant and vertiginous sense of being 'abroad': this last impression suddenly taking shape as that of a far-off visit to Paris. The same scattered records of sight and sound that *Boyhood of Cyrus* had suggested when first seen at the Walpole-Wilsons'. I had another look at the whitening hairs, and saw that they were Mr. Deacon's, last surveyed, years before, on that day in the Louvre among the Peruginos.

He looked much the same, except that there was now something wilder—even a trifle sinister—in his aspect; a representation of Lear on the heath, or Peter the Hermit, in some nineteenth-century historical picture, preaching a crusade. Sandals worn over black socks gave his two feet an authentically medieval air to his extremities. The former rôle was additionally suggested by the undeniably boyish exterior of his companion, whose hair was cut short: barbered, in fact, in a most rough-and-ready fashion in the style then known as an 'Eton crop'. This young woman might, so far as outward appearances were concerned, have passed easily on the stage for the aged king's retainer, for, although her manner was more actively combative than the Fool's, the shortness of her skirt, and bare knees, made her seem to be clad in some kind of smock, or tunic, of the kind in which the part is sometimes played.

When I think of that encounter in Grosvenor Place, my attempt to reintroduce myself to Mr. Deacon in such circumstances seems to me strange, foolhardy even, and the fact still more extraordinary that he should almost immediately have succeeded in grasping my own identity. It was an occasion that undoubtedly did more credit to

Mr. Deacon's social adroitness than to my own, because I was still young enough to be only dimly aware that there are moments when mutual acquaintance may be allowed more wisely to pass unrecognised. For example, to find a white-haired gentleman wandering about the streets in the small hours in the company of a young woman wearing an ample smear of lipstick across her face, and with stockings rolled to the knee, might easily prove a juncture when former meetings in irreproachable surroundings could, without offence, have been tactfully disregarded; although, as it turned out, there was not the smallest breath of scandal at that moment encompassing either of them.

'I had dinner at a house where one of your pictures hangs,' I told him, when enquiries about my family had been made and answered.

'Good gracious,' said Mr. Deacon. 'Which one?'

'Boyhood of Cyrus.'

'Was that Aberavon's? I thought he was dead these twenty years.'

'One of his daughters became Lady Walpole-Wilson. The picture is at her house in Eaton Square.'

'Well, I'm glad to know its whereabouts,' said Mr. Deacon. 'I always make bold to consider it rather a successful achievement of mine, within the limits of the size of the canvas. It is unusual for people of that sort to have much taste in art. Aberavon was the exception. He was a man with vision. I expect his descendants have hung it in some quite incongruous place.'

I thought it wiser to supply no further details on the subject of the hanging of *Boyhood of Cyrus*. 'Skyed' in the hall was a position even the most modest of painters could hardly regard as complimentary; though I was impressed by Mr. Deacon's perspicacity in guessing this fate.

It is, indeed, strange how often persons, living in other respects quite unobjectively, can suddenly become acutely objective about some specific concern of their own. However, no answer was required, because at that moment Widmerpool suddenly stepped in.

At first, after making some sort of an apology for his earlier clumsiness, he had stood staring at Mr. Deacon and the girl as if exhibits at a freak show—which it would hardly be going too far to say they somewhat resembled—but now he seemed disposed to dispute certain matters raised by Mr. Deacon's remarks. I had felt, immediately after making this plunge of recognition, that Widmerpool, especially in his existing mood, would scarcely be inclined to relish this company. In fact, I could not understand why he did not at once make for home, leaving us in peace to wind up the reunion, a duty that my own eagerness, perhaps misplaced, had imposed mutually upon Mr. Deacon and myself. Now to my surprise Widmerpool suddenly said: 'I think, if you meet her, you will find Lady Walpole-Wilson most appreciative of art. She was talking to me about the Academy only this evening—in connexion with the question of the Haig statue—and her comments were illuminating.'

Mr. Deacon was delighted by this frank expression of opinion. There was, naturally, no reason why he should possess any knowledge of Widmerpool, whom I discovered in due course to be—in Mr. Deacon's pre-determined view and own words—'a typical empty-headed young fellow with more money than is good for him' who was now preparing to tell an older man, and an artist, 'what was what in the field of painting'. This was, indeed, the kind of situation in which Mr. Deacon had all his life taken pleasure, and such eminence as he had, in fact, achieved he owed largely to making a habit of speaking in an over-bearing and sarcastic, sometimes almost insulting, manner to the race thus generically described as having 'more money than was good for them'. He looked upon himself as the appointed scourge of all such persons, amongst whom, as I have said, he had immediately classed Widmerpool. The mistake was perhaps inevitable in the circumstances. In fairness to Mr. Deacon it should be added that these onslaughts were almost without exception accepted by the victims themselves—a fact born out by Barnby—as in some eclectic manner complimentary, so that no harm was done; even good, if the sale of Mr. Deacon's pictures could be so regarded.

'Should I ever have the honour of meeting her Ladyship,' said Mr. Deacon, with the suggestion of a flourish, 'I shall much look forward to a discussion on the subject of that *interesting* institution, the Royal Academy. When in need of mirth, I should be lost without it. I expect Isbister, R.A., is one of her special favourites.'

'I have not heard her mention his name,' said Widmerpool, forgoing none of his seriousness. 'But, for my own part, I was not displeased with Isbister's portrait of Cardinal Whelan at Burlington House last year. I preferred it to—was it the wife of the Solicitor-General—that was so much praised?'

It showed a rather remarkable effort of will on the part of Widmerpool, whose interest in such matters was not profound, to have been able to quote these examples on the spur of the moment; and there is no knowing into what inextricable tangle this subject would not have led them both, if their conversation had not been mercifully interrupted by the girl, who now said: 'Are we going to stand here all night? My feet hurt.'

'But how shameful,' said Mr. Deacon, with all his earlier formality. 'I have not introduced you yet. This is Miss

Gypsy Jones. Perhaps you have already met. She goes about a great deal.'

I mentioned Widmerpool's name in return, and Miss Jones nodded to us, without showing much sign of friendliness. Her face was pale, and she possessed an almost absurdly impudent expression, in part natural outcome of her cast of features, but also, as almost immediately became apparent, in an even greater degree product of her temperament. She looked like a thoroughly ill-conditioned errand-boy. Her forehead had acquired a smudge of coal-dust or lamp-black, darker and denser than, though otherwise comparable to, the smudge on Tompsitt's shirt-front. It seemed to have been put there deliberately to offset her crimson mouth. Like Mr. Deacon, she too clutched a pile of papers under her arm, somehow suggesting in doing so the appearance of one of those insects who carry burdens as large as, or even larger than, their own puny frame.

'You must wonder why we are on our way home at this late hour,' said Mr. Deacon. 'We have been attempting in our poor way to aid the cause of disarmament at Victoria Station.'

Mr. Deacon's purpose had not, in fact, occurred to me—it is later in life that one begins to wonder about other people's activities—nor was it immediately made clear by Gypsy Jones extracting a kind of broadsheet from the sheaf under her arm, and holding it towards Widmerpool.

'Penny, *War Never Pays!*' she said.

Widmerpool, almost counterfeiting the secretive gesture of Lady Walpole-Wilson pressing money on Archie Gilbert in the taxi, fumbled in his trouser pocket, and in due course passed across a coin to her. In return she gave him the sheet, which, folding it without examination, he transferred to an inner pocket on his hip or in his tails. Scarcely knowing how to comment on the dealings in which Mr.

Deacon and his companion were engaged, I enquired whether night-time was the best season to dispose of this publication.

'There is the depot,' said Mr. Deacon. 'And then some of the late trains from the Continent. It's not too bad a pitch, you know.'

'And now you are going home?'

'We decided to have a cup of coffee at the stall by Hyde Park Corner,' said Mr. Deacon, adding with what could only be described as a deep giggle: 'I felt I could venture there chaperoned by Gypsy. Coffee can be very grateful at this hour. Why not join us in a cup?'

While he was speaking a taxi cruised near the kerb on the far side of the road. Widmerpool was still staring rather wildly at Gypsy Jones, apparently regarding her much as a doctor, suspecting a malignant growth, might examine a diseased organism under the microscope; although I found later that any such diagnosis of his attitude was far from the true one. Thinking that physical removal might put him out of his supposed misery, I asked if he wanted to hail the passing cab. He glanced uncertainly across the street. For a second he seemed seriously to contemplate the taxi; and then, finally, to come to a decision important to himself.

'I'll join you in some coffee, if I may,' he said. 'On thinking things over, coffee is just what I need myself.'

This resolution was unexpected, to say the least. However, if he wanted to prolong the night in such company, I felt that determination to be his own affair. So far as I was myself concerned, I was not unwilling to discover more of someone like Mr. Deacon who had loomed as a mysterious figure in my mind in the manner of all persons discussed by grown-ups in the presence of a child.

We set off up the hill together, four abreast: Widmerpool and Gypsy Jones on the flanks. Across the road the coffee-stall came into sight, a spot of light round which the scarlet tunics and white equipment of one or two Guardsmen still flickered like the bright wings of moths attracted from nocturnal shadows by a flame. From the park rose the heavy scent of London on a summer night. Here, too, bands could be heard distantly throbbing. We crossed the road at the island and joined a knot of people round the stall, at the side of which, as if killing time while he waited for a friend late in arrival, an elderly person in a dinner-jacket was very slowly practising the Charleston, swaying his weight from one side of his patent leather shoes to the other, while he kept the tips of his fingers delicately in his coat pockets. Mr. Deacon glanced at him with disapproval, but acknowledged, though without warmth, the smirk proffered by a young man in a bright green suit, the uncomfortable colour of which was emphasised by auburn hair, erratically dyed. This was perhaps not a spot one might have chosen to soothe Widmerpool after his unfortunate experience with Barbara and the sugar. All the same, at the far end of the stall's little counter, he seemed already to have found something to discuss with Gypsy Jones—aspects of the question of the Haig statue, possibly, or the merits of Isbister's portrait-painting—and both of them seemed fairly happy. Mr. Deacon began to explain to me how contemporary Paris had become 'altogether too rackety' for his taste.

'The Left Bank was all right when I met you in the Louvre with your family,' he said. 'Wasn't the Peace Conference in progress then? I didn't take much interest in such things in those days. Now I know better. The truth is one gets too intimate with too many people if one stays in Montparnasse too long. I have come back to England for a little quiet. Besides, the French can be very interfering in their own particular way.'

Purveying *War Never Pays!* at midnight in the company of Gypsy Jones seemed, on the face of it, a capricious manner of seeking tranquillity; but—as I knew nothing of the life abandoned by Mr. Deacon to which such an undertaking was alternative—the extent of its potentially less tempting contrasts was impossible to gauge. Regarded from a conventional standpoint, Mr. Deacon gave the impression of having gone down-hill since the days when he had been accustomed to visit my parents, to whom he made little or no reference beyond expression of pious hopes that both of them enjoyed good health. It appeared that he was himself now running a curiosity-shop in the neighbourhood of Charlotte Street. He pressed me to 'look him up' there at the earliest opportunity: writing the address on the back of an envelope. In spite of his air of being set apart from worldly things, Mr. Deacon discoursed with what at least sounded like a good deal of practical common sense regarding the antique business, hours spent in the shop, time given to buying, closing arrangements, and such material points. I did not know what his financial position might be, but the shop was evidently providing, for the time being, an adequate livelihood.

'There are still a few people who are prepared to pay for nice things,' he remarked.

When given coffee, he had handed back his cup, after examination, in objection to the alleged existence on the rim of the china of cracks and chips 'in which poison might collect'.

'I am always worried as to whether or not the crockery is properly washed up in places like this,' he said.

Reflectively, he turned in his hand the cup that had replaced the earlier one, and continued to digress on the general inadequacy of sanitary precautions in shops and restaurants.

'It's just as bad in London as in Paris cafés—worse in some ways,' he said.

He had just returned the second cup as equally unsatisfactory, when someone at my elbow asked: 'Can one get matches here?' I was standing half-turned away from the counter, listening to Mr. Deacon, and did not see this new arrival. For some reason the voice made me glance towards Widmerpool; not because its tone bore any resemblance to his own thick utterance, but because the words suggested, oddly enough, Widmerpool's almost perpetual presence as an unvaried component of everyday life rather than as an unexpected element of an evening like this one. A moment later someone touched my arm, and the same voice said: 'Where are you off to, may I ask, in all those fine clothes?' A tall, pale young man, also in evening dress, though without a hat, was standing beside me.

At first sight Stringham looked just the same; indeed, the fact that on the former occasion, as now, he had been wearing a white tie somehow conveyed the illusion that he had been in a tail-coat for all the years since we had last met. He looked tired, perhaps rather irritable, though evidently pleased to fall in like this with someone known to him. I was conscious of that peculiar feeling of restraint in meeting someone, of whom I had once seen so much, now dropped altogether from everyday life: an extension—and refinement, perhaps—of the sensation no doubt mutually experienced between my parents and Mr. Deacon on that day in the Louvre: more acute, because I had been far more closely associated with Stringham than they ever with Mr. Deacon. The presence of Widmerpool at the stall added a touch of fantasy to Stringham's appearance at that spot; for it was as if Widmerpool's own antics had now called his mimic into being as inexorable accessory to any real existence to which Widmerpool himself might aspire. I introduced Mr. Deacon and Gypsy Jones.

'Why, hullo, Stringham,' said Widmerpool, putting down his coffee-cup with a clatter and puffing out his cheeks in a great demonstration of heartiness. 'We haven't met since we were at Le Bas's.'

He thought, no doubt—if he thought of the matter at all—that Stringham and I were friends who continued to see each other often, inevitably unaware that this was, in fact, our first meeting for so long. Stringham, on his side, clearly supposed that all four of us—Widmerpool, Mr. Deacon, Gypsy Jones, and myself—had been spending an evening together; though it was obvious that he could determine no easy explanation for finding me in Widmerpool's company, and judged our companionship immensely funny. He laughed a lot when I explained that Widmerpool and I had been to the Huntercombes' dance.

'Well, well,' he said. 'It's a long time since I went to a dance. How my poor mother used to hate them when my sister was first issued to an ungrateful public. Was it agony?'

'May one enquire why you should suppose a splendid society ball to have been agony?' asked Mr. Deacon, rather archly.

There could be no doubt that, at first sight, he had taken a great fancy to Stringham. He spoke in his ironically humorous voice from deep down in his throat.

'In the first place,' said Stringham, 'I rather dislike being crowded and uncomfortable—though, heaven knows, dances are not the only places where that happens. A more serious criticism I put forward is that one is expected, when attending them, to keep at least moderately sober.'

When he said this, it struck me that Stringham had already, perhaps, consumed a few drinks before meeting us.

'And otherwise behave with comparative rectitude?' said Mr. Deacon, charmed by this answer. 'I believe I understand you perfectly.'

'Exactly,' said Stringham. 'For that reason I am now on my way—as I expect you are too—to Milly Andriadis's. I expect that will be crowded and uncomfortable too, but at least one can behave as one wishes there.'

'Is that woman still extorting her toll from life?' asked Mr. Deacon.

'Giving a party in Hill Street this very night. I assumed you were all going there.'

'This coffee tastes of glue,' said Gypsy Jones, in her small, rasping, though not entirely unattractive voice.

She was dissatisfied, no doubt, with the lack of attention paid to her; though possibly also rather stimulated by the way events were shaping.

'One heard a lot of Mrs. Andriadis in Paris,' said Mr. Deacon, taking no notice of this interruption. 'In fact, I went to a party of hers once—at least I think she was joint hostess with one of the Murats. A deplorable influence she is, if one may say so.'

'One certainly may,' said Stringham. 'She couldn't be worse. As a matter of fact, my name is rather intimately linked with hers at the moment—though naturally we are unfaithful to each other in our fashion, when opportunity arises, which in my case, I have to confess, is not any too often.'

I really had no very clear idea what all this talk was about, and I had never heard of Mrs. Andriadis. I was also uncertain whether Stringham truly supposed that we might all be on our way to this party, or if he were talking completely at random. Mr. Deacon, however, seemed to grasp the situation perfectly, continuing to laugh out a series of deep chuckles.

'Where do you come from now?' I asked.

'I've a flat just round the corner,' said Stringham. 'At first I couldn't make up my mind whether I was in the vein for a party, and thought a short walk would help me decide. To tell the truth, I have only just risen from my couch. There had, for one reason and another, been a number of rather late nights last week, and, as I didn't want to miss poor Milly's party in case she felt hurt—she is too touchy for words—I went straight home to bed this afternoon so that I might be in tolerable form for the festivities—instead of the limp rag one feels most of the time. It seemed about the hour to stroll across. Why not come, all of you? Milly would be delighted.'

'Is it near?'

'Just past those Sassoon houses. Do come. That is, if none of you mind low parties.'

2.

Uncle Giles's standard of values was, in most matters, ill-adapted to employment by anyone except himself. At the same time, I can now perceive that by unhesitating contempt for all human conduct but his own—judged among his immediate relatives as far from irreproachable—he held up a mirror to emphasise latent imperfections of almost any situation that momentary enthusiasm might, in the first instance, have overlooked. His views, in fact, provided a kind of yardstick to the proportions of which no earthly yard could possibly measure up. This unquestioning condemnation of everyone, and everything, had no doubt supplied armour against some of the disappointments of life; although any philosophical satisfaction derived from reliance on these sentiments had certainly not at all diminished my uncle's capacity for grumbling, in and out of season, at anomalies of social behaviour to be found, especially since the war, on all sides. To look at things through Uncle Giles's eyes would never have occurred to me; but—simply as an exceptional expedient for attempting to preserve a sense of proportion, a state of mind, for that matter, neither always acceptable nor immediately advantageous—there may have been something to be said for borrowing, once in a way, something from Uncle Giles's method of approach. This concept of regarding one's own affairs through the medium of a friend or relative is not, of course, a specially profound one; but, in the case of my uncle, the field of vision surveyed was always likely to be so individual to himself that almost any scene contemplated from this point of vantage required, on the part of another observer, more than ordinarily drastic refocusing.

He would, for example, have dismissed the Huntercombes' dance as one of those formal occasions that he himself, as it were by definition, found utterly unsympathetic. Uncle Giles disapproved on principle of anyone who could afford to live in Belgrave Square (for he echoed almost the identical words of Mr. Deacon regarding people 'with more money than was good for them'), especially when they were, in addition, bearers of what he called 'handles to their names'; though he would sometimes, in this same connexion, refer with conversational familiarity, more in sorrow than anger, to a few members of his own generation, known to him in a greater or lesser degree in years gone by, who had been brought by inheritance to this unhappy condition. He had, for some reason, nothing like so strong an aversion for recently acquired wealth—from holders of which, it is true, he had from time to time even profited to a small degree—provided the money had been amassed by owners safely to be despised, at least in private, by himself or anyone else; and by methods commonly acknowledged to be indefensible. It was to any form of long-established affluence that he took the gravest exception, particularly if the ownership of land was combined with any suggestion of public service, even when such exertions were performed in some quite unspectacular, and apparently harmless, manner, like sitting on a borough council, or helping at a school-treat. 'Interfering beggars,' he used to remark of those concerned.

My uncle's dislike for the incidence of Mrs. Andriadis's party—equally, as a matter of course, overwhelming—would have required, in order to avoid involving himself as an auxiliary of more than negative kind in some warring faction, the selection of a more careful approach on his part than that adopted to display potential disapproval of the Huntercombes; for, by taking sides too actively, he might easily find himself in the position of defending one or another of the systems of conducting human existence which he was normally to be found attacking in another sector of the battlefield. At the same time, it would hardly be true to say that Uncle Giles was deeply concerned with the question of consistency in argument. On the contrary, inconsistency in his own line of thought worried him scarcely at all. As a matter of fact, if absolutely compelled to make a pronouncement on the subject, he—or, so far as that went, anyone else investigating the matter—might have taken a fairly firm stand on the fact that immediate impressions at Mrs. Andriadis's were not, after all, greatly different from those conveyed on first arrival at Belgrave Square.

The house, which had the air of being rented furnished only for a month or two, was bare; somewhat unattractively decorated in an anonymous style which, at least in the upholstery, combined touches of the Renaissance with stripped panelling and furniture of 'modernistic' design, these square, metallic pieces on the whole suggesting Berlin rather than Paris. Although smaller than the Huntercombes', my uncle would have detected there a decided suggestion of wealth, and also—something to which his objection was, if possible, even more deeply ingrained—an atmosphere of frivolity; for, like many people whose days are passed largely in a state of inanition, when not of crisis, Uncle Giles prided himself on his serious approach to life, deprecating nothing so much as what he called 'trying to laugh things off'; and it was true that a lifetime of laughter would scarcely have sufficed to exorcise some of his own fiascos.

On the whole, Mrs. Andriadis's guests belonged to a generation older than that attending the dance, and their voices swelled more loudly throughout the rooms. The men were in white ties and the ladies' dresses were carried in general with a greater flourish than at the Huntercombes': some of the wearers distinctly to be classed as 'beauties'. A minute sprinkling of persons from both sexes still in day clothes absolved Mr. Deacon and Gypsy Jones from looking quite so out of place as might otherwise have been apprehended; and, during the course of that night, I was surprised to notice how easily these two (who had deposited their unsold copies of *War Never Pays!* in the hall, under a high-backed crimson-and-gold chair, designed in an uneasy compromise between *avant garde* motifs and seventeenth-century Spanish tradition) faded unobtrusively into the general background of the party. There were, indeed, many girls present not at all dissimilar in face and figure to Gypsy Jones; while Mr. Deacon, too, could have found several prototypes of himself among a contingent of sardonic, moderately distinguished, grey-haired men, some of whom smelt of bath-salts, dispersed here and there throughout the gathering. The comparative formality of the scene to be observed on our arrival had cast a certain blight on my own—it now seemed too ready—acceptance of Stringham's assurance that invitation was wholly unnecessary; for the note of 'frivolity', to which Uncle Giles might so undeniably have taken exception, was, so I could not help feeling, infused with an undercurrent of extreme coolness, a chilly consciousness of conflicting egoisms, far more intimidating than anything normally to be met with at Walpole-Wilsons', Huntercombes', or, indeed, anywhere else of 'that sort'.

However, as the eye separated individuals from the mass, marks of a certain exoticism were here revealed, notably absent from the scene at Belgrave Square: such deviations from a more conventional standard alleviating, so far as they went, earlier implications of stiffness; although these intermittent patches of singularity—if they were to be regarded as singular—were, on the whole, not necessarily predisposed to put an uninvited newcomer any more at his ease; except perhaps in the sense that one act of informality in such surroundings might, roughly speaking, be held tacitly to excuse another.

For example, an elderly gentleman with a neat white moustache and eye-glass, evidently come from some official assemblage—perhaps the reception at the Spanish Embassy—because he wore miniatures, and the cross of some order in white enamel and gold under the points of his collar, was conversing with a negro, almost tawny in pigmentation, rigged out in an elaborately waisted and square-shouldered tail-coat with rather exaggeratedly pointed lapels. It was really this couple that had made me think of Uncle Giles, who, in spite of advocacy of the urgent dissolution of the British Empire on grounds of its despotic treatment of backward races, did not greatly care for coloured people, whatever their origin; and, unless some quite exceptional circumstance sanctioned the admixture, he would certainly not have approved of guests of African descent being invited to a party to which he himself had been bidden. In this particular case, however, he would undoubtedly have directed the earlier momentum of his disparagement against the man with the eye-glass, since my uncle could not abide the wearing of medals. 'Won 'em in Piccadilly, I shouldn't wonder,' he was always accustomed to comment, when his eye fell on these outward and visible awards, whoever the recipient, and whatever the occasion.

Not far from the two persons just described existed further material no less vulnerable to my uncle's censure for a heavily-built man, with a greying beard and the air of a person of consequence, was unsuccessfully striving, to the accompaniment of much laughter on both sides, to wrest a magnum of champagne from the hands of an ancient dame, black-browed, and wearing a tiara, or jewelled head-dress of some sort, who was struggling manfully to retain possession of the bottle. Here, therefore, were assembled in a single group—as it were of baroque sculpture come all at once to life—three classes of object all equally abhorrent to Uncle Giles; that is to say, champagne, beards, and tiaras: each in its different way representing sides of life for which he could find no good to say; beards implying to him Bohemianism's avoidance of those practical responsibilities with which he always felt himself burdened: tiaras and champagne unavoidably conjuring up images of guilty opulence of a kind naturally inimical to 'radical' principles.

Although these relatively exotic embellishments to the scene occurred within a framework on the whole commonplace enough, the shifting groups of the party created, as a spectacle, illusion of moving within the actual confines of a picture or tapestry, into the depths of which the personality of each new arrival had to be automatically amalgamated; even in the case of apparently unassimilable material such as Mr. Deacon or Gypsy Jones, both of whom, as I have said, were immediately absorbed, at least to the eye, almost as soon as they had crossed the threshold of Mrs. Andriadis.

'Who is this extraordinary old puss you have in tow?' Stringham had asked, while he and I had walked a little ahead of the other three, after we had left the coffee-stall.

'A friend of my parents.'

'Mine know the oddest people too—especially my father. And Miss Jones? Also a friend—or a cousin?'

He only laughed when I attempted to describe the circumstances that had led to my finding myself with Mr. Deacon, who certainly seemed to require some explanation at the stage of life, and of behaviour, that he had now reached. Stringham pretended to think—or was at least unwilling to disbelieve—that Gypsy Jones was my own chosen companion, rather than Mr. Deacon's. However, he had shown no sign of regarding either of them as noticeably more strange than anyone else, encountered on a summer night, who might seem eligible to be asked to a party given by a friend. It was, indeed, clear to me that strangeness was what Stringham now expected, indeed, demanded from life: a need already become hard to satisfy. The detachment he had always seemed to possess was now more marked than ever before. At the same time he had become in some manner different from the person I had known at school, so that, in spite of the air almost of relief that he had shown at falling in with us, I began to feel uncertain whether, in fact, Anne Stepney had not used the term 'pompous' in the usual, and not some specialised, sense. Peter Templer, too, I remembered, had employed the same word years before at school when he had enquired about Stringham's family. 'Well, I imagine it was all rather pompous even at lunch, wasn't it?' he had asked. At that time I associated pomposity with Le Bas, or even with Widmerpool, both of whom habitually indulged in mannerisms unthinkable in Stringham. Yet there could be no doubt that he now possessed a personal remoteness, a kind of preoccupation with his own affairs, that gave at least some *prima facie* excuse for using the epithet. All the rather elaborate friendliness, and apparent gratitude for the meeting—almost as if it might offer means of escape from some burdensome commitment—was unquestionably part of a barrier set up against the rest of the world. Trying to disregard the gap, of which I felt so well aware, as it yawned between us, I asked about his family.

'My father sits in Kenya, quarrelling with his French wife.'

'And your mother?'

'Similarly occupied with Buster over here.'

'At Glimber?'

'Glimber—as arranged by Buster—is let to an Armenian. They now live in a house of more reasonable proportions at Sunningdale. You must come there one day—if only to see dawn breaking over the rock garden. I once arrived there in the small hours and had that unforgettable experience.'

'Is Buster still in the Navy?'

'Not he.'

'A gentleman of leisure?'

'But much humbled. No longer expects one to remember every individual stroke he made during the polo season.'

'So you both rub along all right?'

'Like a house on fire,' said Stringham. 'All the same, you know parents—especially step-parents—are sometimes a bit of a disappointment to their children. They don't fulfil the promise of their early years. As a matter of fact, Buster may come to the party if he can get away.'

'And Miss Weedon?'

'Tuffy has left. I see her sometimes. She came into a little money. My mother changes her secretary every week now. She can't get along with anyone since Tuffy resigned.'

'What about Peggy Stepney?'

'What, indeed!'

'I sat next to her sister, Anne, at dinner tonight.'

'Poor Anne, I hope you were kind to her.'

He gave no hint as to whether or not he was still involved with Peggy Stepney. I presumed that there was at least no longer any question of an engagement.

'Are you still secretary to Sir Magnus Donners?'

'Still to be seen passing from time to time through the Donners-Brebner Building,' said Stringham, laughing again. 'It might be hard to establish my precise status there.'

'Nice work if you can get it!'

'"A transient and embarrassed spectre", as Le Bas used to say, when one tried to slip past him in the passage without attracting undue attention. As a matter of fact I saw Le Bas not so long ago. He turned up at Cowes last year. Not my favourite place at the best of times, but Buster seems to like the life.'

'Was Le Bas sailing?'

'Got up rather like a park-keeper. It is extraordinary how schoolmasters never get any older. In early life they settle on a cruising speed and just stick to it. Le Bas confused me with a Kenya friend of my father's called Dicky Umfraville—you probably know the name as a gentleman-rider—who left the school—sacked as a matter of fact—some fifteen or twenty years earlier than myself.'

It was true that Le Bas, like most of his profession, was accustomed to behave as if never particularly clear as to the actual decade in which he might, at any given moment, be existing; but, once assuming that recognition had not been immediate, his supposition that Stringham was something more than twenty-three or twenty-four—whatever his age at their meeting at Cowes—was not altogether surprising, because he looked, so it seemed to me by then, at least ten years older than when we had last seen each other. At the same time, it was no doubt unreasonable to mistake Stringham for Dicky Umfraville, of whose activities in Kenya I remember Sillery speaking a word of warning towards the end of my first year at the university. However, *tête-à-tête* conversation between Stringham and myself had now to come to an end, because by this time we had been admitted to the house, and the presence of a surrounding crowd of people put a stop to that kind of talk.

In one room the carpet had been rolled back, and a hunchback wearing a velvet smoking-jacket was playing an accordion, writhing backwards and forwards as he attacked his instrument with demiurgic frenzy.

'I took one look at you——
That's all I meant to do——
And then my heart—stood still . . .'

To this music, cheek to cheek, two or three couples were dancing. Elsewhere the party, again resembling the Huntercombes', had spread over the entire building, its density as thick on landings and in passages as among the rooms. There were people everywhere, and voices sounded from the upper levels of bedroom floors. Stringham pushed his way through this swarming herd, the rest of us following. There was a buffet in the drawing-room, where hired butlers were serving drinks. Moving through the closely-packed mob, from which a powerful aroma of tobacco, alcohol, and cosmetics arose, like the scent of plants and flowers in some monstrous garden, we came suddenly upon Mrs. Andriadis herself, when a further, and enormous, field of speculation was immediately projected into being. Stringham took her hand.

'Milly . . .'

'Darling . . .' she said, throwing an arm round his neck and kissing him energetically. 'Why so disgustingly late?'

'Overslept.'

'Milly ought to have been there.'

'Why wasn't she?'

'Milly thought this was going to be a horrible party and she was going to hate it.'

'Not now?'

'Couldn't be.'

I did not remember exactly what outward appearance I had planned before arrival for Mrs. Andriadis. A suspicion may not have been altogether suppressed that she might turn out to resemble, in physiognomy and dress, one of those formalised classical figures from bronze or ceramic art, posed similarly to one or another of the positions into which Le Bas would sometimes contort himself; but my invention, though perhaps in one aspect ancient Greek, was certainly modern Greek in another. However, the shape any imaginary portrait may have taken was quite unlike this small woman with powder-grey hair, whose faint touch of a Cockney accent, like her coiffure, was evidently retained deliberately as a considered attraction. She was certainly pretty, though the effect was obtained in some indirect and unobtrusive manner. Her dark eyebrows were rather strongly marked.

She stood clinging to Stringham's arm, while, as if dancing, she twitched her body this way and that. Her eyes were brown and very bright, and the jewels she wore, in rather defiant profusion, looked as if they might have cost a good deal of money. She could have been about thirty-five; perhaps a year or two more. At first it seemed to me that she must have been a great beauty ten or fifteen years earlier; but I discovered, in due course, from those who had known Mrs. Andriadis for a long time, that, on the contrary, the epoch of this party represented perhaps the peak of her good looks—that is, if her looks (or anyone else's) could be admitted as open to objective judgment by some purely hypothetical standard; for, as Barnby used to say: 'It's no good being a beauty alone on a desert island.'

Barnby himself adhered to the theory that Mrs. Andriadis's appearance had been greatly improved after her hair had turned grey: being usually accustomed to add to this opinion the statement that the change of shade had taken place 'After her first night with "The Royal Personage", as Edgar always calls him.' I was strongly reminded by her appearance—so it seemed to me—of another woman; though of whom I could not decide.

'I brought some friends along, Milly,' said Stringham. 'You don't mind?'

'You darlings,' said Mrs. Andriadis. 'It is going to be a lovely party now. All arranged on the spur of the moment. Come with me, Charles. We are making Deauville plans.'

Although obviously in the habit of having her own way in most matters, she showed no surprise at all at the sight of Widmerpool, Mr. Deacon, Gypsy Jones, and myself. Indeed, it seemed probable that, as newly-arrived entities, she took cognisance, so far as our self-contained group was concerned, of no more than Mr. Deacon and me, since Widmerpool and Gypsy Jones, threading their way across the room, had been left some little way behind the rest of us. Even Mr. Deacon, in spite of strenuous efforts on his own part, scarcely managed to shake hands with Mrs. Andriadis, although, as he bent almost double, the tips of their fingers may have touched. It was at that instant of tenuous contact that Mr. Deacon attempted to explain the matter, mentioned already by him at the coffee-stall, to the effect that he thought they had met once before 'in Paris with the Murats'. An assertion of which Mrs. Andriadis herself took no notice whatsoever.

As it turned out, neither Widmerpool nor Gypsy Jones ever reached her at that—nor, as far as I know, any other—stage of the party, because, evidently deciding to spend no more time on her welcome of such miscellaneous guests, she took Stringham by the arm, and bore him away. Widmerpool, with a set expression on his face, passed obliquely through the crowd, still filled, as I supposed, with an unquenchable determination, even stronger, if possible, than Mr. Deacon's, to make himself at all costs known to his hostess. Gypsy Jones also disappeared from sight at the same moment; though not, it might be presumed, with the same aim. Their effacement was effected rather to my relief, because I had feared from Widmerpool a stream of comment of a kind for which I felt not at all in the mood; while at the same time, rather snobbishly, I did not wish to appear too closely responsible for being the cause, however indirect, of having brought Mr. Deacon and Gypsy Jones to the house. This was the moment when the surrounding tableaux formed by the guests—of which I have already spoken—began to take coherent shape in my eyes, when viewed from the corner by the grand piano, where I had been left beside Mr. Deacon; who now accepted, with a somewhat roguish glance, a beaker of champagne from the tray of one of the men-servants.

'I cannot say I altogether like these parties,' he said. 'A great many of them seem to be given these days. Paris was just the same. I really should not have accepted your nice-looking friend's invitation if we had not had such a very indifferent evening with *War Never Pays!* As it was, I felt some recreation was deserved—though I fear I shall not find much here. Not, at least, in any form likely to appeal to my present mood. By the way, I don't know whether you would ever care to lend a hand with *War Never Pays!*, a penny, one of these days? We are always glad to enlist new helpers.'

I excused myself decisively from any such undertaking on grounds of lacking aptitude for any kind of salesmanship.

'Not everyone feels it a bounden duty,' said Mr. Deacon. 'I need not tell you that Gypsy is scarcely a colleague I should choose, if I were a free agent, but she is so keen I cannot very well raise objection. Her political motives are not identical with my own, but Pacifism is ally of all who desire this country's disarmament. Do you know, I even put her up at my place? After all, you can't expect her to get all the way back to Hendon Central at this time of night. It wouldn't be right.'

He spoke almost with unction at the nobility of such self-sacrifice, and, finishing his champagne at a gulp, wiped the corners of his mouth carefully with a silk handkerchief. On the wall opposite us, one of the panels of the room had been replaced—possibly with the object of increasing the rather 'daring' effect at which decoration of the house evidently aimed—with squares of looking-glass, in the reflections of which could be observed the changing pattern made by the occupants of the room.

The lady with the tiara had at last reluctantly abandoned the magnum to her bearded opponent (now accommodated with a younger, though less conspicuous, woman), and, apparently much flattered by the attention, she was accepting a cigarette from the negro's long case, which he was holding out towards her, the metal seeming delicately matched in tone with the skin of its owner's hand, also the tint of old gold. Beyond this couple, the gentleman with the eye-glass and medals was now talking to a figure whose back-view—for some reason familiar—showed an immensely time-worn suit of evening clothes, the crumpled tails of which hung down almost to its wearer's heels, giving him the appearance of a musical-hall comedian, or conjuror of burlesque, whose baggy Charlie Chaplin trousers, threatening descent to the ground at any moment, would probably reveal red flannel, grotesquely spotted, or some otherwise traditionally comic, underclothes, or lack of them, beneath. Matted white hair protruded over the back of this person's collar, and he was alternately rubbing together his hands and replacing them in the pockets of these elephantine trousers; while he stood nodding his head, and sagging slightly at the knees. I suddenly became aware, with some surprise, that the man with the medals was Colonel Budd—Margaret Budd's father—who held some minor appointment at Court. He had also perhaps, 'come on' from the Huntercombes'.

'She reposes herself at the back of the shop,' said Mr. Deacon, pursuing the topic of his connexion with Gypsy Jones. 'I make up the bed—a divan—myself, with some rather fine Cashmere shawls a former patron of mine left me in his will. However, I don't expect she will need them on a warm night like this. Just as well, if they are not to be worn to shreds. As a matter of fact they are going for a mere song if you happen to know anyone interested in Oriental textiles. I can always find something else to put over Gypsy. Of course Barnby doesn't much like her being there.'

I did not at that time know who Barnby might be, though I felt sure that I had heard of him; connecting the name—as it turned out, correctly—with painting.

'I see his point,' said Mr. Deacon, 'even though I know little of such things. Gypsy's attitude naturally—perhaps Barnby would prefer me to say "unnaturally"—offends his *amour propre*. In some ways he is not an ideal tenant himself. I don't want women running up and down stairs all day long—and all night long too, for that matter—just because I have to put up with Gypsy in a good cause.'

He spoke complainingly, and paused for breath, coughing throatily, as if he might be suffering from asthma. Both of us helped ourselves to another drink. Meanwhile, seen in the looking-glass, Colonel Budd and the wearer of the Charlie Chaplin trousers now began to edge their way round the wall to where a plump youth with a hooked nose and black curly hair, perhaps an Oriental, was talking to a couple of strikingly pretty girls. For a minute or two I had already been conscious of something capable of recognition about the old clothes and assured carriage of the baggy-trousered personage, whose face, until that moment, had been hidden from me. When he turned towards the room, I found that the features were Sillery's, not seen since I had come down from the university.

To happen upon Sillery in London at that season of the year was surprising. Usually, by the time the first few weeks of the Long Vacation had passed, he was already abroad, in Austria or Italy, with a reading party of picked undergraduates: or even a fellow don or two, chosen with equal care, always twenty or thirty years younger than himself. Sillery, probably with wisdom, always considered himself at a disadvantage outside his own academical strongholds. He was accordingly accustomed, on the whole, to emphasise the corruption of metropolitan life as such, in spite of almost febrile interest in the lives and affairs of those who found themselves habitually engaged in London's social activities; but, on the other hand, if passing through on his way to the Continent, he would naturally welcome opportunity to be present, as if by accident, at a party of this kind, when luck put such a chance in his way. The accumulated gossip there obtainable could be secreted, and eked out for weeks and months—even years—at his own tea-parties; or injected in judiciously homeopathic doses to rebut and subdue refractory colleagues at High Table. Possibly, with a view to enjoying such potential benefits, he might even have delayed departure to the lakes and mountains where his summers were chiefly spent; but if he had come to London specially to be present, there could be no doubt that it was to pursue here some negotiation judged by himself to be of first-rate importance.

As they skirted the wall, Sillery and his companion, by contrast remarkably spruce, had almost the appearance of a pair of desperadoes on their way to commit an act of violence, and, on reaching the place where the dark young man was standing, the Colonel certainly seemed to get rid of the women without much ceremony, treating them almost as a policeman might peremptorily 'move on' from the corner of the street female loiterers of dubious complexion. The taller of the two girls was largely built, with china-blue eyes and yellow hair, holding herself in a somewhat conventionally languorous style: the other, dark, with small, pointed breasts and a neat, supple figure. The combined effect of their beauty was irresistible, causing a kind of involuntary pang, as if for a split-second I loved both of them passionately; though a further survey convinced me that nothing so disturbing had taken place. The girls composedly allowed themselves to be dislodged by Colonel Budd and Sillery: at the same time remaining on guard in a strategic position at a short distance, talking and laughing with each other, and with people in the immediate neighbourhood: evidently unwilling to abandon entirely their original stations *vis-à-vis* the young man.

The Colonel, imperceptibly inclining his neck in an abrupt gesture suggesting almost the sudden suppression of an unexpected eructation, presented Sillery, not without deference to this rather mysterious figure, regarding whom I had begun to feel a decided curiosity. The young man, smiling graciously, though rather shyly, held out a hand. Sillery, grinning broadly in return, made a deep bow that seemed, by its mixture of farce and formality, to accord perfectly with the cut of his evening clothes, in their implication of pantomime or charade. However, fearing that absorption in this scene, as reflected in the looking-glass, might have made me seem inattentive to Mr. Deacon's exposition of difficulties experienced in contending with his household, I made further enquiries regarding Barnby's status as a painter. Mr. Deacon did not warm to this subject. I found when I knew him better that this lukewarm attitude was not to be attributed entirely to jealousy he might feel towards Barnby's success, but rather because, finding his own views on the subject so opposed to contemporary opinion as to be in practice untenable, he preferred to close his eyes to the existence of modern painting, just as formerly he had closed his eyes to politics and war. Accordingly, I asked about the nature of Barnby's objections to Gypsy Jones.

'When Gypsy and I were first acquainted,' said Mr. Deacon, lowering his voice, 'I was given to understand—well, hasn't Swinburne got some lines about "wandering watery sighs where the sea sobs round Lesbian promontories"? In fact restriction to such a coastline was almost a condition of our association.'

'Did Barnby object?'

'I think he undoubtedly felt resentment,' said Mr. Deacon. 'But, as a very dear friend of mine once remarked when I was a young man—for I was a young man once, whatever you may think to the contrary—"Gothic manners don't mix with Greek morals." Gypsy would never learn that.'

Mr. Deacon stopped speaking. He seemed to be deliberating within himself whether or not to ask some question, in the wording of which he found perhaps a certain embarrassment. After a few seconds he said: 'As a matter of fact I am rather worried about Gypsy. I suppose you don't happen to know the address of any medicos—I don't mean the usual general practitioner with the restricted views of his profession—no, I didn't for a moment suppose that you did. And of course one does not wish to get mixed up. I feel just the same as yourself. But you were enquiring about Barnby. I really must arrange for you to meet. I think you would like each other.'

When such scraps of gossip are committed to paper, the words bear a heavier weight than when the same information is imparted huskily between draughts of champagne, in the noise of a crowded room; besides which, my thoughts hovering still on the two girls who had been displaced by Sillery and Colonel Budd, I had not been giving very full attention to what Mr. Deacon had been saying. However, if I had at that moment considered Gypsy Jones's difficulties with any seriousness, I should probably have decided, rightly or wrongly, that she was well able to look after herself. Even in the quietest forms of life the untoward is rarely far from the surface, and in the intemperate circles to which she seemed to belong nothing was surprising. I felt at the time absolutely no inclination to pursue the matter further. Mr. Deacon himself became temporarily lost in thought.

Our attention was at that moment violently reorientated by the return to the room of Mrs. Andriadis, who now shouted—a less forcible word would have been inadequate to describe her manner of announcing the news—that 'darling Max' was going to sing: a statement creating a small upheaval in our immediate surroundings, owing to the proximity of the piano, upon which a bottle of champagne was now placed. A mild-looking young man in spectacles was thrust through the crowd, who seating himself on the music-stool, protested: 'Must I really tickle the dominoes?' A number of voices at once encouraged him to embark upon his musical activity, and, after winding round the seat once or twice, apparently more as a ritual than for practical reasons, he struck a few chords.

'Really,' said Mr. Deacon, as if entitled to feel honest disgust at this development, 'Mrs. Andriadis does not seem to care in the least whom she makes friends with.'

'Who is he?'

'Max Pilgrim—a public performer of some sort.'

The young man now began to sing in a tremulous, quavering voice, like that of an immensely ancient lady; though at the same time the words filled the room with a considerable volume of sound:

'I'm Tess of Le Touquet,
My morals are flukey,
Tossed on the foam, I couldn't be busier;
Permanent waves
Splash me into the caves;
Everyone loves me as much as Delysia.
When it's wet on the Links, I know where to
  have a beau
Down in the club-house—next door to the
  lavabo.'

There was muffled laughter and some fragmentary applause; though a hum of conversation continued to be heard round about us.

'I don't care for this at all,' said Mr. Deacon. 'To begin with, I do not entirely understand the meaning of the words—if they have any meaning—and, in the second place, the singer once behaved to me in what I consider an objectionable manner. I can't think how Mrs. Andriadis can have him in the house. It can't do her reputation any good.'

The appearance of Max Pilgrim at the piano had thoroughly put out Mr. Deacon. In an attempt to relieve the gloom that had fallen on him I enquired about Mrs. Andriadis's past.

'Barnby knows more about her than I do,' he said, rather resentfully. 'She is said to have been mistress of a Royal Personage for a time. Personally I am not greatly stimulated by such revelations.'

'Is she still kept?'

'My dear boy, you have the crudest way of putting things,' said Mr. Deacon, smiling at this, and showing signs of cheering up a little. 'No—so far as I am aware—our hostess is no longer "kept", as you are pleased to term the former state of life to which she was called by Providence. A client of mine told me that her present husband—there have been several—possessed comprehensive business interests in Manchester, or that region. My friend's description suggested at least a sufficient competence on the latest husband's part for the condition of dependence you mention to be, financially speaking, no longer necessary for his lady—even, perhaps, undesirable. Apart from this, I know little of Mr. Andriadis, though I imagine him to be a man of almost infinite tolerance. You are, I expect, familiar with Barnby's story of the necklace?'

'What necklace?'

'Milly,' said Mr. Deacon, pronouncing Mrs. Andriadis's name with affected delicacy, 'Milly saw a diamond-and-emerald necklace in Cartier's. It cost, shall we say, two million francs. She approached the Royal Personage, who happened to be staying at the Crillon at that moment, and asked for the money to buy herself the necklace as a birthday present. The Royal Personage handed her the bank-notes—which he was no doubt accustomed to keep in his pocket—and Milly curtsied her way out. She went round the corner to the apartment of a well-known French industrialist—I cannot remember which, but you would know the name—who was also interested in her welfare, and requested him to drive there and then to Cartier's and buy the necklace on the spot. This the industrialist was obliging enough to do. Milly was, therefore, two million francs to the good, and could, at the same time, give pleasure to both her protectors by wearing the necklace in the company of either. Simple—like all great ideas.'

Mr. Deacon paused. He seemed all at once to regret this sudden, and uncharacteristic, outburst of sophistication on so mundane a subject. The anecdote had certainly been told in a manner entirely foreign to his accustomed tone in dealing with worldly matters; discussed by him in general, at least publicly—as I found at a later date—as if all practical transactions were wrapped in mystery impenetrable for one of his simple outlook. Such an approach had been, indeed, habitual with him at all times, and, even so far back as the days when my parents used to speak of him, I could recall banter about Mr. Deacon's repeatedly expressed ignorance of the world. This attitude did not, of course, repudiate on his part a certain insistence on his own knowingness in minor, and more 'human', affairs, such as the running of his shop, described so precisely by him a short time earlier at the coffee-stall. The story of the necklace was, I thought, in some way vaguely familiar to me. It had possibly figured in the repertoire of Peter Templer at school; though the heroine of Templer's anecdote, so I believed, had been represented as a well-known actress rather than Mrs. Andriadis herself.

'Not that I know anything of such gallivanting,' said Mr. Deacon, as if by now ashamed of his momentary abandonment of the unassailable position vouchsafed to him by reliance, in all circumstances, on an artist's traditional innocence of heart. 'Personally I should be delighted for kings, priests, armament manufacturers, *poules de luxe,* and *hoc genus omne* to be swept into the dust-bin—and I might add all the nonsense we find about us tonight.'

As he stopped speaking, the words of the song, which had been proceeding through a number of verses, now became once more audible:

'Even the fairies
Say how sweet my hair is;
They mess my mascara and pinch the peroxide.
I know a coward
Would be overpowered,
When they all offer to be orthodox. I'd
Like to be kind, but say: "Some other day, dears;
Pansies for thoughts remains still the best way,
dears." '

This verse gave great offence to Mr. Deacon. Indeed, its effect on him was almost electric in the suddenness of the ferment it caused within him. He brushed away a lock of grey hair that had fallen over his forehead, and clenched his fist until the knuckles were white. He was evidently very angry. 'Insufferable!' he said. 'And from such a person.'

He had gone quite pale with irritation. The negro, too, perhaps himself a vocalist, or performer upon some instrument, had also been watching Max Pilgrim with a look of mounting, though silent, hatred that had contracted the whole of his face into a scowl of self-righteous rage. This look seemed by then to have dramatised his bearing into the character of Othello. But the pianist, taking occasional nips at his champagne, showed no sign of observing any of the odium aroused by him in these or other quarters. Mr. Deacon sighed. There was a moment when I thought he might, there and then, have decided to leave the house. His chest heaved. However, he evidently made up his mind to dismiss unpleasant reflections.

'Your young friend appears to hold the place of honour here,' he said, in a more restrained voice. 'Is he rich? Who are his parents—if I am not being inquisitive?'

'They are divorced. His father married a Frenchwoman and lives in Kenya. His mother was a South African, also remarried—to a sailor called Foxe.'

'Buster Foxe?'

'Yes.'

'Rather a chic sailor,' said Mr. Deacon. 'If I mistake not, I used to hear about him in Paris. And she started life as wife of some belted earl or other.'

He was again showing recklessness in giving voice to these spasmodic outbursts of worldly knowledge. The champagne perhaps caused this intermittent pulling aside of the curtain that concealed some, apparently considerable, volume of practical information about unlikely people: a little storehouse, the existence of which he was normally unwilling to admit, yet preserved safely at the back of his mind in case of need.

'What was the name?' he went on. 'She is a very handsome woman—or was.'

'Warrington.'

'The Beautiful Lady Warrington!' said Mr. Deacon. 'I remember seeing a photograph of her in *The Queen*. There was some nonsense there, too, about a fancy-dress ball she had given. When will people learn better? And Warrington himself was much older than she, and died soon after their marriage. He probably drank.'

'So far as I know, he was a respectable brigadier-general. It is Charles Stringham's father who likes the bottle.'

'They are all the same,' said Mr. Deacon, decisively.

Whether this condemnation was aimed at all husbands of Stringham's mother, or, more probably, intended, in principle, to embrace members of the entire social stratum from which these husbands had, up to date, been drawn, was not made clear. Once more he fell into silence, as if thinking things over. Max Pilgrim continued to hammer and strum and take gulps of champagne, while against an ever-increasing buzz of conversation, he chanted his song continuously, as if it were a narrative poem or saga recording the heroic, legendary deeds of some primitive race:

'I do hope Tallulah
Now feels a shade cooler,
But why does she pout, as she wanders so far off
From Monsieur Citröen,
Who says something knowin'
To Lady Cunard and Sir Basil Zaharoff?
Has someone guessed who was having a beano
At Milly's last party behind the Casino?'

This verse turned out to be the climax. Max Pilgrim, removing his spectacles, rose and bowed. Since the beginning of the song, many people, among them Mrs. Andriadis herself, had drifted away, and the room was now half empty, though a small group of enthusiasts still hovered round the piano. This residuum now clapped and applauded heartily. Pilgrim was almost immediately led away by two ladies, neither of them young. What remained of the crowd began to shift and rearrange its component parts, so that in the movement following the song's termination Mr. Deacon was swept away from his corner. I watched him betake himself by easy stages to the door, no doubt with the object of further exploration. While I was looking, someone grasped my arm, and I found that Sillery was standing beside me.

By employment of a successful disengaging movement, the dark young man had by then managed to extract himself from the encirclement that had cut him off from the two girls, to whom he had now successfully returned; an operation made easier by the fact that the girls themselves had remained conveniently near, chattering and tittering together. At this development Sillery, who seemed to be enjoying himself hugely, must have pottered away from Colonel Budd, with whom his association was no doubt on a purely business footing. He had paused by me, as if to take breath, apparently unable to decide where best to make his next important descent, puffing out his still dark walrus moustache, and leaning forward, as he swayed slightly. This faint oscillation was not, of course, due to drink, which he touched in no circumstances: sustaining himself through hour after hour of social adventure on a cup or two of *café au lait,* with perhaps an occasional sandwich or biscuit. His white tie was knotted so loosely that it formed a kind of four-in-hand under the huge wings of his collar, itself limp from want of starch.

'Why so thoughtful?' he asked, grinning widely. 'Did Charles Stringham bring you here? Such a friend of our hostess is Charles, isn't he? I heard that you and Charles had not been seeing so much of each other as you used in the old days when you were both undergraduates.'

He was obviously well aware that Stringham's life had changed greatly from the days of which he spoke, and he probably knew, too, as his words implied, that Stringham and I had not met for years. On such stray pieces of information, the cumulative effect not to be despised, Sillery's intelligence system was built up. As to the effectiveness of this system, opinion, as I have said before, differed greatly. At any rate, Sillery himself believed implicitly in his own powers, ceaselessly collecting, sorting, and collating small items in connexion with the personal relationships of the people he knew; or, at least, knew about. No doubt a few of these units of information turned out to be of value in prosecuting schemes in which, for one reason or another, he might himself become suddenly interested.

I admitted that I had not seen Stringham for some little time before that evening; but I did not feel it necessary to reveal in detail to Sillery the circumstances that had brought me to the house of Mrs. Andriadis.

'You stayed too long in the company of that gentleman with the equivocal reputation,' said Sillery, giving my arm a pinch. 'People have to be careful about such things. They do, indeed. Can't think how he got to this very respectable party—but don't let's talk about such matters. I have just been having a most enlightening chat with Prince Theodoric.'

'The Levantine young man?'

'A dark young prince with curly hair,' said Sillery, chuckling. 'That's quite a Tennysonian line, isn't it? Handsome, if it were not for that rather too obtrusive nose. One would never guess him descended from Queen Victoria. Perhaps he isn't. But we mustn't be scandalous. A very clever family, his Royal House—and well connected, too.'

I remembered that there had been some talk of Prince Theodoric at the Walpole-Wilsons'. Although aware that his visit was in progress, I could not recall much about the Prince himself, nor the problems that he was called upon to discuss. Remarks made by Widmerpool and Tompsitt on the subject earlier that evening had become somewhat confused in my mind with the substance of an article in one of the 'weeklies', skimmed through recently in a club, in which the writer associated 'the question of industrial development of base metals'—the phrase that had caught

Archie Gilbert's ear at dinner—with 'a final settlement in Macedonia'. The same periodical, in its editorial notes, had spoken, rather slightingly, of 'the part Prince Theodoric might be hoped to play on the Balkan chess-board', adding that 'informed circles in Belgrade, Bucharest, and Athens are watching this young man's movements closely; while scarcely less interest has been evoked in Sofia and Tirana, in spite of a certain parade of aloofness in the latter capital. Only in Ankara is scepticism freely expressed as to the likelihood of the links of an acceptable solution being welded upon the, by now happily obsolescent, anvil of throne-room diplomacy'. Sillery's description of the Prince as 'well connected' made me think again, involuntarily, of Uncle Giles, who would no doubt within the same reference, also have commented on Prince Theodoric's employment of 'influence' in the advancement of his own or his country's interests.

'Mrs. Andriadis must be at least a tiny bit flattered to find H.R.H. here tonight,' said Sillery. 'Although, of course, our hostess, as you are probably aware, is no stranger to Royalty in its lighter moments. I expect it is the first time, too, that the good Theodoric has been at the same party as one of our coloured cousins. However, he is broad-minded. It is that touch of Coburgh blood.'

'Is he over here for long?'

'Perhaps a month or two. Is it aluminium? Something like that. Hope we are paying a fair price. Some of us try and organise public opinion, but there are always people who think we should have our own way, no matter what, aren't there? However, I expect all that is safe in the hands of such a great and good man as Sir Magnus Donners—with two such great and good assistants as Charles Stringham and Bill Truscott.'

He chuckled again heartily at his last comment.

'Was Prince Theodoric educated over here?'

Sillery shook his head and sighed.

'Tried to get him,' he said. 'But it couldn't be did. All the same, I think we may be going to have something almost as good.'

'Another brother?'

'Better than that. Theodoric is interested in the proposed Donners-Brebner Fellowships. Picked students to come to the university at the Donners-Brebner Company's expense. After all, we have to do something for them, if we take away their metal, don't we?'

'Will you organise the Fellowships, Sillers?'

'The Prince was good enough to ask my advice on certain academical points.'

'And you told him how it should be done?'

'Said I would help him as much as he liked, if he promised not to give me one of those great gawdy decorations that I hate so much, because I never know how to put them on right when I have to go out all dressed up to grand parties.'

'Did he agree to that?'

'Also said a few words 'bout de political sitchivashun,' remarked Sillery, ignoring the question and grinning more broadly than ever. 'Dull things for de poor Prince, I'm 'fraid. 'Spect he's 'joying hisself more now.'

He gave no explanation of this sudden metamorphosis into confused memories of Uncle Remus and the diction of the old plantations, aroused perhaps at that moment by sight of the negro, who passed by, now in friendly conversation with Pilgrim. Possibly the impersonation was merely some Dickensian old fogey. It was impossible to say with certainty. Probably the act had, in truth, no meaning at all. These sudden character parts were a recognised element in Sillery's technique of attacking life. There could be no doubt that he was delighted with the result of his recent conversation, whatever the ground covered; though he was probably correct in his suggestion that the Prince was more happily occupied at that moment with the girls than in earlier discussion of economic or diplomatic problems.

However, apart from the fact that he had presumably initiated the counter-move that had finally displaced Sillery, Prince Theodoric, as it happened, was showing little, if any, outward sign of this presumed partiality. He was gravely watching the two young women between whom he stood, as if attempting to make up his mind which of this couple had more to offer. I could not help feeling some envy at his monopoly of the companionship of such an attractive pair, each in her contrasted looks seeming to personify a style of beauty both exquisite and notably fashionable at that moment: the latter perhaps a minor, even irrelevant, consideration, but one hard to resist. I enquired the names of these friends of Prince Theodoric.

'Well-known nymphs,' said Sillery, sniggering. 'The smaller one is Mrs. Wentworth—quite a famous person in her way—sister of Jack Vowchurch. Mixed up in the divorce of Charles's sister. I seem to remember her name was also mentioned in the Derwentwater case, though not culpably. The tall and statuesque is Lady Ardglass. She was, I believe, a mannequin before her marriage.'

He began to move off, nodding, and rubbing his hands together, deriving too much pleasure from the party to waste any more valuable time from the necessarily limited period of its prolongation. I should have liked to make the acquaintance of one or both ladies, or at least to hear more of them; but I could tell from Sillery's manner that he knew neither personally, or was, at best, far from being at ease with them, so that to apply for an introduction—should they ever leave Prince Theodoric's side—would, therefore, be quite useless. Mrs. Wentworth was, outwardly, the more remarkable of the pair, on account of the conspicuous force of her personality: a characteristic accentuated by the simplicity of her dress, short curly hair, and look of infinite slyness. Lady Ardglass was more like a caryatid, or ship's figurehead, though for that reason no less superb. Seeing no immediate prospect of achieving a meeting with either, I found my way to another room, where I suddenly came upon Gypsy Jones, who appeared to have taken a good deal to drink since her arrival.

'What's happened to Edgar?' she asked clamorously.

She was more untidy than ever, and appeared to be in a great state of excitement: even near to tears.

'Who is Edgar?'

'Thought you said you'd known him since you were a kid!'

'Do you mean Mr. Deacon?'

She began to laugh uproariously at this question.

'And your other friend,' she said. 'Where did you pick that up?'

Laughter was at that moment modified by a slight, and quickly mastered, attack of hiccups. Her demeanour was becoming more noticeably hysterical. The state she was in might easily lead to an awkward incident. I was so accustomed to the general principle of people finding Widmerpool odd that I could hardly regard her question as even hypercritical. It was, in any case, no more arbitrary an enquiry, so far as it went, than Stringham's on the subject of Mr. Deacon; although long-standing friendship made Stringham's form of words more permissible. However, Gypsy Jones's comment, when thought of later, brought home the impossibility of explaining Widmerpool's personality at all briefly, even to a sympathetic audience. His case was not, of course, unique. He was merely one single instance, among many, of the fact that certain acquaintances remain firmly fixed within this or that person's particular orbit; a law which seems to lead inexorably to the conclusion that the often repeated saying that people can 'choose their friends' is true only in a most strictly limited degree.

However, Gypsy Jones was the last person to be expected to relish discussion upon so hypothetical a subject, even if the proposition had then occurred to me, or she been in a fit state to argue its points. Although she seemed to be enjoying the party, even to the extent of being in sight of hysteria, she had evidently also reached the stage when moving to another spot had become an absolute necessity to her; not because she was in any way dissatisfied with the surroundings in which she found herself, but on account of the coercive dictation of her own nerves, not to be denied in their insistence that a change of scene must take place. I was familiar with a similar spirit of unrest that sometimes haunted Barbara.

'I want to find Edgar and go to The Merry Thought.'

She clung on to me desperately, whether as an affectionate gesture, a means of encouraging sympathy, or merely to maintain her balance, I was uncertain. The condition of excitement which she had reached to some extent communicated itself to me, for her flushed face rather improved her appearance, and she had lost all her earlier ill-humour.

'Why don't you come to The Merry Thought?' she said. 'I got a bit worked up a moment ago. I'm feeling better now.'

Just for a second I wondered whether I would not fall in with this suggestion, but the implications seemed so many, and so varied, that I decided against accompanying her. I felt also that there might be yet more to experience in Mrs.

Andriadis's house; and I was not uninfluenced by the fact that I had, so far as I could remember, only a pound on me.

'Well, if Edgar can't be found, I shall go without him,' said Gypsy Jones, speaking as if such a deplorable lack of gallantry was unexpected in Mr. Deacon.

She seemed to have recovered her composure. While she proceeded down the stairs, somewhat unsteadily, I called after her, over the banisters, a reminder that her copies of *War Never Pays!* should preferably not be allowed to lie forgotten under the chair in the hall, as I had no wish to share, even to a small degree, any responsibility for having imported that publication into Mrs. Andriadis's establishment. Gypsy Jones disappeared from sight. It was doubtful whether she had heard this admonition. I felt, perhaps rather ignobly, that she were better out of the house.

Returning through one of the doorways a minute or two later, I collided with Widmerpool, also red in the face, and with hair, from which customary grease had perhaps been dried out by sugar, ruffled into a kind of cone at the top of his head. He, too, seemed to have drunk more than he was accustomed.

'Have you seen Miss Jones?' he asked, in his most breathless manner.

Even though I had been speaking with her so recently, I could not immediately grasp, under this style, the identity of the person sought.

'The girl we came in with,' he muttered impatiently.

'She has just gone off to a night-club.'

'Is someone taking her there?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Do you mean she has gone by herself?'

'That was what she said.'

Widmerpool seemed more fussed than ever. I could not understand his concern.

'I don't feel she should have set off like that alone,' he said. 'She had had rather a lot to drink—more than she is used to, I should imagine—and she is in some sort of difficulty, too. She was telling me about it.'

There could now be no doubt at all that Widmerpool himself had been equally indiscreet in taking more champagne than usual.

'We were having rather an intimate talk together,' he went on. 'And then I saw a man I had been wanting to speak to for weeks. Of course, I could have rung him up, but I preferred to wait for a chance meeting. One can often achieve so much more at such moments than at an interview. I crossed the room to have a word with him—explaining to her, as I supposed quite clearly, that I was going to return after a short business discussion—and when I came back she had vanished.'

'Too bad.'

'That was very foolish of me,' said Widmerpool, in a tone almost as if he were apologising abjectly for some grave error of taste. 'Rather bad-mannered, too. . . .'

He paused, seeming thoroughly upset: much as he had looked—I called to mind—on the day when he had witnessed Le Bas's arrest when we had been at school together. At the moment when he spoke those words, if I could have laid claim to a more discerning state of mind, I might have taken greater notice of the overwhelming change that had momentarily come over him. As it was, I attributed his excitement simply to drink: an entirely superficial view that even brief reflection could have corrected. For example—to illustrate how little excuse there was for my own lack of grasp—I had never before, so far as I can now recollect, heard Widmerpool suggest that anything he had ever done could be classed as foolish, or bad-mannered; and even then, on that evening, I suppose I ought to have been dimly aware that Gypsy Jones must have aroused his interest fairly keenly: as it were 'on the rebound' from having sugar poured over his head by Barbara.

'There really are moments when one should forget about business,' said Widmerpool. 'After all, getting on isn't everything.'

This precept, so far as I was myself concerned in those days, was one that required no specially vigorous inculcation.

'Pleasure before Business has always been my motto,' I remembered Bill Truscott stating at one of Sillery's tea-parties when I was an undergraduate; and, although it would have been misleading to suppose that, for Truscott himself, any such label was in the least—in the smallest degree—applicable, the maxim seemed to me such a truism at the moment when I heard it quoted that I could not imagine why Truscott should seem to consider the phrase, on his part, something of an epigram or paradox. Pleasure still seemed to me a natural enough aim in life; and I certainly did not, on that night in Hill Street, appreciate at all how unusually disturbed Widmerpool must have been to have uttered aloud so profane a repudiation of his own deep-rooted system of opinion. However, he was prevented from further particularising of the factors that had impelled him to this revolutionary conclusion, by the arrival beside us of the man whose practical importance had seemed sufficient to cause abandonment of emotional preoccupations. That person had, so it appeared, additional dealings to negotiate. I was interested to discover the identity of this figure who had proved, in the circumstances, so powerful a counter-attraction to the matter in hand. The disclosure was, in a quiet way, sufficiently dramatic. The 'man' turned out to be Bill Truscott himself, who seemed, through another's pursuance of his own loudly proclaimed precept, to have been, at least to some degree, temporarily victimised.

When I had last seen him, earlier in the year, at a Rothschild dance chatting with the chaperones, there could be no doubt that Truscott was still a general favourite: a 'spare man' treated by everyone with respect and in quite a different, and distinctly higher, category in the hierarchy of male guests from, say, Archie Gilbert. It was, indeed, impossible to deny Truscott's good looks, and the dignity of his wavy, youthfully grey hair and broad shoulders. All the same, the final form of his great career remained still, so far as I knew, undecided. It was not that he was showing signs of turning out less capable—certainly not less reliable—than his elders had supposed; nor, as had been evident on the night when I had seen him, was he growing any less popular with dowagers. On the contrary, many persons, if not all, continued to speak of Truscott's brilliance almost as a matter of course, and it was generally agreed that he was contriving most successfully to retain the delicate balance required to remain a promising young man who still survived in exactly the same place—and a very good place, too—that he had taken on coming down from the university; rather than preferring to make his mark as an innovator in breaking new, and possibly unfruitful, ground in forwarding ambitions that seemed, whatever they were, fated to remain long masked from friends and admirers. At least outwardly, he had neither improved nor worsened his position—so it was said, at least, by Short, who, upon such subjects, could be relied upon to take the entirely unimaginative view of the world in general. In fact, Truscott might still be expected to make name and fortune before he was thirty, though the new decade must be perilously near, and he would have to be quick about it. The promised volume of poems (or possibly *belles lettres*) had never appeared; though there were still those who firmly declared that Truscott would 'write something' one day. Meanwhile he was on excellent terms with most people, especially, for some reason, elderly bankers, both married and unmarried, with whom he was, almost without exception, a great favourite.

On that earlier occasion when I had seen him at the dance, Truscott, although he might excusably have forgotten our two or three meetings with Sillery in days past, had dispensed one of those exhausted, engaging smiles for which he was noted; while his eyes wandered round the ballroom 'ear-marking duchesses', as Stringham—years later—once called that wistful, haunted intensity that Truscott's eyes took on, from time to time, among any large concourse of people that might include individuals of either sex potentially important to an ambitious young man's career. As he came through the door at that moment, he gave his weary smile again, to show that he still remembered me, saying at the same time to Widmerpool: 'You went away so quickly that I had no time to tell you that the Chief will very likely be here tonight. He is an old friend of Milly's. Besides, I happen to know that he told Baby Wentworth he would look in—so it's a virtual certainty.'

Truscott was still, so far as I knew, one of the secretaries of Sir Magnus Donners, to whom it was to be presumed he referred as 'the Chief'. Stringham's vagueness in speaking of his own employment had left me uncertain whether or not he and Truscott remained such close colleagues as formerly, though Sillery's remarks certainly suggested that they were still working together.

'Well, of course, that would be splendid,' said Widmerpool slowly.

But, although unquestionably interested in the information just given him, he spoke rather forlornly. His mind seemed to be on other things: unable to concentrate fully on the comings and goings even of so portentous a figure as Sir Magnus Donners.

'He could meet you,' said Truscott dryly. 'And then we could talk things over next week.'

Widmerpool, trying to collect himself, seemed still uncertain in his own mind. He smoothed down his hair, the disarrangement of which he must have observed in the mural looking-glass in front of us.

'The Chief is the most unconventional man in the world,' said Truscott, encouragingly. 'He loves informality.'

He stood there, smiling down at Widmerpool, for, although not more than an inch or two taller, he managed to give an impression of height. His thick and glossy hair had grown perceptibly more grey round the ears. I wondered how Truscott and Widmerpool had been brought together, since it was clear that arrangements projected for that night must have been the result of earlier, possibly even laborious, negotiation between them. There could be no doubt, whatever my own opinion of Widmerpool's natural endowments, that he managed to make a decidedly good impression on people primarily interested in 'getting on'. For example, neither Tompsitt nor Truscott had much in common except concentration on 'the main chance', and yet both had apparently been struck—in Tompsitt's case, almost immediately—by some inner belief in Widmerpool's fundamental ability. This matter of making headway in life was one to which I felt perhaps I, too, ought to devote greater consideration in future, if I were myself not to remain inextricably fixed in a monotonous, even sometimes dreary, groove.

'You don't think I had better ring you up in the morning?' said Widmerpool, rather anxiously. 'My brain is a bit confused tonight. I don't want to make a poor impression on Sir Magnus. To tell the truth, I was thinking of going home. I don't usually stay up as late as this.'

'All right,' said Truscott, not attempting to repress a polite smile at the idea of anyone being so weak in spirit as to limit their chances of advancement by reluctance to keep late hours. 'Perhaps that might be best. Donners-Brebner, Extension 5, any time after ten o'clock.'

'I don't expect it would be much use looking for my hostess to say good-bye,' said Widmerpool, gazing about him wildly as if tired out. 'You know, I haven't managed to meet her properly the whole time I have been here.'

'Not the slightest use,' said Truscott, smiling again at such naïveté.

He regarded Widmerpool as if he thought—now that a decision to retire to bed had been finally taken—that the sooner Widmerpool embarked upon a good night's rest, the better, if he were to be fit for the plans Truscott had in store for him in the near future.

'Then I'll bid you good-night,' said Widmerpool, turning to me and speaking in a voice of great exhaustion.

'Sweet dreams.'

'Tell Stringham I was sorry not to see him before I left the party.'

'I will.'

'Thank him for bringing us. It was kind. He must lunch with me in the City.'

He made his way from the room. I wondered whether or not it had indeed been kind of Stringham to bring him to the party. Kind or the reverse, I felt pretty sure that Stringham would not lunch with Widmerpool in the City. Truscott showed more surprise at Widmerpool's mention of Stringham than he usually allowed himself: at least in public.

'Does he know Charles, then?' he asked, as Widmerpool disappeared through the door.

'We were all at the same house at school.'

'Indeed?'

'Widmerpool was a shade senior.'

'He really might be quite useful in our new politico-legal branch,' said Truscott. 'Not necessarily full time—anyway at first—and the Chief always insists on hand-picking everyone himself. He'll grow out of that rather unfortunate manner, of course.'

I thought it improbable that Widmerpool would ever change his manner at the mandate of Sir Magnus Donners, Truscott, Stringham, or anyone else, though the projected employment—an aspect of those rather mysterious business activities, so different from those of my own small firm—sounded normal enough. In fact the job, as such, did not at the time make any strong impression on me. I felt more interest in trying to learn something of Stringham's life. This seemed an opportunity to make some enquiries.

'Oh, yes,' said Truscott, almost with enthusiasm. 'Of course Charles is still with us. He can really be quite an asset at times. Such charm, you know. But I see my Chief has arrived. If you will forgive me . . .'

He was gone instantaneously, stepping quickly across the floor to meet, and intercept, a tallish man, who, with Mrs. Wentworth at his side, had just entered the room. At first I was uncertain whether this outwardly unemphatic figure could indeed be Sir Magnus Donners, the person addressed by Truscott being so unlike my pre-conceived idea of what might be expected from the exterior of a public character of that particular kind. I still think hesitation on this point was justifiable. The name of Sir Magnus Donners, both in capacity of well-known industrialist and former member of the Government (in which he had never reached Cabinet rank) attached to the imagination, almost automatically, one of those paraphrases—on the whole uncomplimentary—presented by the cartoonist; representations that serve, more or less effectually, to supply the mind on easy terms with the supposedly salient traits, personal, social, or political, of individuals or types: such delineations being naturally concerned for the most part with men, or categories of men, to be thought of as important in exercising power in one form or another.

In the first place, it was unexpected that Sir Magnus Donners should look at least ten years younger than might reasonably have been supposed; so that, although well into his middle fifties—where he stood beneath an unsatisfying picture executed in the manner of Derain—he seemed scarcely middle-aged. Clean-shaven, good-looking rather than the reverse, possibly there was something odd, even a trifle disturbing, about the set of his mouth. Something that perhaps conveyed interior ferment kept in severe repression. Apart from that his features had been reduced, no doubt by laborious mental discipline, to a state of almost unnatural ordinariness. He possessed, however, a suggestion about him that was decidedly parsonic: a lay-reader, or clerical headmaster: even some distinguished athlete, of almost uncomfortably rigid moral convictions, of whose good work at the boys' club in some East End settlement his own close friends were quite unaware. The complexion was of a man whose life appeared to have been lived, on the whole, out of doors. He seemed, indeed, too used to the open air to be altogether at ease in evening clothes, which were carelessly worn, as if only assumed under protest, though he shared that appearance of almost chemical cleanliness characteristic, in rather another form, of Archie Gilbert. At the same time, in spite of these intimations of higher things, the heavy, purposeful walk implied the professional politician. A touch of sadness about his face was not unprepossessing.

That ponderous tread was also the only faint hint of the side expressed by common gossip, for example, at Sillery's—where Bill Truscott's connexion with Donners-Brebner made Sir Magnus's name a relatively familiar one in the twilight world of undergraduate conversation—that is to say, of a kind of stage 'profiteer' or 'tycoon': a man of Big Business and professionally strong will. Such, indeed, I had previously pictured him. Now the matter, like so many others, had to be reconsidered. Equally, he showed still less of that aspect called up by the remark once let fall by Stringham: 'He is always trying to get in with my mother.' Everything about Sir Magnus seemed far too quiet and correct for any of his elements even to insinuate that there could be in his conduct, or nature, anything that might urge him to push his way into a world where welcome admission might be questionable—even deliberately withheld. Indeed, much later, when I came to hear more about him, there could be no doubt that whatever efforts Sir Magnus may have made to ingratiate himself with Mrs. Foxe, through her son, or otherwise—and there was reason to suppose such efforts had in truth been made—must have been accountable to one of those whims to which men of his sort are particularly subject; that is to say, desire to cut a figure somewhere outside the circle familiar to themselves; because Sir Magnus was, after all, in a position, so far as that went, to 'go' pretty well anywhere he might happen to wish. The social process he elected to follow was rather like that of mountaineers who chose deliberately the sheer ascent of the cliff face; for it was true I found particular difficulty in associating him with Stringham, or, so far as I knew of them, with Stringham's family. Widmerpool, on the other hand, though this was by the way, was a victim easily imaginable; no doubt, as I guessed, fated to be captivated irrevocably at his pending interview by that colourless, respectable, dominating exterior of 'the Chief'.

What part Mrs. Wentworth played in Sir Magnus's life was, of course, a question that at once suggested itself. He was not married. Truscott's words: 'He told Baby Wentworth he would look in—so it's a virtual certainty', seemed to imply a fairly firm influence, or attachment, of one kind or another, probably temporary. However, as Sir Magnus and Mrs. Wentworth came through the door, side by side, there was nothing in their outward appearance to denote pleasure in each other's company. On the contrary, they had entered the room together, both of them, with an almost hang-dog air, and Mrs. Wentworth's features had lost all the gaiety and animation assumed earlier to charm Prince Theodoric. She now appeared sulky, and, if the word could be used at all of someone so self-possessed, and of such pleasing face and figure, almost awkward. It was rather as if they were walking away together from some excessively embarrassing scene in which they had been taking joint part: some incident for which the two of them felt both equally to blame, and heartily ashamed. I could not help thinking of one of those pictures—neither traditional, nor in Mr. Deacon's vernacular, but in 'modern dress', a pictorial method of treating Biblical subjects then somewhat in vogue—of Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden after the Fall: this impression being so vivid that I almost expected them to be followed through the door by a well-tailored angel, pointing in their direction a flaming sword.

Any such view of them was not only entirely fanciful, but perhaps also without any foundation in fact, because Truscott seemed to regard their bearing as perfectly normal. He came up to them buoyantly, and talked for a minute or two in his accustomed easy style. Mrs. Wentworth lit a cigarette, and, without smiling, watched him, her eyebrows slightly raised. Then she spoke to Sir Magnus, at which he nodded his head heavily several times. Perhaps arrangements were being made for sending her home in his car, because he looked at his watch before saying good-night, and asked Truscott some questions. Then Mrs. Wentworth, after giving Sir Magnus little more than a nod, went off with Truscott; who returned a minute or two later, and settled down with his employer on the sofa. They began to talk gravely, looking rather like father and son, though, strangely enough, it might have been Truscott who was playing the paternal rôle.

By now the crowd had thinned considerably, and the music of the hunchback's accordion had ceased. I was beginning to feel more than a little exhausted, yet, unable to make up my mind to go home, I wandered rather aimlessly round the house, throughout which the remaining guests were now sitting about in pairs, or larger groups. Chronological sequence of events pertaining to this interlude of the party became afterwards somewhat confused in my head. I can recall a brief conversation with a woman—not pretty, though possessing excellent legs—on the subject of cheese, which she alleged to be unprocurable at the buffet. Prince Theodoric and Sillery had disappeared, and already there was the impression, given by most parties, sooner or later, that the residue still assembled under Mrs. Andriadis's roof was gradually, inexorably, sinking to a small band of those hard cases who can never tear themselves away from what still remains, for an hour or so longer, if not of gaiety, then at least some sort of mellow companionship, and protection from the austerities of the outer world.

Two young men strolled by, and I heard one of them say: 'Poor Milly really got together quite an elegant crowd tonight.'

The other, who wore an orchid in his button-hole, replied: 'I felt that Sillery imparted a faintly bourgeois note —and there were one or two extraordinary figures from the lofts of Chelsea.'

He added that, personally, he proposed to have 'one more drink' before leaving, while the other murmured something about an invitation to 'bacon and eggs at the Kit-Cat'. They parted company at this, and when the young man with the orchid returned from the bar, he set down his glass near me, and without further introduction, began to discuss, at large, the house's style of decoration, of which he appeared strongly to disapprove.

'Of course it must have cost a fortune to have had all those carpets cut right up to the walls,' he said. 'But why go and spoil everything by these appalling Italianate fittings—and the pictures—my God, the pictures.'

I asked if the house belonged to Mrs. Andriadis.

'Good heavens, no,' he said. 'Milly has only taken it for a few months from a man named Duport.'

'Bob Duport?'

'Not an intimate friend of yours, I hope?'

'On the contrary.'

'Because his manners don't attract me.'

'Nor me.'

'Not that I ever see him these days, but we were at the same college—before he was sent down.'

I commented to the effect that, however unsatisfactory its decoration might be, I found the house an unexpectedly sumptuous place for Duport to inhabit. The young man with the orchid immediately assured me that Duport was not short of money.

'He came into quite a bit,' he said. 'And then he is one of those men money likes. He is in the Balkans at the moment—doing well there, too, I have no doubt. He is, I regret to say, that sort of man.'

He sighed.

'Is he married?'

'Rather a nice wife.'

Although I scarcely knew Bob Duport, he had always remained in my mind on account of his having been one of the company when Peter Templer, in a recently purchased car, had driven Stringham and myself into the ditch, together with a couple of shop-girls and another unprepossessing friend of Templer's called Brent. That episode had been during the single term that Stringham had remained in residence at the university. The incident seemed absurd enough when looked back upon, but I had not greatly liked Duport. Now I felt, for some reason, inexplicably annoyed that he should own a house like this one, however ineptly decorated, and also be the possessor of a wife whom my informant—whose manner suggested absolute infallibility on such matters—regarded as attractive; while I myself, at the same time, lived a comparative hand-to-mouth existence in rooms, and was no longer in love with Barbara—a girl to whom, in my own case, there had never been any serious prospect of getting married. This seemed, on examination, a contrast from which I came out rather poorly.

Since living in London, I had seen Peter Templer several times, but, in the course of an interminable chain of anecdotes about his ever-changing circle of cronies, I could not remember the name of Duport figuring, so that I did not know whether or not the two of them continued to see each other. Peter himself had taken to the City like a duck to water. He now talked unendingly of 'cleaning up a packet' and 'making a killing'; money, with its multifarious imagery and restrictive mystique, holding a place in his mind only seriously rivalled by preoccupation with the pursuit of women: the latter interest having proportionately increased with opportunity to experiment in a wider field than formerly.

When we had lunched or dined together, the occasions had been enjoyable, although there had hardly been any renewal of the friendship that had existed between us at school. Peter did not frequent the world of dances because—like Stringham—he was bored by their unduly respectable environment.

'At least,' he said once, when discussing the matter, 'I don't go as a habit to the sort of dance you see reported in *The Morning Post* or *The Times*. I don't say I have never attended similar entertainments in some huge and gloomy house in Bayswater or Holland Park—probably Jewish—if I happened to take a fancy to a girl who moves in those circles. There is more fun to be found amongst all that mahogany furniture and Moorish brasswork than you might think.'

In business, at least in a small way, he had begun to 'make a bit' on his own, and there seemed no reason to disbelieve his account of himself as looked upon in his firm as a promising young man. In fact, it appeared that Peter, so far from becoming the outcast from society prophesied by our housemaster, Le Bas, now showed every sign of being about to prove himself a notable success in life: an outcome that seemed to demand another of those revisions of opinion, made every day more necessary, in relation to such an enormous amount of material, accepted as incontrovertible at an earlier period of practical experience.

Thinking that if the young man with the orchid knew Duport, he might also know Peter, whom I had not by then seen for about a year, I asked if the two of them had ever met.

'I've never run across Templer,' he said. 'But I've heard tell of him. As a matter of fact, I believe Duport married Templer's sister, didn't he? What was her name?'

'Jean.'

'That was it. A thin girl with blue eyes. I think they got married abroad—South America or somewhere, was it?'

The sudden awareness of displeasure felt a second earlier at the apparent prosperity of Duport's general state was nothing to the pang I suffered on hearing this piece of news: the former sense of grievance caused, perhaps, by premonition that worse was to come. I had not, it was true, thought much of Jean Templer for years, having relegated any question of being, as I had once supposed, 'in love' with her to a comparatively humble position in memory; indeed, regarding the incident as dating from a time when any such feelings were, in my own eyes, hopelessly immature, in comparison, for example, with sentiments felt for Barbara. However, I now found, rather to my own surprise, deep vexation in the discovery that Jean was the wife of someone so unsympathetic as Bob Duport.

Such emotions, sudden bursts of sexual jealousy that pursue us through life, sometimes without the smallest justification that memory or affection might provide, are like wounds, unknown and quiescent, that suddenly break out to give pain, or at least irritation, at a later season of the year, or in an unfamiliar climate. The party, and the young man with the orchid, supplied perfect setting for an attack of that kind. I was about to return to the subject of Duport, with a view to relieving this sense of annoyance by further unfavourable comment regarding his personality (as it had appeared to me in the past) in the hope that my views would find ready agreement, when I became suddenly aware that Stringham and Mrs. Andriadis were together engaged in vehement argument just beside the place we sat.

'But, sweetie,' Mrs. Andriadis was saying, 'you can't possibly want to go to the Embassy *now.*'

'But the odd thing is,' said Stringham, speaking slowly and deliberately, 'the odd thing is that is just what I do want to do. I want to go to the Embassy *at once*. Without further delay.'

'But it will be closed.'

'I am rather glad to hear that. I never really liked the Embassy. I shall go somewhere else.'

'But you said it was just the Embassy you wanted to go to.'

'I can't think why. I really want to go somewhere quite different.'

'You really are being too boring for words, Charles.'

'I quite agree,' said Stringham, suddenly changing his tone. 'The fact is I am much too boring to stay at a party. That is exactly how I feel myself. Especially one of your parties, Milly—one of your charming, gay, exquisite, unrivalled parties. I cast a gloom over the merry scene. "Who is that corpse at the feast?" people ask, and the reply is "Poor old Stringham".'

'But you wouldn't feel any better at the Embassy, darling, even if it were open.'

'You are probably right. In fact, I should certainly feel no better at the Embassy. I should feel worse. That is why I am going somewhere much lower than that. Somewhere really frightful.'

'You are being very silly.'

'The Forty-Three would be too stuffy—in all senses—for my present mood.'

'You can't want to go to the Forty-Three.'

'I repeat that I do not want to go to the Forty-Three. I am at the moment looking into my soul to examine the interesting question of where exactly I do want to go.'

'Wherever it is, I shall come too.'

'As you wish, Milly. As you wish. As a matter of fact I was turning over the possibilities of a visit to Mrs. Fitz.'

'Charles, you are impossible.'

I suppose he had had a good deal to drink, though this was, in a way, beside the point, for I knew from past experience that he could be just as perverse in his behaviour when there had been no question of drinking. If he were a little drunk, apart from making a slight bow, he showed no physical sign of such a condition. Mrs. Andriadis, who was evidently determined to master the situation—and who still, in her own particular style, managed to remain rather dazzling, in spite of being obviously put out by this altercation—turned to one of the men-servants who happened to be passing at that moment, carrying a tray laden with glasses, and said: 'Go and get my coat—and be quick about it.'

The man, an old fellow with a blotched face, who had perhaps taken the opportunity to sample the champagne himself more freely than had been wise, stared at her, and, setting down the tray, ambled slowly off. Stringham caught sight of us sitting near-by. He took a step towards me.

'At least I can rely on you, Nick, as an old friend,' he said, 'to accompany me to a haunt of vice. Somewhere where the stains on the table-cloth make the flesh creep—some cellar far below the level of the street, where ageing harlots caper cheerlessly to the discordant strains of jazz.'

Mrs. Andriadis grasped at once that we had known each other for a long time, because she smiled with one of those looks of captivating and whole-hearted sincerity that must have contributed in no small degree to her adventurous career. I was conscious that heavy artillery was now ranged upon my position. At the same time she managed to present herself—as it were, stood before me—in her weakness, threatened by Stringham's behaviour certainly aggravating enough, remarking softly: 'Do tell him not to be such an ass.'

Stringham, too, perfectly took in the situation, evidently deciding immediately, and probably correctly, that if any kind of discussion were allowed to develop between the three of us, Mrs. Andriadis would, in some manner, bring him to heel. There had been, presumably, some collision of wills between them in the course of the evening; probably the consequence of mutual irritation extending over weeks, or even months. Perhaps he had deliberately intended to provoke a quarrel when he had arrived at the house that evening. The situation had rather the appearance of something of the sort. It was equally possible that he was suffering merely from the same kind of restlessness that had earlier afflicted Gypsy Jones. I did not know. In any case, though no business of mine, a break between them might be for the best. However, no time remained to weigh such question in the balance, because Stringham did not wait. He laughed loudly, and went off through the door. Mrs. Andriadis took my arm.

'Will you persuade him to stay!' she said, with that trace of Cockney which—as Barnby would have remarked—had once 'come near to breaking a royal heart.'

At that moment the young man with the orchid, who had risen with dignity from the sofa where he had been silently contemplating the world, came towards us, breaking into the conversation with the words: 'My dear Milly, I simply must tell you the story about Theodoric and the Prince of Wales . . .'

'Another time, darling.'

Mrs. Andriadis gave him a slight push with her left hand, so that he collapsed quietly, and apparently quite happily, into an easy-chair. Almost simultaneously an enormous, purple-faced man with a decided air of authority about him, whose features were for some reason familiar to me, accompanied by a small woman, much younger than himself, came up, mumbling and faintly swaying, as he attempted to thank Mrs. Andriadis for entertaining them. She brushed him aside, clearly to his immense, rather intoxicated surprise, with the same ruthlessness she had shown to the young man with the orchid: at the same time saying to another servant, whom I took, this time, to be her own butler: 'I told one of those bloody hired men to fetch my coat. Go and see where he's got to.'

All these minor incidents inevitably caused delay, giving Stringham a start on the journey down the stairs, towards which we now set off, Mrs. Andriadis still grasping my arm, along which, from second to second, she convulsively altered the grip of her hand. As we reached the foot of the last flight together, the front door slammed. Three or four people were chatting, or putting on wraps, in the hall, in preparation to leave. The elderly lady with the black eyebrows and tiara was sitting on one of the crimson and gold high-backed chairs, beneath which I could see a pile of *War Never Pays!*: Mr. Deacon's, or those forgotten by Gypsy Jones. She had removed her right shoe and was examining the heel intently, to observe if it were still intact. Mrs. Andriadis let go my arm, and ran swiftly towards the door, which she wrenched open violently, just in time to see a taxi drive away from the front of the house. She made use of an expletive that I had never before—in those distant days—heard a woman employ. The phrase left no doubt in the mind that she was extremely provoked. The door swung on its hinge. In silence Mrs. Andriadis watched it shut with a bang. It was hard to know what comment, if any, was required. At that moment the butler arrived with her coat.

'Will you wear it, madam?'

'Take the damned thing away,' she said. 'Are you and the rest of them a lot of bloody cripples? Do I have to wait half an hour every time I want to go out just because I haven't a rag to put round me?'

The butler, accustomed no doubt to such reproaches as all in the day's work—and possibly remunerated on a scale to allow a generous margin for hard words—seemed entirely undisturbed by these strictures on his own agility, and that of his fellows. He agreed at once that his temporary colleague 'did not appear to have his wits about him at all'. In the second's pause during which Mrs. Andriadis seemed to consider this statement, I prepared to say good-bye, partly from conviction that the occasion for doing so, once missed, might not easily recur; even more, because immediate farewell would be a convenient method of bringing to an end the distressing period of tension that had come into existence ever since Stringham's departure, while Mrs. Andriadis contemplated her next move. However, before there was time, on my own part, to take any step in the direction of leave-taking, a loud noise from the stairs behind distracted my attention. Mrs. Andriadis, too, was brought by this sudden disturbance out of the state of suspended animation into which she appeared momentarily to have fallen.

The cause of the commotion now became manifest. Mr. Deacon and the singer, Max Pilgrim, followed by the negro, were descending the stairs rapidly, side by side, jerking down from step to step in the tumult of a frantic quarrel. At first I supposed, improbable as such a thing would be, that some kind of practical joke or 'rag' was taking place in which all three were engaged; but looking closer, it became plain that Mr. Deacon was angry with Pilgrim, while the negro was more or less a spectator, not greatly involved except by his obvious enjoyment of the row. The loose lock of Mr. Deacon's hair had once more fallen across his forehead: his voice had taken on a deep and mordant note. Pilgrim was red in the face and sweating, though keeping his temper with difficulty, and attempting to steer the dispute, whatever its subject, into channels more facetious than polemical.

'There are always leering eyes on the look-out,' Mr. Deacon was saying. 'Besides, your song puts a weapon in the hands of the puritans.'

'I don't expect there were many puritans present——' began Pilgrim.

Mr. Deacon cut him short.

'It is a matter of *principle,*' he said. 'If you have any.'

'What do you know about my principles?' said Pilgrim. 'I don't expect your own principles bear much examination when the lights are out.'

'I can give you an assurance that *you* have no cause to worry about *my* principles,' Mr. Deacon almost screamed. 'Such a situation could never arise—I can assure you of that. This is not the first time, to my knowledge, that you have presumed on such a thing.'

This comment seemed to annoy Pilgrim a great deal, so that he now became scarcely less enraged than Mr. Deacon himself. His quavering voice rose in protest, while Mr. Deacon's sank to a scathing growl: the most offensive tone I have ever heard him employ.

'You person,' he said.

Turning fiercely away from Pilgrim, he strode across the hall in the direction of the chair under which he had stored away *War Never Pays!* Together with his own copies, he gathered up those brought by Gypsy Jones—forgotten by her, as I had foreseen—and, tucking a sheaf under each arm, he made towards the front door. He ignored the figure of Mrs. Andriadis, of whose presence he was no doubt, in his rage, entirely unaware. The catch of the door must have jammed, for that, or some other cause, prevented the hinge from opening freely. Mr. Deacon's first intention was evidently to hold all the papers, his own and those belonging to Gypsy Jones, under his left arm for the brief second during which he opened the door with his right hand to sweep for ever from the obnoxious presence of Max Pilgrim. However, the two combined packets of *War Never Pays!* made quite a considerable bundle, and he must have found himself compelled to bring his left hand also into play, while he hugged most of the copies of the publication—by then rather crumpled—by pressure from his left elbow against his side. The door swung open suddenly. Mr. Deacon was taken by surprise. All at once there was a sound as of the rending of silk, and the papers, like a waterfall—or sugar on Widmerpool's head—began to tumble, one after another, to the ground from under Mr. Deacon's arm. He made a violent effort to check their descent, contriving only to increase the area over which they were freely shed; an unexpected current of air blowing through the open door at that moment into the house helped to scatter sheets of *War Never Pays!* far and wide throughout the hall, even up to the threshold of the room beyond. There was a loud, stagey laugh from the stairs in the background. 'Ha! Ha! Ha!'

It was the negro. He was grinning from ear to ear, now more like a nigger minstrel—a coon with bones and tambourine from some old-fashioned show on the pier at a seaside resort of the Victorian era—than his former dignified, well-groomed self. The sound of his wild, African laughter must have caused Mrs. Andriadis to emerge unequivocally from her coma. She turned on Mr. Deacon.

'You awful old creature,' she said, 'get out of my house.'

He stared at her, and then burst into a fearful fit of coughing, clutching at his chest. My hat stood on a table not far away. While Mrs. Andriadis was still turned from me, I took it up without further delay, and passed through the open door. Mr. Deacon had proved himself a graver responsibility than I, for one, by then felt myself prepared to sustain. They could, all of them, arrange matters between themselves without my help. It would, indeed, be better so. Whatever solution was, in fact, found to terminate the complexities of that moment, Mr. Deacon's immediate expulsion from the house at the command of Mrs. Andriadis was not one of them; because, when I looked back—after proceeding nearly a hundred yards up the road—there was still no sign of his egress, violent or otherwise, from the house.

It was already quite light in the street, and although the air was fresh, almost breezy, after the atmosphere of the party, there was a hint, even at this early hour, of another sultry day on the way. Narrow streaks of blue were already beginning to appear across the flat surface of a livid sky. The dawn had a kind of heaviness, perhaps of thundery weather in the offing. No one was about, though the hum of an occasional car driving up Park Lane from time to time broke the silence for a few seconds, the sound, mournful as the huntsman's horn echoing in the forest, dying away quickly in the distance. Early morning bears with it a sense of pressure, a kind of threat of what the day will bring forth. I felt unsettled and dissatisfied, though not in the least drunk. On the contrary, my brain seemed to be working all at once with quite unusual clarity. Indeed, I found myself almost deciding to sit down, as soon as I reached my room, and attempt to compose a series of essays on human life and character in the manner of, say, Montaigne, so icily etched in my mind at that moment appeared the actions and nature of those with whom that night I had been spending my time. However, second thoughts convinced me that any such efforts at composition would be inadvisable at such an hour. The first thing to do on reaching home would be to try and achieve some sleep. In the morning, literary matters might be reconsidered. I was conscious of having travelled a long way since the Walpole-Wilsons' dinner-party. I was, in fact, very tired.

Attempting to sort out and classify the events of the night, as I walked home between the grey Mayfair houses, I found myself unable to enjoy in retrospect the pleasure reasonably to be expected from the sense of having broken fresh ground. Mrs. Andriadis's party had certainly been something new. Its strangeness and fascination had not escaped me. But there appeared now, so far as I could foresee, no prospect of setting foot again within those unaccustomed regions; even temporary connexion with them, tenuously supplied by Stringham in his latest avatar, seeming uncompromisingly removed by the drift of circumstance.

Apart from these reflections, I was also painfully aware that I had, so it appeared to me, prodigally wasted my time at the party. Instead, for example, of finding a girl to take the place of Barbara—she, at least had been finally swept away by Mrs. Andriadis—I had squandered the hours of opportunity with Mr. Deacon, or with Sillery. I thought suddenly of Sunny Farebrother, and the pleasure he had described himself as deriving from meeting 'interesting people' in the course of his work at the Peace Conference. No such 'interesting' contacts, so far as I myself had been concerned that evening, could possibly have been said to have taken place. For a moment I regretted having refused Gypsy Jones's invitation to accompany her to The Merry Thought. From the point of view of either sentiment or snobbery, giving both terms their widest connotation, the night had been an empty one. I had, so it appeared, merely stayed up until the small hours—no doubt relatively incapacitating myself for serious work on the day following—with nothing better to show for it than the certainty, now absolute, that I was no longer in love with Barbara Goring; though this emancipation would include, of course, relief also from such minor irritations as Tompsitt and his fellows. I remembered now, all at once, Widmerpool's apprehensions at what had seemed to him the 'unserious' nature of my employment.

As I reached the outskirts of Shepherd Market, at that period scarcely touched by rebuilding, I regained once more some small sense of exultation, enjoyed whenever crossing the perimeter of that sinister little village, that I lived within this enchanted precinct. Inconvenient, at moments, as a locality: noisy and uncomfortable: stuffy, depressing, unsavoury: yet the ancient houses still retained some vestige of the dignity of another age; while the inhabitants, many of them existing precariously on their bridge earnings, or hire of their bodies, were—as more than one novelist had, even in those days, already remarked—not without their own seedy glory.

Now, touched almost mystically, like another Stonehenge, by the first rays of the morning sun, the spot seemed one of those clusters of tumble-down dwellings depicted by Canaletto or Piranesi, habitations from amongst which arches, obelisks and viaducts, ruined and overgrown with ivy, arise from the mean houses huddled together below them. Here, too, such massive structures might, one felt, at any moment come into existence by some latent sorcery, for the place was scarcely of this world, and anything was to be surmised. As I penetrated farther into the heart of that rookery, in the direction of my own door, there even stood, as if waiting to greet a friend, one of those indeterminate figures that occur so frequently in the pictures of the kind suggested—Hubert Robert or Pannini—in which the architectural subject predominates. This materialisation took clearer shape as a man, middle-aged to elderly, wearing a bowler hat and discreetly horsy overcoat, the collar turned-up round a claret-coloured scarf with white spots. He leant a little to one side on a rolled umbrella, just as those single figures in romantic landscape are apt to pose; as if the painter, in dealing with so much static matter, were determined to emphasise 'movement' in the almost infinitesimal human side of his composition.

'Where are you off to?' this person suddenly called across the street.

The voice, grating on the morning air, was somewhat accusing in tone. I saw, as a kind of instantaneous revelation, that it was Uncle Giles who stood on the corner in front of the public-house. He seemed undecided which road to take. It was plain that, a minute or two earlier, he had emerged from one of the three main centres of nocturnal activity in the immediate neighbourhood, represented by the garage, the sandwich bar, and the block of flats of dubious repute. There was not a shred of evidence pointing to one of these starting points in preference to another, though other alternatives seemed excluded by his position. I crossed the road.

'Just up from the country,' he said, gruffly.

'By car?'

'By car? Yes, of course.'

'Is it a new one?'

'Yes,' said Uncle Giles. 'It's a new one.'

He spoke as if he had only just thought of that aspect of the vehicle, supposedly his property, that was stated to have brought him to London. One of those pauses followed for which my uncle's conversation was noted within the family circle. I explained that I was returning from a dance, a half-truth that seemed to cover whatever information was required, then and there, to define my circumstances in as compact and easily intelligible a form as possible. Uncle Giles was not practised in following any narrative at all involved in its nature. His mind was inclined to stray back to his own affairs if a story's duration was of anything but the briefest. My words proved redundant, however. He was not in the least interested.

'I am here on business,' he said. 'I don't want to waste a lot of time. Never was keen on staying too long in London. Your hand is never out of your pocket.'

'Where are you staying?'

My uncle thought for a moment.

'Bayswater,' he said, slowly and rather thoughtfully.

I must have looked surprised at finding him so comparatively far afield from his *pied-à-terre,* because Uncle Giles added:

'I mean, of course, that Bayswater is where I am going to stay—at the Ufford, as usual. There is a lot to be said for a place where they know you. Get some civility. At the moment I am on my way to my club, just round the corner.'

'My rooms are just by here.'

'Where?' he asked, suspiciously.

'Opposite.'

'Can't you find anywhere better to live—I mean it's rather a disreputable part of the world, isn't it?'

As if in confirmation of my uncle's misgivings, a prostitute, small, almost a dwarf, with a stumpy umbrella tucked under her arm, came hurrying home, late off her beat—tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap—along the pavement, her extravagant heels making a noise like a woodpecker attacking a tree. She wore a kind of felt helmet pulled low over her face, which looked exceedingly bad-tempered. Some instinct must have told her that neither my uncle nor I were to be regarded in the circumstances as potential clients; for altering her expression no more than to bare a fang at the side of her mouth like an angry animal, she sped along the street at a furious pace—tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap—and up the steps of the entrance to the flats, when she disappeared from sight. Uncle Giles averted his eyes. He still showed no sign of wishing to move from the spot, almost as if he feared even the smallest change of posture might in some unforeseen manner prejudice the veil of secrecy that so utterly cloaked his immediate point of departure.

'I have been with friends in Surrey,' he said grudgingly, as if the admission were unwillingly drawn from him. 'It's a favourite county of mine. Lovely in the autumn. I'm connected with the paper business now.'

I hoped sincerely that this connexion took, as was probable, some remote and esoteric form, and that he was not associated with some normal branch of the industry with which my own firm might be expected to open an account. However, he showed no desire to pursue this matter of his new employment. Instead, he produced from his overcoat pocket a handful of documents, looking like company reports, and glanced swiftly through them. I thought he was going to begin discussing the Trust—by now the Trust remained practically the only unsevered link between himself and his relations—in spite of the earliness of the hour. If his original idea had been to make the Trust subject of comment, he must have changed his mind, finding these memoranda, if such they were, in some way wanting, because he replaced the papers carefully in order and stuffed them back into his coat.

'Tell your father to try and get some San Pedro Warehouses Deferred,' he said, shortly. 'I have had reliable advice about them.'

'I'll say you said so.'

'Do you always stay up as late as this?'

'No—it was a specially good party.'

I could see from my uncle's face that not only did he not accept this as an excuse, but that he had also chosen to consider the words as intended deliberately to disconcert him.

'Take a bit of advice from one who has knocked about the world for a good many years,' he said. 'Don't get in the habit of sitting up till all hours. It never did anyone any good.'

'I'll bear it in mind.'

'Parents well?'

'Very well.'

'I've been having trouble with my teeth.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Well, I must be off. Good-bye to you.'

He made a stiff gesture, rather as if motioning someone away from him, and moved off suddenly in the direction of Hertford Street, striding along very serious, with his umbrella shouldered, as if once more at the head of his troops, drums beating and colour flying, as the column, conceded all honours of war, marched out of the capitulated town. Just as I opened the door of my house, he turned to wave. I raised my hand in return. Within, the bedroom remained unaltered, just as it had appeared when I had set out for the Walpole-Wilsons', the suit I had worn the day before hanging dejectedly over the back of a chair. While I undressed I reflected on the difficulty of believing in the existence of certain human beings, my uncle among them, even in the face of unquestionable evidence—indications sometimes even wanting in the case of persons for some reason more substantial to the mind—that each had dreams and desires like other men. Was it possible to take Uncle Giles seriously? And yet he was, no doubt, serious enough to himself. If a clue to that problem could be found, other mysteries of life might be revealed. I was still pondering Uncle Giles and his ways when I dropped into an uneasy sleep.

3.

I USED to imagine life divided into separate compartments, consisting, for example, of such dual abstractions as pleasure and pain, love and hate, friendship and enmity; and more material classifications like work and play: a profession or calling being, according to that concept—one that seemed, at least on the surface, unequivocally assumed by persons so dissimilar from one another as Widmerpool and Archie Gilbert—something entirely different from 'spare time'. That illusion—as such a point of view was, in due course, to appear—was closely related to another belief: that existence fans out indefinitely into new areas of experience, and that almost every additional acquaintance offers some supplementary world with its own hazards and enchantments. As time goes on, of course, these supposedly different worlds, in fact, draw closer, if not to each other, then to some pattern common to all; so that, at last, diversity between them, if in truth existent, seems to be almost imperceptible except in a few crude and exterior ways: unthinkable as formerly appeared any single consummation of cause and effect. In other words, nearly all the inhabitants of these outwardly disconnected empires turn out at last to be tenaciously inter-related; love and hate, friendship and enmity, too, becoming themselves much less clearly defined, more often than not showing signs of possessing characteristics that could claim, to say the least, not a little in common; while work and play merge indistinguishably into a complex tissue of pleasure and tedium.

All the same, although still far from appreciating many of the finer points of Mrs. Andriadis's party—for there were, of course, finer points to be appreciated in retrospect—and, on the whole, no less ignorant of what the elements there present had consisted, I was at the same time more than half aware that such latitudes are entered by a door through which there is, in a sense, no return. The lack of ceremony that had attended our arrival, and the fact of being so much in the dark as to the terms upon which the party was being given, had been both, in themselves, a trifle embarrassing; but, looking back on the occasion, armed with later knowledge of individual affiliations among the guests, there is no reason to suppose that mere awareness of everyone's identity would have been calculated to promote any greater feeling of ease: if anything, rather the reverse. The impact of entertainments given by people like Mrs. Andriadis, as I learnt in due course, depends upon rapidly-changing personal relationships; so that to be apprised suddenly of the almost infinite complication of such associations—if any such omniscience could, by some magical means, have been imparted—without being oneself, even at a distance, at all involved, might have been a positive handicap, perhaps a humiliating one, to enjoyment.

To begin with, there was the unanswered question of Stringham's entanglement with Mrs. Andriadis herself. I did not know how long in duration of time the affair had already extended; nor how seriously it was to be regarded. Their connexion, on his part at least, seemed no more than a whim: a fancy for an older woman, of which, for example, in a Latin country nothing whatever would be thought. On the other hand, Mrs. Andriadis herself evidently accepted the fact that, so far as things went, she was fairly deeply concerned. I thought of the casual adventure with the woman in Nairobi that he had described to me, and of the days when he and Peter Templer had been accustomed to discuss 'girls' together at school.

I could now recognise in Stringham's attitude a kind of reticence, never apparent at the time when such talks had taken place. This reticence, when I thought it over, was not in what Stringham said, or did not say, so much as in what, I suppose, he felt; and, when he used to sweep aside objections raised by myself to Templer's often cavalier treatment of the subject, I saw—at this later date—his attitude was assumed to conceal a lack of confidence at least comparable with my own. I did not, of course, come to these conclusions immediately. They were largely the result of similar talks pursued over a long period with Barnby, of whom Mr. Deacon, congenitally unappreciative in that sphere, used to say: 'I can stand almost anything from Barnby except his untidiness and generalisations about women.' However, personally I used to enjoy Barnby's pronouncements on the subject of feminine psychology, and, when I came to know him well, we used to have endless discussions on that matter.

This—as Barnby himself liked to think—almost scientific approach to the subject of 'women' was in complete contrast to Peter Templer's, and, I think, to Stringham's too, both of whom were incurious regarding questions of theory. Templer, certainly, would have viewed these relatively objective investigations as fearful waste of time. In a different context, this antithesis of approach could be illustrated by quoting a remark of Stringham's made a dozen or more years later, when we met during the war. 'You know, Nick,' he said, 'I used to think all that was necessary to fire a rifle was to get your eye, sights, and target in line, and press the trigger. Now I find the Army have written a whole book about it.' Both he and Templer would have felt a similar superfluity attached to these digressions with Barnby; with whom, as it happened, my first words exchanged led, as if logically, to a preliminary examination of the subject: to be followed, I must admit, by a lifetime of debate on the same theme.

The circumstances of our initial encounter to some extent explain this early emphasis. It had been the end of August, or beginning of September, in days when that desolate season of late summer had fallen like a pall on excavated streets, over which the fumes of tar hung heavy in used-up air, echoing to the sound of electric drills. After two or three weeks away from London, there was nothing to be enjoyed in anticipation except an invitation to spend a week-end at Hinton with the Walpole-Wilsons: a visit arranged months ahead, and still comparatively distant, so it seemed, in point of time. Everyone appeared to be away. A sense of isolation, at least when out of the office, had become oppressive, and I began to feel myself a kind of hermit, threading his way eternally through deserted and sultry streets, never again to know a friend. It was in this state of mind that I found myself wondering whether some alleviation of solitude could be provided by 'looking up' Mr. Deacon, as he had suggested at the coffee-stall; although it had to be admitted that I felt no particular desire to see him after the closing scenes of the party, when his behaviour had struck me as intolerable. However, there appeared to exist no other single acquaintance remaining within a familiar orbit, and the Walpole-Wilson week-end still seemed lost in the future. As a consequence of prolonged, indeed wholly disproportionate, speculation on the matter, I set out one afternoon, after work, for the address Mr. Deacon had scrawled on an envelope.

Charlotte Street, as it stretches northward towards Fitzroy Square, retains a certain unprincipled integrity of character, though its tributaries reach out to the east, where, in Tottenham Court Road, structural anomalies pass all bounds of reason, and west, into a nondescript ocean of bricks and mortar from which hospitals, tenements and warehouses gloomily manifest themselves in shapeless bulk above mean shops. Mr. Deacon's 'place' was situated in a narrow by-street in this westerly direction: an alley-way, not easy to find, of modest eighteenth-century—perhaps even late seventeenth-century—houses, of a kind still to be seen in London, though growing rarer, the fronts of some turned to commercial purposes, others bearing the brass plate of dentist or midwife. Here and there a dusty creeper trailed from window to window. Those that remained private dwellings had three or four bells, one above the other, set beside the door at a height from the ground effectively removed from children's runaway rings. Mr. Deacon's premises stood between a French polisher's and the offices of the Vox Populi Press. It was a sordid spot, though one from which a certain implication of expectancy was to be derived. Indeed, the façade was not unlike that row of shops that form a backcloth for the harlequinade; and, as I approached the window, I was almost prepared for Mr. Deacon, with mask and spangles and magic wand, suddenly to pirouette along the pavement, tapping, with disastrous consequence, all the passers-by.

However, the shop was shut. Through the plate glass, obscured in watery depths, dark green like the interior of an aquarium's compartments, Victorian work-tables, *papier-mâché* trays, Staffordshire figures, and a varnished scrap screen—upon the sombrely coloured *montage* of which could faintly be discerned shiny versions of *Bubbles* and *For He Had Spoken Lightly Of A Woman's Name*—swam gently into further aqueous recesses that eddied back into yet more remote alcoves of the double room: additional subterranean grottoes, hidden from view, in which, like a grubby naiad, Gypsy Jones, as described so vividly by Mr. Deacon, was accustomed, from time to time, to sleep, or at least to recline, beneath the monotonous, conventionalised arabesques of rare, if dilapidated, Oriental draperies. For some reason, the thought roused a faint sense of desire. The exoticism of the place as a bedroom was undeniable. I had to ring the bell of the side door twice before anyone answered the summons. Then, after a long pause, the door was half opened by a young man in shirt-sleeves, carrying a dustpan and brush.

'Yes?' he asked abruptly.

My first estimate of Barnby, whom I immediately guessed this to be, the *raisonneur* so often quoted at the party by Mr. Deacon as inhabiting the top floor of the house, was not wholly favourable; nor, as I learnt later, was his own assessment of myself. He looked about twenty-six or twenty-seven, dark, thick-set, and rather puffed under the eyes. There was the impression of someone who knew how to look after his own interests, though in a balanced and leisurely manner. I explained that I had come to see Mr. Deacon.

'Have you an appointment?'

'No.'

'Business?'

'No.'

'Mr. Deacon is not here.'

'Where is he?'

'Cornwall.'

'For long?'

'No idea.'

This allegedly absolute ignorance of the duration of a landlord's retirement to the country seemed scarcely credible in a tenant whose life, at least as presented in Mr. Deacon's anecdotes, was lived at such close range to the other members of the household. However, the question, put in a somewhat different form, achieved no greater success. Barnby stared hard, and without much friendliness. I saw that I should get no further with him at this rate, and requested that he would inform Mr. Deacon, on his return, of my call.

'What name?'

'Jenkins.'

At this, Barnby became on the spot more accommodating. He opened the door wider and came out on to the step.

'Didn't you take Edgar to Milly Andriadis's party?' he asked, in a different tone.

'In a manner of speaking.'

'He was in an awful state the next day,' Barnby said. 'Worried, too, about losing so many copies of that rag he hawks round. I believe he had to pay for them out of his own pocket. Anyway, Edgar is too old for that kind of thing.'

He spoke this last comment sadly, though without implication of disapproval. I mentioned the unusual circumstances that had brought Mr. Deacon and myself to the party. Barnby listened in a somewhat absent manner, and then made two or three enquiries regarding the names of other guests. He seemed, in fact, more interested in finding out who had attended the party than in hearing a more specific account of how Mr. Deacon had received his invitation, or had behaved while he was there.

'Did you run across a Mrs. Wentworth?' he asked. 'Rather a handsome girl.'

'She was pointed out to me. We didn't meet.'

'Was she with Donners?'

'Later in the evening. She was talking to a Balkan royalty when I first saw her.'

'Theodoric?'

'Yes.'

'Had Theodoric collected anyone else?'

'Lady Ardglass.'

'I thought as much,' said Barnby. 'I wish I'd managed to get there. I've met Mrs. Andriadis—but I can't say I really know her.'

He nodded gravely, more to himself than in further comment to me, seeming to admit by this movement the justice of his own absence from the party. For a moment or two there was silence between us. Then he said: 'Why not come in for a minute? You know, all sorts of people ask for Edgar. He likes some blackmailers admitted, but by no means all of them. One has to be careful.'

I explained that I had not come to blackmail Mr. Deacon.

'Oh, I guessed that almost at once,' said Barnby. 'But I was doing a bit of cleaning when you rang—the studio gets filthy—and the dust must have confused my powers of differentiation.'

All this was evidently intended as some apology for earlier gruffness. As I followed up a narrow staircase, I assured him that I had no difficulty in grasping that caution might be prudent where Mr. Deacon's friends were concerned. In answer to this Barnby expressed himself very plainly regarding the majority of Mr. Deacon's circle of acquaintance. By this time we had reached the top of the house, and entered a fairly large, bare room, with a north light, used as a studio. Barnby pointed to a rickety armchair, and throwing dustpan and brush in the corner by the stove, sat down on a kind of divan that stood against one wall.

'You've known Edgar for a long time?'

'Since I was a child. But the other night was the first time I ever heard him called that.'

'He doesn't let everyone use the name,' said Barnby. 'In fact, he likes to keep it as quiet as he can. As it happens, my father was at the Slade with him.'

'He has given up painting, hasn't he?'

'Entirely.'

'Is that just as well?'

'Some people hold that as a bad painter Edgar carries all before him,' said Barnby. 'I know good judges who think there is literally no worse one. I can't say I care for his work myself—but I'm told Sickert once found a good word to say for some of them, so there may have been something there once.'

'Is he making a success of the antique business?'

'He says people are very kind. He marks the prices up a bit. Still, there always seems someone ready to pay—and I know he is glad to be back in London.'

'But I thought he liked Paris so much.'

'Only for a holiday, I think. He had to retire there for a number of years. There was a bit of trouble in the park, you know.'

This hint of a former contretemps explained many things about Mr. Deacon's demeanour. For example, the reason for his evasive manner in the Louvre was now made plain; and I recalled Sillery's words at Mrs. Andriadis's party. They provided an illustration of the scope and nature of Sillery's stock of gossip. Mr. Deacon's decided air of having 'gone downhill' was now also to be understood. I began to review his circumstances against a more positive perspective.

'What about *War Never Pays!*, and Gypsy Jones?'

'The pacifism came on gradually,' said Barnby. 'I think it followed the period when he used to pretend the war had not taken place at all. Jones's interests are more political—world revolution, at least.'

'Is she in residence at the moment?'

'Returned to the bosom of her family. Her father is a schoolmaster in the neighbourhood of Hendon. But may I ask if you, too, are pursuing her?'

After the remarks, largely incoherent, though apparently pointed enough, made by Mr. Deacon at the party, to the effect that Barnby's disapproval of Gypsy Jones's presence in the house was radically vested in his own lack of success in making himself acceptable to her, I assumed this question to be intended to ascertain whether or not I was myself to be considered a rival in that quarter. I therefore assured him at once that he could set his mind at rest upon that point, explaining that my enquiry had been prompted by the merest curiosity.

The inference on my part may have been a legitimate one in the light of what Mr. Deacon had said, but it proved to be a long way wide of the mark. As a matter of fact, it turned out that any such interpretation of Barnby's question was, according to himself, not only utterly mistaken, but also extremely distasteful to him. He appeared much annoyed at the suggestion that his own feelings for Gypsy Jones could be coloured by any sentiment short of the heartiest dislike: stating in the most formidable terms at hand—comparable to those he had used earlier of Mr. Deacon's hangers-on—his own ineradicable unwillingness, for that matter suspected actual physical incapacity in face of financial indemnities of the most extravagant order, to be inveigled into any situation that might even threaten approach to intimacy with her.

These protests struck me at the time as perhaps a shade exaggerated, since I had to admit that, personally, I had found Gypsy Jones, undeniably sluttish though she might be, at the same time less obnoxious than the impression of her conveyed by Barnby's words. However, I tried to make amends for the unjust imputation laid upon him, although, owing to their somewhat uncomplimentary nature, I was naturally unable to explain in precise terms the form taken by Mr. Deacon's misleading comments.

'I meant the chap with spectacles,' said Barnby. 'Isn't he a friend of yours? He always seems to be round here when Jones is about. I thought she might have made a conquest of you as well.'

The second that passed before I was able to grasp that Barnby referred to Widmerpool was to be attributed to that deep-seated reluctance that still remained in my heart, in the face of a volume of evidence to prove the contrary, to believe Widmerpool capable of possessing a vigorous emotional life of his own. This lack of understanding on my own part is explicable only when examined in the light of that crudeness of method which serves most people in early life—and some for all their days—as a rough-and-ready guide to human behaviour. In this particular case, for example, Widmerpool appeared, at least from an unimaginative point of view, as a person outwardly unprepossessing, and therefore, according to a totally misleading doctrine, confined to an inescapable predicament that allowed no love affairs: or, at best, love affairs of so obscure and colourless a kind as to be of no possible interest to the world at large.

Apart from its many other flaws, this approach was entirely subjective in its assumption that Widmerpool must of necessity appear, even to persons of the opposite sex, as physically unattractive as he seemed to me; though there could probably be counted on my side, in support of this misapprehension, the opinion of most, perhaps all, of our contemporaries at school. On the other hand, I could claim a certain degree of vindication regarding this particular point at issue by insisting, with some justice, that Gypsy Jones, on the face of it, was the last girl on earth who might be expected to occupy Widmerpool's attention; which, on his own comparatively recent showing, seemed so unhesitatingly concentrated on making a success, in the most conventional manner, of his own social life.

At least that was how matters struck me when the situation, if it could be so called, was mentioned by Barnby; though I remembered then how the two of them—Gypsy Jones and Widmerpool—had apparently found each other's company congenial at the party. It was a matter to which I had given no thought at the time. Now I considered some of the facts. Although the theory that, in love, human beings like to choose an 'opposite' may be genetically unsound, there is also, so it seems, a basic validity in such typically prescriptive emotional situations as Montague and Capulet, Cavalier and Roundhead. If certain individuals fall in love from motives of convenience, they can be contrasted with plenty of others in whom passion seems principally aroused by the intensity of administrative difficulties in procuring its satisfaction. In fact, history is full of examples of hard-headed personages—to be expected to choose partners in love for reasons helpful to their own career—who were, as often as not, the very people most to embarrass themselves, even to the extent of marriage, with unions that proved subsequently formidable obstacles to advancement.

This digression records, naturally, a later judgment; although even at the time, thinking things over, I could appreciate that there was nothing to be regarded as utterly unexpected in Widmerpool, after the sugar incident, taking a fancy to someone new and different, 'on the rebound', however surprisingly in contrast with Barbara the next girl might be. When I began to weigh up the characteristics of Gypsy Jones, in so far as I knew them, I wondered whether, on examination, they made, indeed, so violent an antithesis to Barbara's qualities as might at first sight have appeared. Arguments could unquestionably be brought forward to show that these two girls possessed a good deal in common. Perhaps, after all, Barbara Goring and Gypsy Jones, so far from being irreconcilably different, were in fact notably alike; Barbara's girls' club, or whatever it was, in Bermondsey even pointing to a kind of sociological preoccupation in which there was—at least debatably—some common ground.

These speculations did not, of course, occur to me all at once. Still less did I think of a general law enclosing, even in some slight degree, all who share an interest in the same woman. It was not until years later that the course matters took in this direction became more or less explicable to me along such lines—that is to say, the almost irresistible pressure in certain emotional affairs of the most positive circumstantial inconvenience to be found at hand. Barnby, satisfied that I was clear regarding his own standpoint, was now prepared to make concessions.

'Jones has her admirers, you know,' he said. 'In fact, Edgar swears that she is the toast of the 1917 Club. It's my belief that in a perverted sort of way he rather fancies her himself—though, of course, he would never admit as much.'

'He talked a lot about her at the party.'

'What did he say?'

'He was deploring that she found herself in rather an awkward spot.'

'You know about that, do you?'

'Mr. Deacon seemed very concerned.'

'You make me laugh when you call Edgar "Mr. Deacon",' said Barnby. 'It certainly makes a new man of him. As a matter of fact, I rather think Jones has solved her problem. You know, she is older than you'd think—too old to get into that sort of difficulty. What do you say to going across the road for a drink?'

On the way out of the studio I asked if one of the unframed portraits standing against the easel could be a likeness of Mrs. Wentworth. Barnby, after scarcely perceptible hesitation, agreed that the picture represented that lady.

'She is rather paintable,' he explained.

'Yes?'

'But tricky at times.'

The subject of Mrs. Wentworth seemed to dispirit him a little, and he remained silent until we were sitting in front of our drinks in the empty saloon bar of the pub on the corner.

'Do you have any dealings with Donners?' he asked at last.

'A friend of mine called Charles Stringham has some sort of a job with him.'

'I've heard Baby speak of Stringham. Wasn't there something about a divorce?'

'His sister's.'

'That was it,' said Barnby. 'But the point is—what is happening about Baby and Donners?'

'How do you mean?'

'They are seen about a lot together. Baby has been appearing with some rather nice diamond clips, and odds and ends of that sort, which seem to be recent acquisitions.'

Barnby screwed up his face in thought.

'Of course,' he said. 'I realise that a poor man competing with a rich one for a woman should be in a relatively strong position if he plays his cards well. Even so, Donners possesses to a superlative degree the advantages of his handicaps—so that one cannot help feeling a bit agitated at times. Especially with Theodoric cutting in, though I don't think he carries many guns.'

'What about Mrs. Wentworth's husband?'

'Divorced,' said Barnby. 'She may even want to marry Donners. The point is, in this—as, I believe, in business matters too—he is rather a man of mystery. From time to time he has a girl hanging about, but he never seems to settle down with anyone. The girls themselves are evasive. They admit to no more than accepting presents and giving nothing in return. That's innocent enough, after all.'

Although he spoke of the matter as if not to be taken too seriously, I suspected that he was, at least for the moment, fairly deeply concerned in the matter of Baby Wentworth; and, when conversation turned to the supposed whims of Sir Magnus, Barnby seemed to take a self-tormenting pleasure in the nature of the hypotheses he put forward. It appeared that the position was additionally complicated by the fact that he had sold a picture to Sir Magnus a month or two before, and that there was even some question of his undertaking a mural in the entrance hall of the Donners-Brebner building.

'Makes the situation rather delicate,' said Barnby.

He was, so I discovered, a figure of the third generation (perhaps the descent, if ascertainable, would have proved even longer) in the world in which he moved: a fact that seemed to give his judgment, based on easy terms of long standing with the problems involved, a scope rather unusual among those who practise the arts, even when they themselves perform with proficiency. His father—though he had died comparatively young, and left no money to speak of—had been, in his day, a fairly successful sculptor of an academic sort; his grandfather, not unknown in the

’sixties and ’seventies, a book illustrator in the Tenniel tradition.

There were those, as I found later, among Barnby’s acquaintances who would suggest that his too extensive field of appreciation had to some degree inhibited his own painting. This may have been true. He was himself fond of saying that few painters, writers or musicians had anything but the vaguest idea of what had been thought by their forerunners even a generation or two before; and usually no idea at all, however much they might protest to the contrary, regarding each other’s particular branch of æsthetic. His own work diffused that rather deceptive air of emancipation that seemed in those years a kind of neo-classicism, suggesting essentially that same impact brought home to me by Paris in the days when we had met Mr. Deacon in the Louvre: an atmosphere I can still think of as excitingly peculiar to that time.

Sir Magnus’s interest in him showed enterprise in a great industrialist, for Barnby was then still comparatively unknown as a painter. In some curious manner his pictures seemed to personify a substantial proportion of that wayward and melancholy, perhaps even rather spurious, content of the self-consciously disillusioned art of that epoch. I mention these general aspects of the period and its moods, not only because they serve to illustrate Barnby, considered, as it were, as a figure rather symbolic of the contemporary background, but also because our conversation, when later we had dinner together that night, drifted away from personalities into the region of painting and writing; so that, by the time I returned to my rooms, I had almost forgotten his earlier remarks about such individuals, and their concerns, as Widmerpool and Gypsy Jones, or Mrs. Wentworth and Sir Magnus Donners.

As it turned out, some of the things Barnby had told me that night threw light, in due course, on matters that would otherwise have been scarcely intelligible; for I certainly did not expect that scattered elements of Mrs. Andriadis's party would recur so comparatively soon in my life; least of all supposing that their new appearance would take place through the medium of the Walpole-Wilsons, who were involved, it is true, only in a somewhat roundabout manner. All the same, their commitment was sufficient to draw attention once again to that extraordinary process that causes certain figures to appear and reappear in the performance of one or another sequence of what I have already compared with a ritual dance.

Their summons to the country, although, as an invitation, acceptable to say the least at that time of year, was in itself, unless regarded from a somewhat oblique angle, not specially complimentary. This was because Eleanor herself looked upon house-parties at Hinton Hoo without enthusiasm, indeed with reluctance, classing them as a kind of extension of her 'season', calculated on the whole to hinder her own chosen activities by bringing to her home people who had, in a greater or lesser degree, to be entertained; thereby obstructing what she herself regarded, perhaps with reason, as the natural life of the place. There was no doubt something to be said for this point of view; and her letter, painfully formulated, had made no secret of a sense of resignation, on her own part, to the inevitable: conveying by its spirit, rather than actual words, the hope that at least I, for one, as an old, if not particularly close, friend, might be expected to recognise the realities of the situation, and behave accordingly.

Eleanor's candour in this respect certainly did not preclude gratitude. On the other hand, it had equally to be admitted that some fundamental support sustaining the Walpole-Wilson family life had become at some stage of existence slightly displaced, so that a visit to Hinton, as to all households where something fundamental has gone obscurely wrong, was set against an atmosphere of tensity. Whether this lack of harmony had its roots in Sir Gavin's professional *faux pas* or in some unresolved imperfection in the relationship of husband and wife could only be conjectured. Hard up as I was at that moment for entertainment, I might even have thought twice about staying there —so formidable could this *ambiance* sometimes prove—if I had not by then been wholly converted to Barbara's view that 'Eleanor was not a bad old girl when you know her.' I was rather glad to think that Barbara herself was in Scotland, so that there would be no likelihood of meeting her at her uncle's house. I felt that, if we could avoid seeing each other for long enough, any questions of sentiment—so often deprecated by Barbara herself—could be allowed quietly to subside, and take their place in those niches of memory especially reserved for abortive emotional entanglements of that particular kind.

All the same, this sensation of starting life again, as it were, with a clean sheet, made me regret a little to find on arrival that the assembled house-party consisted only of Sir Gavin's unmarried sister, Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson, Rosie Manasch, and Johnny Pardoe. On the way down in the train I had felt that it would be enjoyable to meet some new girl, even at risk of becoming once more victim to the afflictions from which I had only recently emerged. However, it seemed that no such situation was on this occasion likely to arise. Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson I knew of only by name, though I had heard a great deal about her from time to time when talking to Eleanor, who, possessing a great admiration for her aunt, often described the many adventures for which she was noted within the family.

The other two guests, although in theory a perfectly suitable couple to invite together, were, I thought, not quite sure whether they liked one another. Barnby used to say that a small man was at more of a disadvantage with a small woman than with a big one, and it was certainly true that the short, squat, black figures of Rosie Manasch and Pardoe sometimes looked a little absurd side by side. 'Johnnie is so amusing,' she used to say, and he had been heard to remark: 'Rosie dances beautifully,' but almost any other pair of Eleanor's acquaintances would have liked each other as well, if not better. As a matter of fact, Sir Gavin, as I have said before, had rather a *tendresse* for Rosie, which may have accounted for her presence; and he certainly felt strong approval of Pardoe's comfortable income. Eleanor's own indifference to the matter might be held to excuse her parents for asking to the house guests who at least appealed in one way or another to the tastes of an older generation.

The red brick Queen Anne manor house stood back from the road in a small park, if such an unpretentious setting of trees and paddocks could be so called. A walled orchard on the far side stretched down to the first few cottages of the village. The general impression of the property was of an estate neat and well superintended, rather than large. The place possessed that quality, perhaps more characteristic of country houses in England than in some other parts of Europe, of house and grounds forming an essential part of the landscape. The stables stood round three sides of a courtyard a short way from the main buildings, and there Eleanor was accustomed to spend a good deal of her time, with animals of various kinds, housed about the loose-boxes in hutches and wooden crates.

Within, there existed, rather unexpectedly, that somewhat empty, insistently correct appearance that private dwellings of those who have spent most of their lives in official residences of one kind or another are sometimes inclined to assume. A few mementoes of posts abroad were scattered about. For example, an enormous lacquer cabinet in the drawing-room had been brought from Pekin—some said Tokyo—by Sir Gavin, upon the top of which stood several small, equivocal figures carved in wood by the Indians of some South American tribe. The portraits in the dining-room were mostly of Wilson forebears: one of them, an admiral, attributed to Zoffany. There was also a large painting of Lady Walpole-Wilson's father by the Academician, Isbister (spoken of with such horror by Mr. Deacon), whose portrait of Peter Templer's father I remembered as the only picture in the Templer home. This canvas was in the painter's earlier manner, conveying the impression that at any moment Lord Aberavon, depicted in peer's robes, would step from the frame and join the company below him in the room.

The Wilsons had lived in the county for a number of generations, but Sir Gavin had bought Hinton (with which he possessed hereditary connexions through a grandmother) only after retirement. This comparatively recent purchase of his home was a subject upon which Sir Gavin's mind was never wholly at rest; and he was always at pains to explain that its ownership was not to be looked upon as an entirely new departure so far as any hypothetical status might be concerned as a land-owner 'in that part of the world'.

'As a matter of fact, the Wilsons are, if anything, an older family than the Walpoles—well, perhaps not that, but at least as old,' he used to say. 'I expect you have heard of Beau Wilson, a young gentleman who spent a lot of money in the reign of William and Mary, and was killed in a duel. I have reason to suppose he was one of our lot. And then there was a Master of the Mint a bit earlier. The double-barrel, which I greatly regret, and would discard if I could, without putting myself and my own kith and kin to a great deal of inconvenience, was the work of a great-uncle—a most consequential ass, between you and me, and a bit of a snob, I'm afraid—and has really no basis whatever, beyond the surname of a remote ancestor in the female line.'

He was accustomed to terminate this particular speech with a number of 'm'ms', most of them interrogative, and some uneasy laughter. His sister, on this occasion, looked rather disapproving at these excursions into family history. She was a small, defiant woman, some years younger than Sir Gavin, recently returned from a journey in Yugoslavia, where she had been staying with a friend married to a British consul in that country. Although spoken of as 'not well off', Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson was also reported to maintain herself at a respectable level of existence by intermittent odd jobs that varied between acting as secretary, usually in a more or less specialised capacity, to some public figure, often a friend or relative of the family; alternatively, by undertaking the rôle of governess or duenna to children of relations, some of whom were rather rich, when they travelled abroad.

'Aunt Janet says you must never mind asking,' Eleanor had informed me, when speaking of the ease with which Miss Walpole-Wilson, apparently on account of her freedom from inhibition upon this point, always found employment. Her aunt certainly seemed to have enjoyed throughout her life a wide variety of confidences and experiences. She dressed usually in tones of brown and green, colours that gave her for some reason, possibly because her hats almost always conveyed the impression of being peaked, an air of belonging to some dedicated order of female officials, connected possibly with public service in the woods and forests, and bearing a load of responsibility, the extent of which was difficult for a lay person—even impossible if a male—

to appreciate, or wholly to understand. The outlines of her good, though severe, features were emphasised by a somewhat reddish complexion.

Sir Gavin, though no doubt attached to his sister, was sometimes openly irritated by her frequent, and quite uncompromising, pronouncements on subjects that he must have felt himself, as a former diplomatist of some standing, possessing the right, at least in his own house, to speak of with authority. Lady Walpole-Wilson, on the other hand, scarcely made a secret of finding the presence of her sister-in-law something of a strain. A look of sadness would steal over her face when Miss Walpole-Wilson argued with Sir Gavin about ethnological problems in the Sanjak of Novi Bazar, or spoke of times when 'the Ford's big end went in the Banat', or 'officials made themselves so disagreeable at Nish': geographical entities of that kind playing a great part in her conversation. Although seriously concerned with the general welfare of the human race, she sometimes displayed a certain capricious malignity towards individuals, taking, for example, a great dislike to Pardoe, though she showed a guarded friendship towards Rosie Manasch. I was relieved to find her attitude to myself suggested nothing more hostile than complete indifference.

One, perhaps the chief, bone of contention lying between herself and her brother was Miss Walpole-Wilson's contention that the traditions of his service, by their very nature, must have rendered him impervious to anything in the way of new ideas or humanitarian concepts; so that much of Sir Gavin's time was taken up in attempting to demonstrate to his sister that, so far from lagging behind in the propagation of reforms of almost every kind, he was prepared to go, theoretically at least, not only as far as, but even farther than, herself. Both of them knew Sillery, who had recently stayed in the neighbourhood, and for once they were in agreement that he was 'full of understanding'. The subject of Sillery's visit came up at dinner on the night of my arrival.

'It was at Stourwater,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson. 'As a matter of fact we have been asked over there on Sunday. Prince Theodoric is staying there with Sir Magnus Donners.'

I knew the castle by name, and was even aware in a vague kind of way that it had often changed hands during the previous fifty or hundred years; but I had never seen the place, nor had any idea that Sir Magnus Donners lived there.

'And I so much wanted that afternoon to see those two hound puppies Nokes is walking,' said Eleanor. 'Now it turns out we are being forced to go to this ghastly luncheon-party.'

'Got to be civil to one's neighbours, my dear,' said Sir Gavin. 'Besides, Theodoric has particularly asked to see me.'

'I don't know what you call "neighbours",' said Eleanor. 'Stourwater is twenty-five miles, at least.'

'Nonsense,' said Sir Gavin. 'I doubt if it is twenty-three.'

His attitude towards Eleanor varied between almost doting affection and an approach best suggested by the phrase 'making the best of a bad job'; but there were times when she vexed him. Arguing with her father brought out the resemblance between the two of them, though features that, in Sir Gavin, seemed conventionalised to the point, almost, of stylisation took on a peculiar twist in his daughter: due perhaps to some interior effort on the part of her mother's sensibility within her to find outlet through the more prosaic, though at the same time far from unruffled, medium of her father's nature. As she sat there at the table, I could recognise no similarity whatever to

Barbara—of whom at times I still found myself thinking—except for their being both about the same in colouring.

'I explained to Donners that we should be quite a large party,' said Sir Gavin, 'but he would not hear of anyone being left behind. In any case, there is plenty of room there, and the castle itself is well worth seeing.'

'I don't think I shall come after all, Gavin,' said Miss Walpole-Wilson. 'No one will want to see me there—least of all Prince Theodoric. Although I dare say he is too young to remember the misunderstanding that arose, when I stayed with you, regarding that remark about "a travesty of democratic government"—and you know I never care for people with too much money.'

'Oh, come, Janet,' said Sir Gavin. 'Of course they will all want to see you—the Prince especially. He is a very go-ahead fellow; everyone who has met him agrees. As a matter of fact, you know as well as I do, the old King laughed heartily when I explained the circumstance of your remark. He made a rather broad joke about it. I've told you a thousand times. Besides, Donners is not a bad fellow at all.'

'I can't get on with those people—ever.'

'I don't know what you mean by "those people",' said Sir Gavin, a trifle irritably. 'Donners is no different from anyone else, except that he may be a bit richer. He didn't start life barefoot—not that I for one should have the least objection if he had, more power to his elbow—but his father was an eminently solid figure. He was knighted, I believe, for what that's worth. Donners went to some quite decent school. I think the family are of Scandinavian, or North German, extraction. No doubt very worthy people.'

'Oh, I do hope he isn't German,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson. 'I never thought of that.'

'Personally, I have a great admiration for the Germans—I do not, of course, mean the Junkers,' said her sister-in-law.

'They have been hardly treated. No one of liberal opinions could think otherwise. And I certainly do not object to Sir Magnus on snobbish grounds. You know me too well for that, Gavin. I have no doubt, as you say, that he has many good points. All the same, I think I had better stay at home. I can make a start on my article about the Bosnian Moslems for the news-sheet of the Minority Problems League.'

'If Aunt Janet doesn't go, I don't see why I should,' said Eleanor. 'I don't in the least want to meet Prince Theodoric.'

'I do,' said Rosie Manasch. 'I thought he looked too fetching at Goodwood.'

In the laugh that followed this certainly tactful expression of preference, earlier warnings of potential family difference died away. Sir Gavin began to describe, not for the first time, the occasion when, as a young secretary in some Oriental country, he had stained his face with coffee-grounds and, like Haroun-al-Raschid, 'mingled' in the bazaar: with, so it appeared, useful results. The story carried dinner safely to the dessert, a stage when Pardoe brought conversation back once more to Sunday's expedition by asking whether Sir Magnus Donners had purchased Stourwater from the family with whom Barbara was staying in Scotland, for whose house he was bound on leaving Hinton.

'He bought it from a relation of mine,' said Rosie Manasch. 'Uncle Leopold always says he sold it—with due respect to you, Eleanor—because the hunting round here wasn't good enough. I think it was really because it cost too much to keep up.'

'It is all very perfect now,' said Sir Gavin. 'Rather too perfect for my taste. In any case, I am no medievalist.'

He looked round the table challengingly after saying this, rather as Uncle Giles was inclined to glare about him after making some more or less tendentious statement, whether because he suspected that one or other of us, in spite of this disavowal, would charge him with covert medievalism, or in momentary hesitation that, in taking so high a line on the subject of an era at once protracted and diversified, he ran risk of exposure to the impeachment of 'missing something' thereby, was uncertain.

'There is the Holbein, too,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson. 'You really must come, Janet. I know you like pictures.'

'The castle belongs, like Bodiam, to the later Middle Ages,' said Sir Gavin, assuming all at once the sing-song tones of a guide or lecturer. 'And, like Bodiam, Stourwater possesses little or no historical interest, as such, while remaining, so far as its exterior is concerned, architecturally one of the most complete, and comparatively unaltered, fortified buildings of its period. For some reason——'

'——for some reason the defences were not dismantled—"slighted", I think you call it—at the time of the Civil Wars,' cut in Lady Walpole-Wilson, as if answering the responses in church, or completing the quotation of a well-known poem to show appreciation of its aptness. 'Though subsequent owners undertook certain improvements in connexion with the structural fabric of the interior, with a view to increasing Stourwater's convenience as a private residence in more peaceful times.'

'I have already read a great deal of what you have been saying in *Stourwater and Its Story,* a copy of which was kindly placed by my bed,' said Miss Walpole-Wilson. 'I doubt if all the information given there is very accurate.'

For some reason a curious sense of excitement rose within me at prospect of this visit. I could not explain to myself this feeling, almost of suspense, that seemed to hang over the expedition. I was curious to see the castle, certainly, but that hardly explained an anxiety that Eleanor's hound puppies, or Miss Walpole-Wilson's humours, might prevent my going there. That night I lay awake thinking about Stourwater as if it had been the sole motive for my coming to Hinton: fearing all the time that some hitch would occur. However, the day came and we set out; Miss Walpole-Wilson, in spite of her earlier displeasure, finally agreeing to accompany the party, accommodated in two cars, one of them driven by Sir Gavin himself. There was perhaps a tacit suggestion that he would have liked Rosie Manasch to travel with him, but, although as a rule not unwilling to accept his company, and approval, she chose, on this occasion, the car driven by the chauffeur.

When we came to Stourwater that Sunday morning, the first sight was impressive. Set among oaks and beeches in a green hollow of the land, the castle was approached by a causeway crossing the remains of a moat, a broad expanse of water through which, with great deliberation, a pair of black swans, their passage sending ripples through the pond weed, glided between rushes swaying gently in the warm September air. Here was the Middle Age, from the pages of Tennyson, or Scott, at its most elegant: all sordid and painful elements subtly removed. Some such thought must have struck Sir Gavin too, for I heard him murmuring at the wheel:

'"And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two . . ."'

There was, in fact, no one about at all; neither knights nor hinds, this absence of human life increasing a sense of unreality, as if we were travelling in a dream. The cars passed under the portcullis, and across a cobbled quadrangle. Beyond this open space, reached by another archway, was a courtyard of even larger dimensions, in the centre of which a sunken lawn had been laid out, with a fountain at the centre, and carved stone flower-pots, shaped like urns, at each of the four corners. The whole effect was not, perhaps, altogether in keeping with the rest of the place. Through a vaulted gateway on one side could be seen the high yew hedges of the garden. Steps led up to the main entrance of the castle's domestic wing, at which the cars drew up.

Mounted effigies in Gothic armour guarded either side of the door by which we entered the Great Hall; and these dramatic figures of man and horse struck a new and somewhat disturbing note; though one at which the sunken garden had already hinted. Such implications of an over-elaborate solicitude were followed up everywhere the eye rested, producing a result altogether different from the cool, detached vision manifested a minute or two earlier by grey walls and towers rising out of the green, static landscape. Something was decidedly amiss. The final consequence of the pains lavished on these halls and galleries was not precisely that of a Hollywood film set, the objects assembled being, in the first place, too genuine, too valuable; there was even a certain sense of fitness, of historical association more or less correctly assessed. The display was discomforting, not contemptible. The impression was of sensations that might precede one of those episodes in a fairy story, when, at a given moment, the appropriate spell is pronounced to cause domes and minarets, fountains and pleasure-gardens, to disappear into thin air; leaving the hero—in this case, Sir Magnus Donners—shivering in rags beneath the blasted oak of a grim forest, or scorched by rays of a blazing sun among the rocks and boulders of some desolate mountain-side. In fact, Sir Gavin's strictures on Stourwater as 'too perfect' were inadequate as a delineation to the extent of being almost beside the point.

I had supposed that, in common with most visits paid on these terms in the country, the Walpole-Wilson group might be left most of the time huddled in a cluster of their own, while the Donners house-party, drawn together as never before by the arrival of strangers, would discourse animatedly together at some distance off: the one faction scarcely mixing at all with the other. This not uncommon predicament could no doubt in a general way have been exemplified soon after we had been received by Sir Magnus—looking more healthily clerical than ever—in the Long Gallery (at the far end of which hung the Holbein, one of the portraits of Erasmus), had not various unforeseen circumstances contributed to modify what might be regarded as a more normal course of events. For example, among a number of faces in the room possessing a somewhat familiar appearance, I suddenly noticed Stringham and Bill Truscott, both of whom were conversing with an unusually pretty girl.

We were presented, one by one, to Prince Theodoric, who wore a grey flannel suit, unreservedly continental in cut, and appeared far more at his ease than at Mrs. Andriadis's party: smiling in a most engaging manner when he shook hands. He spoke that scrupulously correct English, characteristic of certain foreign royalties, that confers on the language a smoothness and flexibility quite alien to the manner in which English people themselves talk. There was a word from him for everyone. Sir Gavin seized his hand as if he were meeting a long lost son, while Prince Theodoric himself seemed, on his side, equally pleased at their reunion. Lady Walpole-Wilson, probably because she remembered Prince Theodoric only as a boy, showed in her eye apparent surprise at finding him so grown-up. Only Eleanor's, and her aunt's, firmly-clasped lips and stiff curtsey suggested entire disapproval.

Further introductions took place. The Huntercombes were there—Lord Huntercombe was Lord Lieutenant of the county—and there were a crowd of persons whose identities, as a whole, I failed to assimilate; though here and there was recognisable an occasional notability like Sir Horrocks Rusby, whose name I remembered Widmerpool mentioning on some occasions, who had not so long before achieved a good deal of prominence in the newspapers as counsel in the Derwentwater divorce case. I also noticed Mrs. Wentworth—whom Sir Horrocks had probably cross-questioned in the witness-box—still looking rather sulky, as she stood in one of the groups about us. When the formalities of these opening moves of the game had been completed, and we had been given cocktails, Stringham strolled across the room. His face was deeply burned by the sun. I wondered whether this was the result of the Deauville trip, of which Mrs. Andriadis had spoken, or if, on the contrary, division between them had been final. He had not wholly lost his appearance of fatigue.

'You must inspect my future wife,' he said at once.

This announcement of imminent marriage was, so far as I was concerned, a complete surprise. I remembered Barnby saying, during the course of the evening we had spent together: 'When people think they are never further from marriage, they are often, in reality, never nearer to it,' but that kind of precept takes time to learn. I had certainly accepted as obvious the implication that nothing was more distant than marriage from Stringham's intentions when I had seen him so violently abandon Mrs. Andriadis's house; although now I even wondered whether he could have decided to repair matters by making Mrs. Andriadis herself his wife. To be able to consider this a possibility showed, I suppose, in its grasp of potentialities, an advance on my part of which I should have been incapable earlier in the year.

However, without further developing the news, he led me to the girl from whose side he had come, who was still talking to Truscott.

'Peggy,' he said, 'this is an old friend of mine.'

Apart from former signs given by Stringham's behaviour in other respects, external evidence had been supplied, indirectly by Anne Stepney, and directly by Rosie Manasch, that anything like an engagement was 'off'. Peggy Stepney, whom I now recognised from pictures I had seen of her, was not unlike her sister, with hair of the same faintly-reddish shade, though here, instead of a suggestion of disorder, the elder sister looked as if she might just have stepped gracefully from the cover of a fashion magazine; 'too perfect', indeed, as Sir Gavin might have said. She was, of course, a 'beauty', and possessed a kind of cold symmetry, very taking, and at the same time more than a little alarming. However, this rather icy exterior was not accompanied by a parallel coolness of manner on her part; on the contrary, she could in the circumstances scarcely have been more agreeable. While we talked, we were joined by Mrs. Wentworth, at whose arrival I was conscious of a slight stiffening in Stringham's bearing; an almost imperceptible acerbity, due possibly—though by no means certainly, I thought—to the part played by Mrs. Wentworth in his sister's divorce. In comparing the looks of the two young women, it was immediately clear that Peggy Stepney was more obviously the beauty; though there was something about Mrs. Wentworth that made the discord she had aroused in so many quarters easily understandable.

'How long have I got to go on sitting next to that equerry of Theodoric's, Bill?' she asked. 'I've been through his favourite dance tunes at dinner last night. I can't stand them at lunch again to-day. I'm not as young as I was.'

'Talk to him about birds and beasts,' said Stringham. 'I've already tried that with great success—the flora and fauna of England and Wales.'

Mrs. Wentworth seemed not greatly amused by this facetiousness. Her demeanour was in contrast to that of Peggy Stepney in most respects, and she did no more than glance in my direction when we were introduced. I was decidedly impressed by Barnby's temerity in tackling so formidable an objective. Luncheon was announced at that moment, so that the four of us temporarily parted company.

The dining-room was hung with sixteenth-century tapestries. I supposed that they might be Gobeline from their general appearance, and blue and crimson tints, set against lemon yellow. They illustrated the Seven Deadly Sins. I found myself seated opposite *Luxuria,* a failing principally portrayed in terms of a winged and horned female figure, crowned with roses, holding between finger and thumb one of her plump, naked breasts, while she gazed into a looking-glass, held up on one side by Cupid and on the other by a goat of unreliable aspect. The four-footed beast of the Apocalypse with his seven dragon-heads dragged her triumphal car, which was of great splendour. Hercules, bearing his clubs, stood by, somewhat gloomily watching this procession, his mind filled, no doubt, with disquieting recollections. In the background, the open doors of a pillared house revealed a four-poster bed, with hangings rising to an apex, under the canopy of which a couple lay clenched in a priapic grapple. Among trees, to the right of the composition, further couples and groups, three or four of them at least, were similarly occupied in smaller houses and Oriental tents; or, in one case, simply on the ground.

I had been placed next to Rosie Manasch, who was, at the moment of seating herself, engaged in talk with her neighbour on the far side; and—curious to investigate some of the by-products of indulgence depicted in this sequence of animated, and at times enigmatic, incidents—I found myself fully occupied in examining unobtrusively the scenes spread out on the tapestry. There had been, I was dimly aware, some rearrangement of places on my right-hand side, where a chair had remained empty for a moment or two. Now a girl sat down there, next to me, to whom I had not yet, so far as I knew, been introduced, with some muttered words from Truscott, who had instigated the change of position—possibly to relieve Mrs. Wentworth from further strain of making conversation with Prince Theodoric's equerry.

'I don't think you remember me,' she said, almost at once, in a curiously harsh voice that brought back, in fact, that same sense of past years returning that Stringham's enquiry for matches had caused me at the coffee-stall. 'I used to be called Jean Templer. You are a friend of Peter's, and you came to stay with us years ago.'

It was true that I had not recognised her. I think we might even have exchanged words without my guessing her identity, so little had she been in my thoughts, and so unexpected a place was this to find her. That was not because she had changed greatly. On the contrary, she still seemed slim, attenuated, perhaps not—like the two other girls with whom I had been talking, and round whom my thoughts, before the distraction of the tapestry, had been drifting—exactly a 'beauty'; but, all the same, still in some way mysterious and absorbing to me, and certainly pretty enough, so far as that went, just as she had seemed when I had visited the Templers after leaving school. There was perhaps a touch of the trim secretary of musical comedy. I saw also, with a kind of relief, that she seemed to express none of the qualities I had liked in Barbara. There was a sense of restraint here, a reserve at present unpredictable.

I tried to excuse my bad manners in having failed at once to remember her. She gave one of those quick, almost masculine laughs. I was not at all sure how I felt about her, though conscious suddenly that being in love with Barbara, painful as some of its moments had been, now seemed a rather amateurish affair; just as my feelings for Barbara had once appeared to me so much more mature than those previously possessed for Suzette; or, indeed, for Jean herself.

'You were so deep in the tapestry,' she said.

'I was wondering about the couple in the little house on the hill.'

'They have a special devil—or is he a satyr?—to themselves.'

'He seems to be collaborating, doesn't he?'

'Just lending a hand, I think.'

'A guest, I suppose—or member of the staff?'

'Oh, a friend of the family,' she said. 'All newly-married couples have someone of that sort about. Sometimes several. Didn't you know? I see you can't be married.'

'But how do you know they are newly married?'

'They've got such a smart little house,' she said. 'They must be newly married. And rather well off, too, I should say.'

I was left a trifle breathless by this exchange, not only because it was quite unlike the kind of luncheon-table conversation I had expected to come my way in that particular place, but also on account of its contrast with Jean's former deportment, when we had met at her home, for at that moment I hardly considered the difference that age had made, no doubt in both of us. She was, I thought, about a couple of years younger than myself. Feeling unable to maintain this detachment of attitude towards human—and, in especial, matrimonial—affairs, I asked whether it was not true that she had married Bob Duport. She nodded; not exactly conveying, it seemed to me, that by some happy chance their union had introduced her to an unexpected terrestrial paradise.

'Do you know Bob?'

'I just met him years ago with Peter.'

'Have you seen Peter lately?'

'Not for about a year. He has been doing very well in the City, hasn't he? He always tells me so.'

She laughed.

'Oh, yes,' she said. 'He has been making quite a lot of money, I think. That is always something. But I wish he would settle down, get married, for instance.'

I was aware of an unexpected drift towards intimacy; although this sudden sense of knowing her all at once much better was not simultaneously accompanied by any clear portrayal in my own mind of the kind of person she might really be. Perhaps intimacy of any sort, love or friendship, impedes all exactness of definition. For example, Mr. Deacon's character was plainer to me than Barnby's, although by then I knew Barnby better than I knew Mr. Deacon. In short, the persons we see most clearly are not necessarily those we know best. In any case, to attempt to describe a woman in the broad terms employable for a man is perhaps irrational.

'I went to a party in your London house given by Mrs. Andriadis.'

'How very grand,' she said. 'What was it like? We let the place almost as soon as we took it, because Bob had to go abroad. It's rather a horrid house, really. I hate it, and everything in it.'

Not knowing quite how to comment on this attitude towards her own home, which—as I had agreed with the young man with the orchid—left, in spite of its rather expensive air, a good deal to be desired so far as the interior was concerned, I said that I wished she had been present at the party.

'Oh, us,' she said laughing again, as if any such eventuality were utterly unthinkable. 'Besides, we were away. Bob was arguing about nickel or aluminium or something for months on end. As a matter of fact, I think we shall have to sue Mrs. Andriadis when he comes back. She has raised absolute hell in the house. Burnt the boiler out and broken a huge looking-glass.'

She reminded me immediately of her brother in this disavowal of being the kind of person asked to Mrs. Andriadis's parties; for the setting in which we found ourselves seemed, on the face of it, at least for the sake of argument, to be perfectly conceivable as an extension of Mrs. Andriadis's sort of entertaining. Indeed, it appeared to me, in my inexperience, that almost exactly the same chilly undercurrent of conflict was here perceptible as that permeating the house in Hill Street a month or two before. Dialectical subtleties could no doubt be advanced—as Stringham had first suggested, and remarks at Sillery's had seemed to substantiate—to demolish Sir Magnus's pretensions, hierarchically speaking, to more than the possession of 'a lot of money'; in spite of various testimonials paid to him, at Hinton and elsewhere, on the score of his greatness in other directions. However, even allowing that Sir Magnus might be agreed to occupy a position only within this comparatively modest category of social differentiation, such assets as were his were not commonly disregarded, even in the world of Mrs. Andriadis. Her sphere might be looked upon, perhaps, as a more trenchant and mobile one, though it was doubtful if even this estimate were beyond question.

In fact, I was uncertain whether or not I might have misunderstood Jean, and that she had intended to imply that her existence was at a higher, rather than lower, plane. Some similar thought may have struck her too, because, as if in explanation of a matter that needed straightening out, she said: 'Baby brought me here. She wanted someone to play for her side, and Bob's aluminium fitted in nicely for this week-end, as Theodoric knew Bob—had even met him.'

The concept of 'playing for her side' opened up in the imagination fascinating possibilities in connexion with Mrs. Wentworth's position in the household. I remembered the phrase as one used by Stringham when enlisting my own support in connexion with his project of 'going down' from the university after a single term of residence—the time, in fact, when he had asked his mother to lunch to meet Sillery. However, the status of Mrs. Wentworth at the castle was obviously not a matter to be investigated there and then, while, in addition to any question of diffidence in enquiring about that particular affair, Jean's initial display of vivacity became suddenly exhausted, and she sank back into one of those silences that I remembered so well from the time when we had first met. For the rest of the meal she was occupied in fragmentary conversation with the man on her right, or I was myself talking with Rosie Manasch; so that we hardly spoke to one another again while in the dining-room.

The rest of the members of the luncheon-party, on the whole, appeared to be enjoying themselves. Prince Theodoric, sitting at the other end of the long table between Lady Walpole-Wilson and Lady Huntercombe, was conversing manfully, though he looked a shade cast down. From time to time his eyes wandered, never for more than an instant, in the direction of Mrs. Wentworth, who had cheered up considerably under the stimulus of food and drink, and was looking remarkably pretty. I noticed that she made no effort to return the Prince's glances, in the manner she had employed at the party. Truscott was clearly doing wonders with Miss Walpole-Wilson, whose wide social contacts he must have regarded as of sufficient importance, possibly as an ancillary factor in publicising Donners-Brebner concerns, to justify, on his own part, slightly more than normal attention. It was even possible, though I thought on the whole improbable, that Miss Walpole-Wilson's rather unaccommodating exterior might, in itself, have been sufficient to put Truscott on his mettle to display, without ulterior motive, his almost unequalled virtuosity in handling intractable material of just the kind Miss Walpole-Wilson's personality provided. In rather another field, I had seen Archie Gilbert, on more than one occasion, do something of that sort; on the part of Truscott, however, such relatively frivolous expenditure of energy would have been, to say the least, unexpected.

Only Eleanor, still no doubt contemplating hound puppies and their diet, or perhaps disapproving in general of the assembled company's formal tone, appeared uncompromisingly bored. Sir Magnus himself did not talk much, save intermittently to express some general opinion, which, when during a comparative silence his words were wafted to the farther end of the table, on the lips of a lesser man would have suggested processes of thought of a banality so painful—of such profound and arid depths, in which neither humour, nor imagination, nor, indeed, any form of human understanding could be thought to play the smallest part—that I almost supposed him to be speaking ironically, or teasing his guests by acting the part of a bore in a drawing-room comedy. I was far from understanding that the capacity of men interested in power is not necessarily expressed in the brilliance of their conversation. Even in daylight he looked young for his age, and immensely, almost unnaturally, healthy.

At the end of the meal, on leaving the dining-room, Sir Gavin, who had one of his favourite schemes to discuss, cornered Lord Huntercombe, and they went off together. Lord Huntercombe, a small man, very exquisite in appearance and possessing a look of ineffable cunning, was trustee of one, if not more, of the public galleries, and Sir Gavin was anxious to interest him in a project, dear to his heart, of which he had spoken at Hinton, regarding the organisation of a special exhibition of pictures to be thought of as of interest in connexion with the history of diplomatic relations between England and the rest of the world. The two of them retired among the yew hedges, Lord Huntercombe's expression presaging little more than sufferance at the prospect of listening to Sir Gavin's plan. The rest of the party broke up into groups. Jean, just as she used to disappear from the scene in her own home, was nowhere to be found on the terrace, to which most of the party now moved. Peggy Stepney, too, seemed to have gone off on her own. Finding myself sitting once more with Stringham and Truscott, I asked when the wedding was to take place.

'Oh, any moment now,' Stringham said. 'I'm not sure it isn't this afternoon. To be precise, the second week in October. My mother can't make up her mind whether to laugh or cry. I think Buster is secretly rather impressed.'

I found it impossible to guess whether he was getting married because he was in love, because he hoped by taking this step to find a more settled life, or because he was curious to experiment with a new set of circumstances. The absurdity of supposing that exact reasons for marriage can ever be assigned had not then struck me; perhaps excusably, since it is a subject regarding which everyone considers, at least where friends are concerned, the assumption of categorical knowledge to be an inalienable right. Peggy Stepney herself looked pleased enough, though the formality of her style was calculated, at least for those unacquainted with her, to hide outward responses. There had been an incident—hardly that—while we had been talking before luncheon. She had let her hand rest on a table in such a way that it lay, at least putatively, in Stringham's direction. He had placed his own hand over hers, upon which she had jerked her fingers away, almost angrily, and begun to powder her face. Stringham had shown absolutely no sign of noticing this gesture. His first movement had been made, so it had appeared, almost automatically, not even very specifically as a mark of affection. It was possible that some minor quarrel had just taken place; that she was teasing him; that the action had no meaning at all. Thinking of the difficulties inherent in his situation, I began to turn over once more the meeting with Jean, and asked Stringham if he knew that Peter Templer's sister was one of the guests at Stourwater.

'Didn't even know he had a sister—of course, yes, I remember now—he had two at least. One of them, like my own, was always getting divorced.'

'This is the younger one. She is called Mrs. Duport.'

'What, Baby's friend?'

He did not show the least interest. It was inexplicable to me that he had apparently noticed her scarcely at all; for, although Widmerpool's love for Barbara had seemed an outrageous presumption, Stringham's indifference to Jean was, in the opposite direction, almost equally disconcerting. My own feelings for her might still be uncertain, but his attitude was not of indecision so much as complete unawareness. However, the thought of Mrs. Wentworth evidently raised other questions in his mind.

'What sort of progress is Theodoric making with Baby?' he asked.

Truscott smiled, making a deprecatory movement with his finger to indicate that the matter was better undiscussed: at least while we remained on the terrace.

'Not very well, I think,' Stringham said. 'It will be Bijou Ardglass, after all. I'll have a bet on it.'

'Did the Chief strike you as being a bit off colour at luncheon, Charles?' Truscott asked, ignoring these suppositions.

He spoke casually, though I had the impression he might be more anxious about Sir Magnus's state of temper than he wished outwardly to admit.

'I heard him say once that it took all sorts to make a world,' said Stringham. 'He ought to write some of his aphorisms down so that they are not forgotten. Would it be an occasion for the dungeons?'

He made this last remark in that very level voice of his that I recognised, as of old, he was accustomed to employ when intending to convey covert meaning to some apparently simple statement or question. Truscott pouted, and lowered his head in rather arch reproof. I saw that he was amused about some joke shared in secret between them, and I knew that I had judged correctly in suspecting latent implication in what Stringham had said.

'Baby doesn't like it.'

'Who cares what Baby likes?'

'The Chief is never unwilling,' Truscott said, still smiling. 'It certainly might cheer him up. *You* ask him, Charles.'

Sir Magnus was talking to Lady Huntercombe only a short distance from us. Stringham moved across the terrace towards them. As he came up, Lady Huntercombe, whose features and dress had been designed to recall Gainsborough's Mrs. Siddons, turned, almost as if she had been expecting his arrival, and pointed, with an appropriately dramatic gesture, to the keep of the castle, as if demanding some historical or architectural information. I could see Stringham repress a smile. Her words had perhaps made his enquiry easier to present. Before answering, he inclined towards Sir Magnus, and, with perhaps more deference than had been common to his manner in former days, put some question. Sir Magnus, in reply, raised his eyebrows, and—like Truscott a few minutes earlier, who had perhaps unconsciously imitated one of his employer's mannerisms—made a deprecatory movement with his forefinger; his face at the same time taking on the very faintest suggestion of a deeper colour, as he in turn addressed himself to Lady Huntercombe, apparently requesting her opinion on the point brought to his notice by Stringham. She nodded at once in such a way as to indicate enthusiasm, the rather reckless gaiety of a great actress on holiday, one of the moods, comparatively few in range, to which her hat and general appearance committed her. Stringham looked up, and caught Truscott's eye.

The result of the consultation was a public announcement by Truscott, as Sir Magnus's mouthpiece, that our host, who had by then spoken a word with Prince Theodoric, would himself undertake a personally conducted tour of the castle, 'including the dungeons'. This was the kind of exordium Truscott could undertake with much adroitness, striking an almost ideal mean between putting a sudden stop to conversation, and, at the same time, running no risk of being ignored by anyone in the immediate neighbourhood. No doubt most of those assembled round about had already made the inspection at least once. Some showed signs of unwillingness to repeat the performance. There was a slight stir as sightseers began to sort themselves out from the rest. The end of the matter was that about a dozen persons decided to make up the company who would undertake the tour. They were collected into into one group and led indoors.

'I'll get the torches,' said Truscott.

He went off, and Stringham returned to my side.

'What is the joke?'

'There isn't one, really,' he said, but his voice showed that he was keeping something dark.

Truscott returned, carrying two electric torches, one of which he handed to Stringham. The party included Prince Theodoric, Lady Huntercombe, Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson, Eleanor, Rosie Manasch, and Pardoe: together with others, unknown to me. Stringham went ahead with Truscott, who acted as principal guide, supplying a conjunction of practical information and historical detail, in every way suitable to the circumstances of the tour. As we moved round, Sir Magnus watched Truscott with approval, but at first took no part himself in the exposition. I felt certain that Sir Magnus was secure in exact knowledge of the market price of every object at Stourwater: that kind of insight that men can develop without possessing any of the æsthete's, or specialist's, cognisance of the particular category, or implication, of the valuable concerned. Barnby used to say that he knew a bill-broker, scarcely aware even how pictures are produced, who could at the same time enter any gallery and pick out the most expensively priced work there 'from Masaccio to Matisse', simply through the mystic power of his own respect for money.

We passed through room after room, apartments of which the cumulative magnificence seemed only to enhance the earlier fancy that, at some wave of the wand—somewhat in the manner of Peer Gynt—furniture and armour, pictures and hangings, gold and silver, crystal and china, could turn easily and instantaneously into a heap of withered leaves blown about by the wind. From time to time Prince Theodoric made an appreciative comment, or Miss Walpole-Wilson interjected a minor correction of statement; although, in the latter case, it was clear that Truscott's effective handling of the matter of sitting next to her at luncheon had greatly reduced the potential of her critical assault.

We made an end of that part of the interior of the castle to be regarded as 'on show', returning to the ground floor, where we came at length to the head of a spiral staircase, leading down to subterranean depths. Here Sir Magnus was handed one of the torches by Truscott, and from this point he took over the rôle of showman. There was a slight pause. I saw Stringham and Truscott exchange a look.

'We are now descending to the dungeons,' said Sir Magnus, his voice trembling slightly. *'I sometimes think that is where we should put the girls who don't behave.'*

He made this little speech with an air almost of discomfort. A general titter rippled across the surface of the party, and there was a further pause, as of expectancy, perhaps on account of an involuntary curiosity to learn whether he would put this decidedly threatening surmise to practical effect. Truscott smiled gently, rather like a governess, or nanny, of wide experience who knows only too well that 'boys will be boys'. I could see from Stringham's face that he was suppressing a tremendous burst of laughter. It struck me, at this moment, that such occasions, the enjoyment of secret laughter, remained for him the peak of pleasure, for he looked suddenly happier; more buoyant, certainly, than when he had introduced me to Peggy Stepney. What perverse refinements, verbal or otherwise, were actually implied by Sir Magnus's words could only be guessed. It seemed that this remark, as an assertion of opinion, had always to be uttered at this point in the itinerary, and that its unfailing regularity was considered by his secretaries—if Stringham and Truscott could be so called—as an enormous hidden joke.

There was also the point to be remembered that Baby Wentworth, as Truscott had earlier reminded Stringham, 'did not like' these visits to the dungeons. I recalled some of Barnby's speculations regarding the supposed relationship between her and Sir Magnus. While scarcely to be supposed that, in truth, he physically incarcerated Mrs. Wentworth, or his other favourites, in the manner contemplated, frequent repetition of the words no doubt drew attention to sides of his nature that a girl often seen in his company might reasonably prefer to remain unemphasised. Sir Magnus's eyes had, in fact, paused for a second on Rosie Manasch when he had spoken that sentence. Now they ranged quickly over the faces of Lady Huntercombe, Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson, and Eleanor: coming to rest on the ingenuous profile of a little fair girl whose name I did not know. Then, moistening his lips slightly, he beckoned us on. The party began to descend the stairs, Sir Magnus leading the way.

It so happened that at that moment my shoe-lace came unfastened. There was an oak bench by the side of the staircase, and, resting my foot on this, I stooped to retie the lace, which immediately, as is the way, re-knotted itself tightly, delaying progress for a minute or more. The heels of the women echoed on the stones as the people clattered down the stairs, and then the sound of voices grew fainter, until hum of chatter and shuffle of feet became dim, ceasing at last in the distance. As soon as the shoe-lace was tied once more, I started off quickly down the steps, beside which an iron rail had been fixed as a banister. The way was dark, and the steps cut deep, so that I had slowed up by the time

I came, only a short way below, to a kind of landing. Beyond this space the stairs continued again. I had passed this stage, and had just begun on the second flight, when a voice—proceeding apparently from out of the walls of the castle—suddenly spoke my name, the sound of which echoed round me, as the footsteps of the party ahead had echoed a short time before.

'Jenkins?'

I have to admit that I was at that moment quite startled by the sound. The tone was thick and interrogative. It seemed to emerge from the surrounding ether, a voice from out of the twilight of the stair, isolated from human agency, for near approach of any speaker, up or down the steps, would have been audible to me before he could have come as close as the sound suggested. A second later I became aware of its place of origin, but instead of relief at the simple explanation of what had at first seemed a mysterious, even terrifying, phenomenon, a yet more nameless apprehension was portentously occasioned by the sight revealed. Just level with my head—as I returned a step or more up the stair—was a narrow barred window, or squint, through the iron grill of which, his face barely distinguishable in the shadows, peered Widmerpool.

'Where is the Chief?' he asked, in a hoarse voice.

Once in a way, for a brief instant of time, the subconscious fantasies of the mind seem to overflow, so that we make, in our waking moments, assumptions as outrageous and incredible as those thoughts and acts which provide the commonplace of dreams. Perhaps Sir Magnus's allusion to the appropriate treatment of 'girls who don't behave', presumably intended by him at least in a relatively jocular manner, as he had pronounced the sentence, although, it was true, his voice had sounded unnaturally serious, had, for some unaccountable reason, resulted in the conjuration of this spectre, as the image seemed to be, that took form at that moment before my eyes. It was a vision of Widmerpool, imprisoned, to all outward appearance, in an underground cell, from which only a small grating gave access to the outer world: even those wider horizons represented only by the gloom of the spiral staircase. I felt a chill at my heart in the fate that must be his, thus immured, while I racked my brain, for the same brief instant of almost unbearable anxiety, to conjecture what crime, or dereliction of duty, he must have committed to suffer such treatment at the hands of his tyrant.

I record this absurd aberration on my own part only because it had some relation to what followed; for, so soon as anything like rational thought could be brought to bear on the matter, it was clear to me that Widmerpool was merely speaking from an outer passage of the castle, constructed on a lower level than the floor from which, a short time earlier, we had approached the head of the spiral stair. He had, in fact, evidently arrived from the back entrance, or, familiar with the ground plan of the building, had come by some short cut straight to this window.

'Why are you staring like that?' he asked, irritably.

I explained as well as I could the circumstances that caused me to be found in this manner wandering about the castle alone.

'I gathered from one of the servants that a tour was in progress,' said Widmerpool. 'I came over with the draft speech for the Incorporated Metals dinner. I am spending the week-end with my mother, and knew the Chief would like to see the wording as soon as possible—so that I could make a revision when one or two points had been settled. Truscott agreed when I rang up.'

'Truscott is showing the party round.'

'Of course.'

All this demonstrated clearly that arrangements initiated by Truscott at Mrs. Andriadis's party had matured in such a manner as to graft Widmerpool firmly on to the Donners-Brebner organisation, upon the spreading branches of which he seemed to be already positively blossoming. Before I could make further enquiries, on the tip of my tongue, regarding such matters as the precise nature of his job, or the closeness of touch maintained by him with his chief in tasks like the writing of speeches, Widmerpool continued to speak in a lower and more agitated tone, pressing his face between the iron bars, as if attempting to worm his way through their narrow interstices. Now that my eyes had become accustomed to the oddness of his physical position, some of the earlier illusion of forcible confinement dissolved; and, at this later stage, he seemed merely one of those invariably power-conscious beings—a rôle for which his temperament certainly well suited him—who preside over *guichets* from which tickets are dispensed for trains or theatres.

'I am glad to have an opportunity for speaking to you alone for a moment,' he said. 'I have been worried to death lately.'

This statement sent my thoughts back to his confession about Barbara on the night of the Huntercombes' dance, and I supposed that he had been suddenly visited with one of those spasms of frustrated passion that sometimes, like an uncured disease, break out with renewed virulence at a date when treatment seemed no longer necessary. After all, it was only in a fit of anger, however justifiable, that he had sworn he would not see her again. No one can choose, or determine, the duration of such changes of heart. Indeed, the circumstances of his decision to break with her after the sugar incident made such a renewal far from improbable.

'Barbara?'

He tried to shake his head, apparently in vehement negation, but was prevented by the bars from making this movement at all adequately to convey the force of his feelings.

'I was induced to do an almost insanely indiscreet thing about the girl you introduced me to.'

The idea of introducing Widmerpool to any girl was so far from an undertaking I was conscious ever of having contemplated, certainly a girl in relation to whom serious indiscretion on his part was at all probable, that I began to wonder whether success in securing the Donners-Brebner job had been too much for his brain, already so obsessed with self-advancement, and that he was, in fact, raving. It then occurred to me that I might have brought him into touch with someone or other at the Huntercombes', although no memory of any introduction remained in my mind. In any case, I could not imagine how such a meeting might have led to a climax so ominous as that suggested by his tone.

'Gypsy,' he said, hesitating a moment over the name, and speaking so low as to be almost inaudible.

'What about her?'

The whole affair was hopelessly tangled in my head. I could remember that Barnby had said something about Widmerpool being involved with Gypsy Jones, but I have already spoken of the way of looking at life to which, in those days, I subscribed—the conception that sets individuals and ideas in hermetically sealed receptacles—and the world in which such things could happen at which Widmerpool seemed to hint appeared infinitely removed, I cannot now think why, from Stourwater and its surroundings. However, it was at last plain that Widmerpool had, in some manner, seriously compromised himself with Gypsy Jones; and a flood of possible misadventures that could have played an unhappy part in causing his distress now invaded my imagination.

'A doctor was found,' said Widmerpool.

He spoke in a voice hollow with desperation, and this news did not allay the suspicion that whatever was amiss must be fairly serious; though for some reason the exact cause of his anxiety still remained uncertain in my mind.

'I believe everything is all right now,' he said. 'But it cost a lot of money. More than I could afford. You know, I've never even committed a technical offence before—like using the untransferable half of somebody else's return ticket, or driving a borrowed car insured only in the owner's name.'

Giving expression to his dismay seemed to have done him good: at least to have calmed him.

'I felt I could mention matters to you as you were already familiar with the situation,' he said. 'That fellow Barnby told me you knew. I don't much care for him.'

Now, at last, I remembered the gist of what Mr. Deacon had told me, and, incredible as I should have supposed their course to be, the sequence of events began to become at least dimly visible: though much remained obscure. I have spoken before of the difficulties involved in judging other people's behaviour by a consistent standard—for, after all, one must judge them, even at the price of being judged oneself—and I cannot pretend that had I been told of some similar indiscretion on the part of, say, Peter Templer I should have been particularly disturbed. There is, or, at least, should be, a fitness in the follies each individual pursues, and uniformity of pattern is, on the whole, rightly preserved in human behaviour. Such unwritten regulations seemed now to have been disregarded wholesale.

In point of fact Templer was, so far as I knew, capable of conducting his affairs without recourse to such extremities; and a crisis of this kind appeared to me so foreign to

Widmerpool's nature—indeed, to what might almost be called his station in life—that there was something distinctly shocking, almost personally worrying, in finding him entangled with a woman in such circumstances. I could not help wondering whether or not there had been, or would be, material compensation for these mental, and financial, sufferings. Having regarded him, before hearing of his feelings for Barbara, as existing almost in a vacuum so far as the emotion of love was concerned, an effort on my own part was required to accept the fact that he had been engaged upon so improbable, indeed, so sinister, a liaison. If I had been annoyed to find, a month or two earlier, that he was in a position to regard himself as possessing claims of at least some tenuous sort on Barbara, I was also, I suppose, more than a trifle put out to discover that Widmerpool, so generally regarded by his contemporaries as a dull dog, had been, in fact, however much he might now regret it, in this way, at a moment's notice, prepared to live comparatively dangerously.

'I will tell you more some other time. Naturally my mother was distressed by the knowledge that I have had something on my mind. You will, of course, say a word to no one. Now I must find the Chief. I think I will go to the other end of this passage and cut the party off there. It is almost as quick as coming round to where you are.'

His voice had now lost some of its funereal note, returning to a more normal tone of impatience. The outline of his face disappeared as suddenly as it had become visible a minute or two before. I found myself alone on the spiral staircase, and now hurried on once more down the steep steps, trying to digest some of the information just conveyed. The facts, such as they were, certainly appeared surprising enough. I reached the foot of the stair without contriving to set them in any very coherent order to be satisfactorily understood.

Other matters now intervened. The sound of voices and laughter provided an indication of the path to follow, leading along a passage, pitch-dark and smelling of damp, at the end of which light flashed from time to time. I found the rest of the party standing about in a fairly large vaulted chamber, lit by the torches held by Sir Magnus and Truscott. Attention seemed recently to have been directed to certain iron staples, set at irregular intervals in the walls a short way from the paved floor.

'Where on earth did you get to?' asked Stringham, in an undertone. 'You missed an ineffably funny scene.'

Still laughing quietly to himself, he went on to explain that some kind of horse-play had been taking place, in the course of which Pardoe had borrowed the dog-chain that was almost an integral part of Eleanor's normal equipment, and, with this tackle, had attempted by force to fasten Rosie Manasch to one of the staples. In exactly what manner this had been done I was unable to gather, but he seemed to have slipped the chain round her waist, producing in this manner an imitation of a captive maiden, passable enough to delight Sir Magnus. Rosie Manasch herself, her bosom heaving slightly, seemed half cross, half flattered by this attention on Pardoe's part. Sir Magnus stood by, smiling very genially, at the same time losing none of his accustomed air of asceticism. Truscott was smiling, too, although he looked as if the situation had been allowed to get farther out of control than was entirely comfortable for one of his own cautious temperament. Eleanor, who had recovered her chain, which she had doubled in her hand and was swinging about, was perhaps not dissatisfied to see Rosie, sometimes a little patronising in her tone, reduced to a state of fluster, for she appeared to be enjoying herself for the first time since our arrival at the castle. It was perhaps a pity that her father had missed the tour. Only Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson stood sourly in the shadows, explaining that the supposed dungeon was almost certainly a kind of cellar, granary, or storehouse; and that the iron rings, so far from being designed to shackle, or even torture, unfortunate prisoners, were intended to support and secure casks or trestles. However, no one took any notice of her, even to the extent of bothering to contradict.

'The Chief was in ecstasies,' said Stringham. 'Baby will be furious when she hears of this.'

This description of Sir Magnus's bearing seemed a little exaggerated, because nothing could have been more matter-of-fact than the voice in which he enquired of Prince Theodoric: 'What do you think of my private prison, sir?'

The Prince's features had, I noticed, resumed to some extent that somewhat embarrassed fixity of countenance worn when I had seen him at Mrs. Andriadis's; an expression perhaps evoked a second or two earlier by Pardoe's performance, the essentially schoolboy nature of which Prince Theodoric, as a foreigner, might have legitimately failed to grasp. He seemed at first to be at a loss to know exactly how to reply to this question, in spite of its evident jocularity, raising his eyebrows and stroking his dark chin.

'I can only answer, Sir Magnus,' he said at last, 'that you should see the interior of one of our own new model prisons. They might surprise you. For a poor country we have some excellent prisons. In some ways, I can assure you, they compare very favourably, so far as modern convenience is concerned, with the accommodation in which my own family is housed—certainly during the season of the year when we are obliged to inhabit the Old Palace.'

This reply was received with suitable amusement; and, as the tour was now at an end—at least the serious part of it—we moved back once more along the passage. Our host, in his good-humour, had by then indisputably lost interest in the few minor points of architectural consideration that remained to be displayed by Truscott on the ascent of the farther staircase. Half-way up these stairs, we encountered Widmerpool, making his way down. He retired before the oncoming crowd, waiting at the top of the stairway for Sir Magnus, who was the last to climb the steps. The two of them remained in conference together, while the rest of us returned to the terrace overlooking the garden, where Sir Gavin and Lord Huntercombe were standing, both, by that time, showing unmistakable signs of having enjoyed enough of each other's company. Peggy Stepney had also reappeared.

'Being engaged really takes up all one's time,' said Stringham, after he had described to her the incidents of the tour. 'Weren't you talking of Peter? Do you ever see him these days? I never meet anyone or hear any gossip.'

'His sister tells me he ought to get married.'

'It comes to us all sooner or later. I expect it's hanging over you, too. Don't you, Peggy? He'll have to submit.'

'Of course,' she said, laughing.

They seemed now very much like any other engaged couple, and I decided that there could have been no significance in the withdrawal of her hand from his. In fact, everything about the situation seemed normal. There was not even a sense of the engagement being 'on' again, after its period of abeyance, presumably covered by the interlude with Mrs. Andriadis. I wondered what the Bridgnorths thought about it all. I did not exactly expect Stringham to mention the Andriadis party, indeed, it would have been surprising had he done so; but, at the same time, he was so entirely free from any suggestion of having 'turned over a new leaf', or anything that could possibly be equated with that state of mind, that I felt curious to know what the stages had been of his return to a more conventional form of life. We talked of Templer for a moment or two.

'I believe you have designs on that very strange girl you came over here with,' he said. 'Admit it yourself.'

'Eleanor Walpole-Wilson?'

'The one who produced the chain in the dungeon. How delighted the Chief was. Why not marry her?'

'I think Baby will be rather angry,' said Peggy Stepney, laughing again and blushing exquisitely.

'The Chief likes his few whims,' said Stringham. 'I don't think they really amount to much. Still, people tease Baby sometimes. The situation between Baby and myself is always rather delicate in view of the fact that she broke up my sister's married life, such as it was. Still, one mustn't let a little thing like that prejudice one. Here she is, anyway.'

If Mrs. Wentworth, as she came up, heard these last remarks, which could have been perfectly audible to her, she made no sign of having done so. She was looking, it was true, not best pleased, so that it was to be assumed that someone had already taken the trouble to inform her of the dungeon tour. At the same time she carried herself, as ever, with complete composure, and her air of dissatisfaction may have been no more than outward expression of a fashionable indifference to life. I was anxious to escape from the group and look for Jean, because I thought it probable that we should not stay for tea, and all chance of seeing her again would be lost. I had already forgotten about Widmerpool's troubles, and did not give a thought to the trying time he might be experiencing, talking business while overwhelmed with private worry, though it could at least have been said in alleviation that Sir Magnus, gratified by Pardoe's antics, was probably in a receptive mood. This occurred to me later when I considered Widmerpool's predicament with a good deal of interest; but at the time the people round about, the beauty of the castle, the sunlight striking the grass and water of the moat, made such decidedly sordid difficulties appear infinitely far away.

Even to myself I could not explain precisely why I wanted to find Jean. Various interpretations were, of course, readily available, of which the two simplest were, on the one hand, that—as I had at least imagined myself to be when I had stayed with the Templers—I was once more 'in love' with her; or, on the other, that she was an unquestionably attractive girl, whom any man, without necessarily ulterior motive, might quite reasonably hope to see more of. However, neither of these definitions completely fitted the case. I had brought myself to think of earlier feelings for her as juvenile, even insipid, in the approach; while, at the same time, I was certainly not disinterested enough to be able honestly to claim the second footing. The truth was that I had become once more aware of that odd sense of uneasiness which had assailed me when we had first met, while no longer able to claim the almost purely romantic conceptions of that earlier impact; yet so far was this feeling remote from a simple desire to see more of her that, in a way, I almost equally hoped that I might fail to find her again before we left Stourwater, at the time that a simultaneous anxiety to search for her also tormented me.

Certainly I know that there was, at that stage, no coherent plan in my mind to make love to her; if for no other reason, because, rather naïvely, I thought of her as married to someone else, and therefore removed automatically from any such sphere of interest. I was even young enough to think of married women as belonging, generically, to a somewhat older group than my own. All this must be admitted to be an altogether unapprehending state of mind; but its existence helps to interpret the strange, disconcerting fascination that I now felt: if anything, more divorced from physical desire than those nights lying in bed in the hot little attic room at La Grenadière, when I used to think of Jean—or Suzette, and other girls remembered from the past or seen in the course of the day.

I can now, looking back, only suppose that a consciousness of future connexion was thrown forward like a deep shadow in the manner in which such perceptions are sometimes projected out of Time: a process that may well be the explanation, for which no other seems adequate, of what is called 'love at first sight': that knowledge that someone who has just entered the room is going to play a part in our life. A curious, almost apprehensive feeling had certainly come over me, though it could hardly be described as 'love'. Its analysis at that moment was in any case out of reach, because I realised that I had been left, at that moment, standing silently by Mrs. Wentworth, to whom I now explained, *à propos de bottes,* that I knew Barnby. This information appeared, on the whole, to please her, and her manner became less disdainful.

'Oh, yes, how is Ralph?' she said. 'I didn't manage to see him before leaving London. Is he having lots of lovely love affairs?'

A sudden move on the part of the Walpole-Wilsons, made with a view to undertaking preparations for return to Hinton, exempted me then and there from need to answer this question, in so far as I might be able, at all explicitly; rather to my relief, because it seemed by its nature to obstruct any effort on my own part to present Barnby, as I supposed he would wish, in the condition of a man who thought, in the emotional sphere, exclusively of Mrs. Wentworth herself. The decision to leave was probably attributable in the main to Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson, evidently becoming restless in these surroundings, admittedly unsympathetic to her. She had been standing in isolation for some time at the far end of the terrace, looking rather like a governess waiting to bring her charges home after an unusually ill-behaved children's party. Sir Gavin, too, showed signs of depression, after his talk with Lord Huntercombe; and even Prince Theodoric's friendliness, when we took leave of him, did not succeed in lifting the cloud of his sense of failure in forwarding a favourite scheme.

'Getting on in life now, sir,' he said, in answer to some remark made by the Prince. 'Got to make way for younger men.'

'Nonsense, Sir Gavin, nonsense.'

Prince Theodoric insisted on coming to the door to say a final good-bye. A number of other guests, with Sir Magnus, followed to the place in the courtyard where the cars were waiting. Among this crowd of people I suddenly noticed Jean had reappeared.

'Bob is returning next month,' she said, when I approached her. 'Come to dinner, or something. Where do you live?'

I told her my address, feeling at the same time that dinner with the Duports was not exactly the answer to my problem. I suddenly began to wonder whether or not I liked her at all. It now seemed to me that there was something awkward and irritating about the manner in which she had suggested this invitation. At the same time she reminded me of some picture. Was it Rubens and *Le Chapeau de Paille*: his second wife or her sister? There was that same suggestion, though only for an instant, of shyness and submission. Perhaps it was the painter's first wife that

Jean resembled, though slighter in build. After all, I recalled, they were aunt and nieces. Jean's grey-blue eyes were slanting and perhaps not so large as theirs. Some trivial remarks passed between us, and we said good-bye.

Turning from this interlude, I noticed a somewhat peculiar scene taking place, in which Widmerpool was playing a leading part. This was in process of enactment in front of the steps. He must have completed his business with Sir Magnus and decided to slip quietly away, because he was sitting in an ancient Morris which now resolutely refused to start. Probably on account of age, and hard use suffered in the past, the engine of this vehicle would roar for a second or two, when the car would give a series of jerks; and then, after fearful, thunderous shaking, the noise would die down and cease altogether. Widmerpool, red in the face, could be seen through the thick grime of the almost opaque windscreen, now pressing the self-starter, now accelerating, now shifting the gears. The car seemed hopelessly immobilised. Sir Magnus, the ground crunching under his tread, stepped heavily across towards the spot.

'Is anything wrong?' he asked, mildly.

The question was no doubt intended as purely rhetorical, because it must have been clear to anyone, even of far less practical grasp of such matters than Sir Magnus, that something was very wrong indeed. However, obeying that law that requires most people to minimise to a superior a misfortune which, to an inferior, they would magnify, Widmerpool thrust his head through the open window of the car, and, smiling reverentially, gave an assurance that all was well.

'It's quite all right, sir, quite all right,' he said. 'She'll fire in a moment. I think I left her too long in the sun.'

For a time, while we all watched, the starter screeched again without taking effect; the sound was decreasing and this time it stopped finally. It was clear that the battery had run out.

'We'll give you a push,' said Pardoe. 'Come on, boys.'

Several of the men went over to help, and Widmerpool, in his two-seater, was trundled, like Juggernaut, round and round the open space. At first these efforts were fruitless, but suddenly the engine began to hum, this sound occurring at a moment when, facing a wall, the car was so placed to make immediate progress forward impossible. Widmerpool therefore applied the brake, 'warming up' for several seconds. I could see, when once more he advanced his head through the window, that he was greatly agitated. He shouted to Sir Magnus: 'I must apologise for this, sir, I really must. It is too bad.'

Sir Magnus inclined his head indulgently. He evidently retained his excellent humour. It was then, just as the Walpole-Wilson party were settled in their two cars, that the accident happened. My attention had been momentarily distracted from the scene in which Widmerpool was playing the main rôle by manœuvres on the part of Sir Gavin to steer Rosie Manasch, this time successfully, into the seat beside him; with the unforeseen result that Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson, as if by irresistible instinct, immediately seated herself in the back of the same car. While these dispositions were taking place, Widmerpool, making up his mind to move, must have released the brake and pressed the accelerator too hard. Perhaps he was unaware that his gear was still in 'reverse'. Whatever the reason, the Morris suddenly shot backward with terrific force for so small a body, running precipitately into one of the stone urns where it stood, crowned with geraniums, at the corner of the sunken lawn. For a moment it looked as if Widmerpool and his car would follow the flower-pot and its heavy base, as they crashed down on to the grass, striking against each other with so much force that portions of decorative moulding broke from off the urn. Either the impact, or some sudden, and quite unexpected, re-establishment of control on Widmerpool's part, prevented his own wholesale descent on to the lower levels of the lawn. The engine of the Morris stopped again, giving as it did so a kind of wail like the departure of an unhappy spirit, and, much dented at the rear, the car rolled forward a yard or two, coming to rest at an angle, not far from the edge of the parapet.

Before this incident was at an end, the Walpole-Wilson chauffeur had already begun to move off, and, looking back, the last I saw of the actors was a glimpse of the absolutely impassive face of Sir Magnus, as he strode with easy steps once more across the gravel to where Widmerpool was climbing out of his car. The sun was still hot. Its rays caught the sweat glistening on Widmerpool's features, and flashed on his spectacles, from which, as from a mirror, the light was reflected. There was just time to see him snatch these glasses from his nose as he groped for a handkerchief. We passed under the arch, reaching the portcullis, and crossing the causeway over the moat, before anyone spoke. Once more the car entered the lanes and byways of that romantic countryside.

'That was a near one,' said Pardoe.

'Ought we to have stopped?' asked Lady Walpole-Wilson, anxiously.

'I wonder who it was,' she continued a moment later.

'Why, didn't you see?' said Eleanor. 'It was Mr. Widmerpool. He arrived at Stourwater some time after luncheon. Is he staying there, do you think?'

This information threw her mother into one of her not uncommon states of confusion, though whether the nervous attack with which Lady Walpole-Wilson was now visited could be attributed to some version, no doubt by that time hopelessly garbled, having come to her ears regarding Barbara and the sugar incident, it was not possible to say. More probably she merely looked upon Widmerpool and his mother as creators of a social problem with which she was consciously unwilling to contend. Possibly she had hoped that, in subsequent summers, the Widmerpools would find somewhere else in England to rent a cottage; or, at least, that after a single invitation to dinner the whole matter of Widmerpool's existence might be forgotten once and for all. Certainly she would not wish, over and above such strands as already existed, to be additionally linked to his mother. That was certain. Nor could there be any doubt that she would not greatly care for the idea of Widmerpool himself being in love with her niece. At the same time, nothing could be more positive than the supposition that Lady Walpole-Wilson would, if necessary, have shown the Widmerpools, mother and son, all the kindness and consideration that their presence in the locality—regarded, of course, in relation to his father's former agricultural connexion with her brother-in-law—might, in the circumstances, justly demand.

'Oh, I hardly think Mr. Widmerpool would be staying at Stourwater,' she said; adding almost immediately: 'Though I don't in the least know why I should declare that. Anyway . . . he seemed to be driving away from the castle when we last saw him.'

This last sentence was the product of instinctive kindness of heart, or fear that she might have sounded snobbish: the latter state of mind being particularly abhorrent to her at that moment because the attitude, if existent, might seem applied to an establishment which she could not perhaps wholly respect. She looked so despairing at the idea of Widmerpool possessing, as it were, an operational base in extension to the cottage from which he, and his mother, could already potentially molest Hinton, that I felt it my duty to explain with as little delay as possible that Widmerpool had recently taken a job at Donners-Brebner, and had merely come over that afternoon to see Sir Magnus on a matter of business. This statement seemed, for some reason, to put her mind at ease, at least for the moment.

'I was really wondering whether we should ask Mr. Widmerpool and his mother over to tea,' she said, as if the question of how to deal with the Widmerpools had now crystallised in her mind. 'You know Aunt Janet likes an occasional talk with Mrs. Widmerpool—even though they don't always see eye to eye.'

What followed gave me the impression that Lady Walpole-Wilson's sudden relief may have been to some extent attributable to the fact that she had all at once arrived at a method by which the Widmerpools might be evaded, or a meeting with them at least postponed. If this was her plan—and, although in many ways one of the least disingenuous of women, I think she must quickly have devised a scheme on that occasion—the design worked effectively; because, at this suggestion of her mother's, Eleanor at once clenched her teeth in a manner that always indicated disapproval.

'Oh, don't let's have them over when Aunt Janet is here,' she said. 'You know I don't really care for Mr. Widmerpool very much—and Aunt Janet has plenty of opportunity to have her gossips with his mother when they are both in London.'

Lady Walpole-Wilson made a little gesture indicating 'So be it', and there the matter seemed to rest, where, I suppose, she had intended it to rest. Disturbed by mixed feelings set in motion by benevolence and conscience, she had been no doubt momentarily thrown off her guard. Comparative equilibrium was now restored. We drove on; and, by that evening, Widmerpool was forgotten by the rest of the party at Hinton Hoo. However, although nothing further was said about Widmerpool, other aspects of the visit to Stourwater were widely discussed. The day had left Sir Gavin a prey to deep depression. The meeting with Prince Theodoric had provided, naturally enough, a reminder of former grandeurs, and the congenial nature of their reunion, by agreeable memories aroused, had no doubt at the same time equally called to mind the existence of old, unhealed wounds.

'Theodoric is a man of the middle of the road,' he said. 'That, in itself, is sympathetic to me. In my own case, such an attitude has, of course, been to a large extent a professional necessity. All the same it is in men like Károlyi and Sforza that I sense a kind of fundamental reciprocity of thought.'

'He seems a simple young man,' said Miss Walpole-Wilson. 'I find no particular fault in him. No doubt he will have a difficult time with that brother of his.'

'Really, the Prince could not have been more friendly,' said Lady Walpole-Wilson, 'and Sir Magnus, too. He was so kind. I can't think why he has never married. So nice to see the Huntercombes. Pretty little person, Mrs. Wentworth.'

'So your friend Charles Stringham is engaged again,' said Rosie Manasch, rather maliciously. 'I wonder why it hasn't been in the papers. Do you think his mother is holding up the announcement for some reason? Or the Bridgnorths? They sound rather a stuffy pair, so it may be them.'

'How long ought one to wait until one puts an engagement in print?' asked Pardoe.

'Are you secretly engaged, Johnny?' said Rosie. 'I'm sure he is, aren't you?'

'Of course I am,' said Pardoe. 'To half a dozen girls, at least. It's just a question of deciding which is to be the lucky one. Don't want to make a mistake.'

'I've arranged to see the hound puppies on Tuesday,' said Eleanor. 'What a pity you will all be gone by then.'

However, she spoke as if she could survive the disbandment of our party. I pondered some of the events of the day, especially the situations to which, by some inexorable fate, Widmerpool's character seemed to commit him. This last misfortune had been, if anything, worse than the matter of Barbara and the sugar. And yet, like the phœnix, he rose habitually, so I concluded, recalling his other worries, from the ashes of his own humiliation. I could not help admiring the calm manner in which Sir Magnus had accepted damage of the most irritating kind to his property: violation which, to rich or poor, must always represent, to a greater or lesser degree, assault upon themselves and their feelings. From this incident, I began to understand at least one small aspect of Sir Magnus's prescriptive right to have become in life what Uncle Giles would have called 'a person of influence'. The point about Jean that had impressed me most, I thought, was that she was obviously more intelligent than I had previously supposed. In fact she was almost to be regarded as an entirely new person. If the chance arose again, it was in that capacity that she must be approached.

Sir Gavin straightened the photograph of Prince Theodoric's father, wearing hussar uniform, that stood on the piano in a plain silver frame, surmounted by a royal crown.

'His helmet now shall make a hive for bees . . .' he remarked, as he sank heavily into an arm-chair.

4.

A SENSE of maturity, or at least of endured experience, is conveyed, for some reason, in the smell of autumn; so it seemed to me, passing one day, by chance, through Kensington Gardens. The eighteen months or less since that Sunday afternoon on the steps of the Albert Memorial, with the echoing of Eleanor's whistle, and Barbara's fleeting grasp of my arm, had become already measureless as an eternity. Now, like scraps of gilt pealed untidily from the mosaic surface of the neo-Gothic canopy, the leaves, stained dull gold, were blowing about in the wind; while, squatting motionless beside the elephant, the Arab still kept watch on summer's mirage, as, once more, the green foliage faded gradually away before his displeased gaze. Those grave features implied that for him, too, that year, for all its monotony, had also called attention, in different aspects, to the processes of life and death that are always on the move. For my own part, I felt myself peculiarly conscious of these unalterable activities. For example, Stringham, as he had himself foreshadowed, was married to Peggy Stepney in the second week of October; the same day, as it happened, that saw the last of Mr. Deacon.

'Don't miss Buster's present,' Stringham just had time to remark, as the conveyor-belt of wedding guests evolved sluggishly across the carpet of the Bridgnorths' drawing-room in Cavendish Square.

There was opportunity to do no more than take the hand, for a moment, of bride and bridegroom; but Buster's present could hardly have remained invisible: a grandfather clock, gutted, and fitted up with shelves to form a 'cocktail cabinet', fully equipped with glasses, two shakers, and space for bottles. A good deal of money had evidently been spent on this ingenious contrivance. There was even a secret drawer. I could not make up my mind whether the joke was not, in reality, against Stringham. The donor himself, perhaps physically incapacitated by anguish of jealousy, had been unable to attend the church; and, since at least one gossip column had referred to 'popular Commander Foxe's temporary retirement to a nursing home', there seemed no reason to disbelieve in the actuality of Buster's seizure.

Stringham's mother, no less beautiful, so it seemed to me, than when, as a schoolboy, I had first set eyes on her—having at last made up her mind, as her son had put it, 'whether to laugh or cry'—had wept throughout the whole of the service into the corner of a small, flame-coloured handkerchief. By the time of the reception, however, she had made a complete recovery. His sister, Flavia, I saw for the first time. She had married as her second husband an American called Wisebite, and her daughter, Pamela Flitton, a child of six or seven, by the earlier marriage, was one of the bridesmaids. Well dressed, and good-looking, Mrs. Wisebite's ties with Stringham were not known to me. She was a few years older than her brother and at school he had rarely mentioned her. Miss Weedon, rather pale in the face, and more beaky than I remembered, sat in one of the back pews. I recalled the hungry looks she used to dart at Stringham on occasions when I had seen them together years before.

Neither of Peggy Stepney's parents looked specially cheerful, and rumours were current to the effect that objections had been raised to the marriage by both families. It appeared to have been Stringham himself who had insisted upon its taking place. Such opposition as may have existed had been, no doubt, finally overcome by conviction on the Bridgnorths' part that it was high time for their elder daughter to get married, since she could not subsist for ever on the strength of photographs, however charming, in the illustrated papers; and they could well have decided, in the circumstances, that she might easily pick on a husband less presentable than Stringham. Lord Bridgnorth, a stout, red-faced man, wearing a light grey stock and rather tight morning clothes, was notable for having owned a horse that won the Derby at a hundred to seven. His wife—daughter of a Scottish duke, to one of the remote branches of whose house Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson's mother had belonged—was a powerful figure in the hospital world, where she operated, so I had been informed, in bitter competition with organisations supported by Mrs. Foxe: a rivalry which their new relationship was hardly likely to decrease. The Walpole-Wilsons themselves were not present; but Lady Huntercombe, arrayed more than ever like Mrs. Siddons, was sitting with her daughters on the bride's side of the church, and later disparaged the music.

Weddings are notoriously depressing affairs. It looked as if this one, especially, had been preceded by more than common display of grievance on the part of persons regarding themselves as, in one way or another, fairly closely concerned, and therefore possessing the right to raise difficulties and proffer advice. Only Lady Anne Stepney appeared to be, for once, enjoying herself unreservedly. She was her sister's chief bridesmaid, and, as a kind of public assertion of rebellion against convention of all kind, rather in Mr. Deacon's manner, she was wearing her wreath back to front; a disorder of head-dress that gravely prejudiced the general appearance of the cortège as it passed up the aisle.

Little Pamela Flitton, who was holding the bride's train, felt sick at this same moment, and rejoined her nurse at the back of the church.

I returned to my rooms that evening in rather low spirits; and, just as I was retiring to bed, Barnby rang up with the news—quite unexpected, though I had heard of his indisposition—that Mr. Deacon had died as the result of an accident. Barnby's account of how this had come about attested the curious fitness that sometimes attends the manner in which people finally leave this world; for, although Mr. Deacon's end was not exactly dramatic within the ordinary meaning of the term, its circumstances, as he himself would have wished, could not possibly be regarded as commonplace. In many ways the embodiment of bourgeois thought, he could have claimed with some justice that his long struggle against the shackles of conventions, sometimes inwardly dear to him, had, in the last resort, come to his aid in releasing him from what he would have considered the shame of a bourgeois death.

Although the demise was not a violent one in the most usual sense of the word, it unquestionably partook at the same time of that spirit of carelessness and informality always so vigorously advocated by Mr Deacon as a precept for pursuing what Sillery liked to call 'The Good Life'. Sillery's ideas upon that subject were, of course, rather different, on the whole, from Mr. Deacon's; in spite of the fact that both of them, even according to their own lights, were adventurers. But, although each looked upon himself as a figure almost Promethean in spirit of independence—godlike, and following ideals of his own, far from the well-worn tracks of fellow men—their chosen roads were also acknowledged by each to be set far apart.

Mr. Deacon and Sillery must, in fact, have been just about the same age. Possibly they had known each other in their troubled youth (for even Sillery had had to carve out a career for himself in his early years), and some intersection of those unrestricted paths to which each adhered no doubt credibly explained at least a proportion of Sillery's express disapproval of Mr. Deacon's irregular habits. Any such strictures on Sillery's part were at least equally attributable to prudence: that sense of self-preservation, and desire to 'keep on the safe side', of which Sillery, among the many other qualities to which he could lay claim, possessed almost more than a fair share.

When, in an effort to complete the picture, I had once asked Mr. Deacon whether, in the course of his life, he had ever run across Sillery, he had replied in his deep voice, accompanied by that rather sardonic smile: 'My father, a man of modest means, did not send me to the university. I sometimes think—with due respect, my dear Nicholas, to your own *Alma Mater*—that he was right.'

In that sentence he avoided a direct answer, while framing a form of words not specifically denying possibility of the existence of an ancient antagonism; his careful choice of phrase at the same time excusing him from commenting in any manner whatsoever on the person concerned. It was as if he insisted on upon Sillery's status as an essentially academical celebrity: a figure not properly to be discussed by one who had never been—as Mr. Deacon was accustomed to put it in the colloquialism of his own generation—'a 'varsity man'. There was also more than a hint of regret implicit in the deliberately autobiographical nature of this admission, revealing an element to be taken into account in any assessment of Mr. Deacon's own outlook.

At the time of his death, few, if any, of Mr. Deacon's friends knew the somewhat jealously-guarded secret of his age more exactly than within a year or two; in spite of the fatal accident having taken place on his birthday—or, to be pedantic about chronology, in the small hours of the day following his birthday party. I was myself not present at the latter stages of this celebration, begun at about nine o'clock on the evening before, having preferred, as night was already well advanced, to make for home at a moment when Mr. Deacon, with about half a dozen remaining guests, had decided to move on to a night-club. Mr. Deacon had taken this desertion—my own and that of several other friends, equally weak in spirit—in bad part, quoting: 'Blow, blow, thou winter wind . . .' rather as if enjoyment of his hospitality had put everyone on his honour to accept subjection to the host's will for at least a period of twelve hours on end. However, the dissolution of the party was clearly inevitable. The club that was their goal, newly opened, was expected by those conversant with such matters to survive no more than a week or two, before an impending police raid: a punctual visit being, therefore, regarded as a matter of comparative urgency for any amateur of 'night life'. In that shady place, soon after his arrival there, Mr. Deacon fell down the stairs.

Even in this undignified mishap there had been, as ever, that touch of martyrdom inseparable from the conduct of his life; since he had been on his way, so it was learnt afterwards, to lodge a complaint with the management regarding the club's existing sanitary arrangements: universally agreed to be deplorable enough. It was true that he might have taken a little more to drink than was usual for someone who, after the first glass or two, was relatively abstemious in his habit. His behaviour at Mrs. Andriadis's, occasioned, of course, far more by outraged principles than unaccustomed champagne, had been, so I discovered from Barnby, quite exceptional in its unbridled nature; and had proved, indeed, a source of great worry to Mr. Deacon in the weeks that followed.

As a matter of fact, I had never learnt how the question of his exit from the house in Hill Street had been finally settled. Whether Mr. Deacon had attempted to justify himself with Mrs. Andriadis, or whether she, on her part, compelled him—with, or without, the assistance of men-servants, Max Pilgrim, or the negro—to clear up the litter of papers in the hall, the future never revealed. Mr. Deacon himself, on subsequent occasions, chose to indicate only in the most general terms that he had found Mrs. Andriadis's party unenjoyable; and, when her name had once cropped up in conversation, he echoed a sentiment often expressed by Uncle Giles, in remarking: 'People's manners have changed a lot since the war—not always for the better.' He did not disclose, even to Barnby, who acted in some respects almost as his conscience, the exact reason for his quarrel with the singer, apart from the fact that he had taken exception to specific phrases in the song; so that the nature of his difference with Pilgrim on some earlier occasion remained a matter for speculation.

However, if undeniable that at Hill Street Mr. Deacon had taken perhaps a glass or two more of champagne than was wise, the luxurious style of the surroundings had no doubt also played their part in stimulating that quixotic desire, never far below the surface in all his conduct, to champion his ideals, wherever he found himself, however unsuitable the occasion. At the night-club he was, of course, in more familiar environment, and it was agreed by everyone present that the fall had been in no way attributable to anything more than a rickety staircase and his own habitual impetuosity. The truth was that, as a man no longer young, he would have been wiser in this, and no doubt in other matters too, to have shown less frenzied haste in attempting to bring about the righting of so many of life's glaring wrongs.

At such an hour, in such a place, nothing much was thought of the fall at the time; neither by Mr. Deacon nor the rest of his party. He had complained, so it was said, only of a bruise on his thigh and a 'shaking up' inside. Indeed, he had insisted on prolonging the festivities, if they could be so called, until four o'clock in the morning: an hour when Barnby, woken at last after repeated knocking, had been roused to admit him, with Gypsy, once more to the house, because the latch-key had by that time been lost or mislaid. Mr. Deacon had gone into hospital a day or two later. He must have sustained some internal injury, for he died within the week.

We had met fairly often in the course of renewed acquaintance, for I had taken to dropping in on Barnby once or twice a week, and we would sometimes descend to the shop, or Mr. Deacon's sitting-room, for a talk; or go across with him to the pub for a drink. Now he was no more. Transition between the states of life and death had been effected with such formidable rapidity that his anniversary seemed scarcely completed before he had been thus silently called away; and, as Barnby remarked some time later, it was 'hard to think of Edgar without being overwhelmed with moralisings of a somewhat banal kind'. I certainly felt sad that I should not see Mr. Deacon again. The milestones provided by him had now come suddenly to an end. The road stretched forward still.

'Edgar's sister is picking up the pieces,' Barnby said. 'She is a clergyman's wife, living in Norfolk, and has already had a shattering row with Jones.'

He had made this remark when informing me by telephone of arrangements made for the funeral, which was to take place on a Saturday: the day, as it happened, upon which I had agreed to have supper with Widmerpool and his mother at their flat. This invitation, arriving in the form of a note from Mrs. Widmerpool, had added that she was looking forward to meeting 'so old a friend' of her son's. I was not sure that this was exactly the light in which I wished, or, indeed, had any right, to appear; although I had to admit to myself that I was curious to learn from Widmerpool's lips, as I had not seen him since Stourwater, an account, told from his own point of view, of the course events had taken in connexion with himself and Gypsy Jones. I had already received one summary from Barnby on my first visit to Mr. Deacon's shop after return from the Walpole-Wilsons'. He had spoken of the subject at once, so that no question of betraying Widmerpool's confidence arose.

'Your friend paid,' Barnby had said. 'And that was all.'

'How do you know?'

'Jones told me.'

'Is she to be believed?'

'No statement on that subject can ever be unreservedly accepted,' said Barnby. 'But he has never turned up here since. Her story is that he left in a rage.'

'I don't wonder.'

Barnby shook his head and laughed. He did not like Gypsy, nor she him, and, so far as he was concerned, that was an end of the matter. I saw his point, though personally I did not share the obduracy of his views. In fact there were moments when Gypsy turned up at the shop and we seemed to get on rather well together. Her egotism was of that entirely unrestrained kind, always hard to resist when accompanied by tolerable looks: a passionate self-absorption of the crudest kind, extending almost far enough to threaten the limits of sanity: with the added attraction of unfamiliar ways and thought. Besides, there was something disarming, almost touching, about her imperfectly concealed respect for 'books', which played a considerable part in her conversation when not talking of 'chalking' and other political activities. However—as Barbara might have said—there was no need to become sentimental. Gypsy usually showed herself, on the whole, more agreeable than on the first night we had met, but she could still be tiresome enough if the mood so took her.

'Jones is an excellent specimen of middle-class female education brought to its logical conclusions,' Barnby used to say. 'She couldn't be more perfect even if she had gone to the university. Her head is stuffed full of all the most pretentious nonsense you can think of, and she is incapable—but literally incapable—of thought. The upper and lower classes can sometimes keep their daughters in order—the middle classes rarely, if ever. I belong to the latter, and I know.'

I felt this judgment unnecessarily severe. Claiming, as she did, some elementary knowledge of typing and shorthand, Gypsy was temporarily employed in some unspecified capacity, next-door to Mr. Deacon's, at the offices of the Vox Populi Press: duties alleged by Barnby to be contingent on 'sleeping with Craggs', managing director of that concern. There seemed no reason either to accept or refute this statement, for, as Mr. Deacon used to remark, not without a touch of pride in his voice: 'Indiscretion is Gypsy's creed.' There could be no doubt that she lived up to this specification, although, as a matter of fact, shared political sympathies might equally well have explained close association with Craggs, since the Press (which was, in truth, merely a small publishing business, and did not, as its name implied, print its own publications) was primarily concerned with producing books and pamphlets of an insurgent tone.

Mr. Deacon had talked a lot about his birthday party before it had taken place, discussing at great length who should, and who should not, be invited. He had determined, for some reason, that it was to be a 'respectable' gathering; though no one, not even Barnby and Gypsy Jones, knew where—or rather at whom—Mr. Deacon was likely to draw the line. Naturally, these two were themselves to be present, and they were to ask, at Mr. Deacon's suggestion, some of their own friends. However, when the names of prospective candidates for invitation were actually put forward, there had been a good deal of argument on Mr. Deacon's part as to whether or not he could agree to allow some of the postulants 'in the house'—using the phrase I remembered Stringham attaching to Peter Templer years before—because a great many people, often unknown to themselves, had, at one time or another, caused offence to him in a greater or lesser degree. In the end he relented, vetoing only a few of Barnby's female acquaintances: procedure which certainly caused no hard feelings on Barnby's part.

Speaking for myself, I had been prepared for anything at Mr. Deacon's party. I was conscious, as it happened, of a certain sense of disappointment, even of annoyance, in my own life, and weariness of its routine. This was because, not many days before, I had rung up the Duports' house in Hill Street, and a caretaker, or whoever had answered the telephone, had informed me that the Duports had gone abroad again, and were coming back in the spring. This statement was accompanied by various hypotheses and suggestions on the part of the speaker, embedded in a suitable density of hesitation and subterfuge, that made the fact that Jean was, as my informant put it, 'expecting', no longer a secret even before this definitive word itself dropped into our conversation. This eventuality, I realised at once, was something to be inevitably associated with the married state; certainly not to be looked upon as unreasonable, or—as Mr. Deacon would say—'indiscreet'.

All the same, I felt, as I have said, disappointed, although aware that I could hardly claim that anything had taken place to justify even the faintest suspicion of a broken 'romance'. In fact, I could not even explain to myself why it was, for some reason, necessary to make this denial—that a relatively serious hope had been blighted—sufficiently clear in my own mind. In short, the situation encouraged the kind of mood that made the prospect of an entertainment such as Mr. Deacon's party promised to be, acceptable rather than the reverse. The same pervading spirit of being left, emotionally speaking, high and dry on a not specially Elysian coast, had also caused a faint pang, while having my hair cut, at seeing a picture of Prince Theodoric, sitting on the sands of the Lido between Lady Ardglass and a beautiful Brazilian, a reminder of the visit to Stourwater that now seemed so long past, and also of the perennial charm of female companionship in attractive surroundings. On thinking over this photograph, however, I recalled that, even apart from circumstances inherent in our different walks of life, the Prince's own preferred associate had been Mrs. Wentworth, so that he, too, had probably suffered a lack of fulfilment. Barnby had been delighted when his attention had been drawn to this snapshot.

'I knew Baby would ditch Theodoric,' he said. 'I wonder who the Brazilian girl was.'

He had even expressed a hope that he might succeed in bringing Mrs. Wentworth to Mr. Deacon's party.

'Somewhere where she would at least be sure of not meeting Donners,' he had added.

Certainly, Sir Magnus had not turned up at Mr. Deacon's, nor, for that matter, anyone at all like him. The sitting-room had been largely cleared of the many objects overflowed from the shop that were usually contained there. Chairs and sofa had been pushed back to the walls, which were hung on all sides, frame to frame, with his own paintings: making a kind of memorial hall of Mr. Deacon's art. Even this drastic treatment of the furniture did not entirely exempt the place from its habitually old-maidish air, which seemed, as a rule, to be vested in the extraordinary number of knick-knacks, tear-bottles and tiny ornamental cases for needles or toothpicks, that normally littered every available space.

At either end of the mantelpiece stood a small oval frame —the pair of them uniformly ornamented with sea shells— one of which contained a tinted daguerreotype of Mr. Deacon's mother, the other enclosing a bearded figure, the likeness, so it appeared, of Walt Whitman, for whom Mr. Deacon possessed a profound admiration. The late Mrs. Deacon's features so much resembled her son's as for the picture, at first sight, almost to cause the illusion that he had himself posed, as a *jeu d'esprit,* in crinoline and pork-pie hat. Juxtaposition of the two portraits was intended, I suppose, to suggest that the American poet, morally and intellectually speaking, represented the true source of Mr. Deacon's otherwise ignored paternal origins.

The atmosphere of the room had already become rather thick when I arrived upstairs that night, and a good many bottles and glasses were set about on occasional tables. After the meticulous process of selection to which they had been subjected, the first sight of the people assembled there came as something of an anti-climax; and Mr. Deacon's method of choosing was certainly not made at once apparent by a casual glance round the room. A few customers had been invited, picked from the ranks of those specially distinguished in buying expensive 'antiques'. These were mostly married couples, middle-aged to elderly, their position in life hard to define with any certainty. They laughed rather uneasily throughout the evening, in due course leaving early. The rest of the gathering was predominantly made up of young men, some of whom might reasonably have been considered to fall within Mr. Deacon's preferential category of 'respectable'; together with others whose claim to good repute was, at least outwardly, less pronounced: in some cases, even widely open to question.

There were, however, two persons present who, as it now seems to me, first revealed themselves at Mr. Deacon's party as linked together in that mysterious manner that circumscribes certain couples, and larger groups of human beings: a subject of which I have already spoken in connexion with Widmerpool and myself. These two were Mark Members and Quiggin; although at that period I was, of course, unable to appreciate that this pair had already begun the course of their long pilgrimage together, regarding them as no more connected with each other than with myself. I had not set eyes upon Quiggin since coming down from the university, although, as it happened, I had already learnt that he was to be invited as the result of a chance remark let fall by Gypsy during discussion of arrangements to be made for the party.

'Don't let Quiggin get left over in the house at the end of the evening,' she had said. 'I don't want him snuffling round downstairs after I have just dropped off to sleep.'

'Really, the ineffable vanity of woman,' Mr. Deacon had answered sharply. 'Quiggin will not molest you. He thinks too much about himself, for one thing, to bother about anyone else. You can set your mind at rest on that point.'

'I'd rather be safe than sorry,' said Gypsy. 'He showed signs of making himself quite a nuisance the other night, you may like to know. I'm just warning you, Edgar.'

Thinking the person named might well be the same

Quiggin I had known as an undergraduate, I enquired about his personal appearance.

'Very plain, I'm afraid, poor boy,' said Mr. Deacon. 'With a shocking North-Country accent—though I suppose one should not say such a thing. He is nephew of a client of mine in the Midlands. Rather hard up at the moment, he tells me, so he lends a hand in the shop from time to time. I'm surprised you have never run across him here. It gives him a pittance—and leisure to write. That's where his heart is.'

'He is J. G. Quiggin, you know,' said Gypsy. 'You must have read things by him.'

She may have thought that the importance she had ascribed to Quiggin as a potential source of nocturnal persecution of herself had been under-estimated by me, through ignorance of his relative eminence as a literary figure; and it was certainly true that I was unfamiliar with the name of the magazine mentioned by her as the organ to which he was said most regularly to contribute.

'No doubt about Quiggin's talent,' said Mr. Deacon. 'Though I don't like all his ideas. He's got a rough manner, too. All the same, he made himself very useful disposing of some books of a rather awkward sort—you need not snigger like that, Barnby—that I wanted to get rid of.'

Trying to recall terms of our mutual relationship when we had last seen anything of each other, I could remember only that I had met Quiggin from time to time up to the early part of my second year at the university, when, for some reason, he had passed completely out of my life. In this process of individual drifting apart, there was, where university circles were concerned, of course, nothing out of the way: undergraduate acquaintance flourishing and decaying often within a matter of weeks. I could remember commenting at one of Sillery's tea-parties that Quiggin seemed not to have been about for some time, at which, so far as I could recall, Sillery, through the medium of considerable verbal convolution, had indicated, or at least implied, that Quiggin's scholarship had been withdrawn by his college on grounds of idleness, or some other cause of dissatisfaction to the authorities; and that, not long after this had happened, he had been 'sent down'. That story had been, I thought, more or less substantiated by Brightman, a don at Quiggin's college. Certainly Brightman, at some luncheon party, had referred to 'that path trodden by scholarship boys whose mental equipment has been somewhat over-taxed at an earlier stage of their often injudiciously promoted education', and it was possible that he had used the case of Quiggin as an illustration.

I was rather impressed to hear that in the unfamiliar form of 'J. G. Quiggin' this former acquaintance was already known as a 'writer'; and admired, if only by Gypsy Jones. I also felt a little ashamed, perhaps merely on account of this apparent notoriety of his, to think, after finding in him something that had interested, if not exactly attracted, me, I had so easily forgotten about his existence.

My first sight of him at the party suggested that he had remained remarkably unchanged. He was still wearing his shabby black suit, the frayed trousers of which were maintained insecurely by a heavy leather belt with a brass buckle. His hair had grown a shade sparser round the sides of his dome-like forehead, and he retained that look of an undomesticated animal of doubtful temper. At the same time there was also his doggy, rather pathetic look about the eyes that had reminded me of Widmerpool, and which is a not uncommon feature of those who have decided to live by the force of the will. When we talked, I found that he had abandoned much of the conscious acerbity of manner that had been so much a part of social equipment at the university. It was not that he was milder—on the contrary, he seemed more anxious than ever to approach on his own terms every matter that arose—but he appeared to have come much nearer to perfection of method in his own particular method of attacking life; so that for others there was not, as in former days, the same field of conversational pitfalls to be negotiated. No doubt this greater smoothness of intercourse was also to be explained by the fact that we had both 'grown up' in the year or two that had passed. He asked some searching questions, comparable to Widmerpool's, regarding my firm's publications, almost immediately suggesting that he should write a preface for a book to be included in one or other of some series mentioned to him.

It was at that stage we had been joined by Members, rather to my surprise, because, as undergraduates, Members and Quiggin had habitually spoken of each other in a far from friendly manner. Now a change of relationship seemed to have taken place, or, it would perhaps be more exact to say, appeared desired by each of them; for there was no doubt that they were prepared, at least momentarily, to be on the best of terms. The three of us talked together, at first perhaps with a certain lack of ease, and then with greater warmth than I remembered in the past.

I had, in fact, met Members with Short, who was a believer in what he called 'keeping up with interesting people', soon after I had come to live in London. This taste of Short's, with whom I occasionally had dinner or saw a film, as we had planned to do on the night when I had cut him for the Walpole-Wilson dinner-party, resulted in running across various former acquaintances not seen regularly as a matter of course, and Members, by now of some repute as a *litterateur,* was one of these. To find him at Mr. Deacon's was unexpected, however, for I had supposed Members, for some reason, to frequent literary circles of a more sedate kind, though quite why I should have thus regarded him I hardly know.

In contrast with Quiggin, Mark Members had altered considerably since his undergraduate period, when he had been known for the relative flamboyance of his dress. Him too I remembered chiefly from my first year at the university, though this was not because he had left prematurely, but rather on account of his passing into a world of local hostesses of more or less academical complexion, which I did not myself frequent. If I had considered the matter, it was to some similar layer of society in London that I should have pictured him attached: perhaps a reason for supposing him out of place at Mr. Deacon's. Possibly these ladies, most of them hard-headed enough in their own way, had been to some extent responsible for the almost revolutionary changes that had taken place in his appearance; for, even since our meeting with Short, Members had worked hard on his own exterior, in much the same manner that Quiggin had effected the interior modifications to which I have already referred.

There had once, for example, been at least a suggestion of side-whiskers, now wholly disappeared. The Byronic collar and loosely tied tie discarded, Members looked almost as neat round the neck as Archie Gilbert. His hair no longer hung in an uneven fringe, but was brushed severely away from his forehead at an acute angle; while he had also, by some means, ridded himself of most of his freckles: acquiring a sterner expression that might almost have been modelled on Quiggin's. In fact, he looked a rather distinguished young man, evidently belonging to the world of letters, though essentially to the end of that world least well disposed to Bohemianism in its grosser forms. He had been brought—Mr. Deacon had finally declared himself resigned to a certain number of uninvited guests, 'modern manners being what they are'—by a strapping, black-haired model called Mona, a friend of Gypsy's belonging, so Barnby reported, to a stage of Gypsy's life before she was known to Mr. Deacon.

Short had told me that Members did occasional work for one of the 'weeklies'—the periodical, in fact, that had commented rather disparagingly on Prince Theodoric's visit to England—and I had, indeed, read, with decided respect, some of the pieces there written by him. He had, I believed, failed to secure the 'first' expected of him, by Sillery and others, at the end of his university career; but, like Bill Truscott in another sphere, he had never relinquished the reputation of being 'a coming young man'. Speaking of reviews written by Members, Short used to say: 'Mark handles his material with remarkable facility,' and, not without envy, I had to agree with that judgment; for this matter of writing was beginning to occupy an increasing amount of attention in my own mind. I had even toyed with the idea of attempting myself to begin work on a novel: an act that would thereby have brought to pass the assertion made at La Grenadière, merely as a conversational pretext to supply an answer to Widmerpool, to the effect that I possessed literary ambitions.

As I have already said of Mrs. Andriadis's party, such latitudes are entered by a door through which there is rarely if ever a return; and, in rather the same manner, that night at Mr. Deacon's certain matters seemed to crystallise. Perhaps this crystallisation had something to do with the presence there of Members and Quiggin, though they themselves were in agreement as to the displeasure they both felt in the company assembled.

'You must admit,' said Members, looking round the room, 'it all looks rather like that picture in the Tate, of the Sea giving up the Dead that were in It. I can't think why Mona insisted on coming.'

Quiggin concurred in finding Mr. Deacon's guests altogether unacceptable, at the same time paying suitable commendation to the aptness of the pictorial allusion. He looked across the room to where Mona was talking to Barnby, and said: 'It is a very unusual figure, isn't it? Epstein would treat it too sentimentally, don't you think? Something more angular is required, in the manner of Lipchitz or Zadkine.'

'She really *hates* men,' said Members, laughing dryly.

His amusement was no doubt directed at the impracticability of the unspoken desires of Quiggin, who, perhaps with the object of moving to ground more favourable to himself, changed the subject.

'Did I hear that you had become secretary to E. St. John Clarke?' he asked, in a casual voice.

Members gave his rather high laugh again. This was evidently a matter he wished to be approached delicately. He seemed to have grown taller since coming to London. His slim waist and forceful, interrogative manner rather suggested one of those strong-willed, elegant young salesmen, who lead the customer from the shop only after the intention to buy a few handkerchiefs has been transmuted into a reckless squandering on shirts, socks, and ties, of patterns to be found later fundamentally unsympathetic.

'At first I could not make up my mind whether to take it,' he admitted. 'Now I am glad I decided in favour. St. J. is rather a great man in his way.'

'Of course, one could not exactly call him a very great novelist,' said Quiggin, slowly, as if deliberating the question carefully within himself. 'But he is a *personality,* certainly, and some of his critical writing might be labelled as—well—shall we say "not bad"?'

'They have a certain distinction of thought, of course, in their rather old-fashioned manner.'

Members seemed relieved to concede this. He clearly felt that Quiggin, catching him in a weak position, had let him off lightly. St. John Clarke was the novelist of whom Lady Anne Stepney had spoken with approval. I had read some of his books towards the end of my time at school with great enjoyment; now I felt myself rather superior to his windy, descriptive passages, two-dimensional characterisation, and, so I had come to think, the emptiness of the writing's inner content. I was surprised to find someone I regarded as so impregnable in the intellectual field as I supposed Members to be, saddled with a figure who could only be looked upon by those with literary pretensions of any but the crudest kind as an Old Man of the Sea; although, in one sense, the metaphor should perhaps have been reversed, as it was Members who had, as it were, climbed upon the shoulders of St. John Clarke.

I can now see his defence of St. John Clarke as an interesting example of the power of the will; for his disinclination for St. John Clarke's works must have been at least equal to my own: possibly far in excess. As Members had made up his mind to accept what was probably a reasonable salary—though St. John Clarke was rather well known for being 'difficult' about money—his attitude was undoubtedly a sagacious one; indeed, a great deal more discerning than mine, based upon decidedly romantic premises. The force of this justification certainly removed any question of Quiggin, as I had at first supposed he might, opening up some sort of critical attack on Members, based on the charge that St. John Clarke was a 'bad writer'. On the contrary, Quiggin now seemed almost envious that he had not secured the post for himself.

'Of course, if I had a job like that, I should probably say something one day that wouldn't go down,' he commented, rather bitterly. 'I've never had the opportunity to learn the way successful people like to be treated.'

'St. J. knows your work,' said Members, with quiet emphasis. 'I brought it to his attention.'

He watched Quiggin closely after saying this. Once more I wondered whether there was any truth in Sillery's story, never verified in detail, to the effect that the two of them lived almost next-door in the same Midland town. In spite of Quiggin's uncouth, drab appearance, and the new spruceness of Members, there could be no doubt that they had something in common. As Quiggin's face relaxed at these complimentary words, I could almost have believed that they were cousins. Quiggin did not comment on the subject of this awareness of his own status as a writer now attributed to St. John Clarke, but, in friendly exchange, he began to question Members about his books, in process of being written or already in the press: projected works that appeared to be several in number—at least three, possibly four—consisting of poems, a novel, a critical study, together with something else, more obscure in form, the precise nature of which I have forgotten, as it never appeared.

'And you, J.G.?' asked Members, evidently not wishing to appear grudging.

'I am trying to remain one of the distinguished few who have not written a novel,' said Quiggin, lightly. 'The Vox Populi may be doing a fragment of autobiography of mine in the spring. Otherwise I just keep a few notes—odds and ends I judge of interest. I suppose they will find their way into print in due course. Everything does these days.'

'No streams of consciousness, I hope,' said Members, with a touch of malignity. 'But the Vox Populi isn't much of a publishing house, is it? Will they pay a decent advance?'

'I get so sick of all the "fine" typography you see about,' said Quiggin, dismissing the matter of money. 'I've told Craggs to send it out to a jobbing printer, just as he would one of his pamphlets—print it on lavatory paper, if he likes. At least Craggs has the right political ideas.'

'I question if there is much of the commodity you mention to be found on the premises of the Vox Populi,' said Members, giving his thin, grating laugh. 'But no doubt that *format* would ensure a certain sale. Don't forget to send me a copy, so that I can try and say something about it somewhere.'

In leaving behind the kind of shell common to all undergraduates, indeed to most young men, they had, in one sense, taken more definite shape by each establishing conspicuously his own individual identity, thereby automatically drawing farther apart from each other. Regarded from another angle, however, Quiggin and Members had come, so it appeared, closer together by their concentration, in spite of differences of approach, upon the same, or at least very similar, aims. They could be thought of, perhaps, as representatives, if not of different cultures, at least of opposed traditions; Quiggin, a kind of abiding prototype of discontent against life, possessing at the same time certain characteristics peculiar to the period: Members, no less dissatisfied than Quiggin, but of more academic derivation, perhaps even sharing some of Mr. Deacon's intellectual origins.

Although he had already benefited from the tenets of what was possibly a dying doctrine, Members was sharp enough to be speedily jettisoning appurtenances, already deteriorated, of an outmoded æstheticism. Quiggin, with his old clothes and astringent manner, showed a similar sense of what the immediate future intimated. This was to be a race neck-and-neck, though whether the competitors themselves were already aware of the invisible ligament binding them together in apparently eternal contrast and comparison, I do not know. Certainly the attitude that was to exist mutually between them—perhaps best described as 'love-hate'—must have taken root long before anything of the sort was noticed by me. At the university their eclectic personalities had possessed, I had thought, a curious magnetism, unconnected with their potential talents. Now I was almost startled by the ease with which both of them appeared able to write books in almost any quantity; for Quiggin's relative abnegation in that field was clearly the result of personal choice, rather than lack of subject matter, or weakness in powers of expression.

Quiggin was showing no public indication of the attempts to ingratiate himself with Gypsy suggested by her earlier remarks. On the contrary, he seemed to be spending most of his time talking business or literary gossip of the kind in which he had indulged with Members. On the whole, he restricted himself to the men present, though once or twice he hovered, apparently rather ill at ease, in the vicinity of the model, Mona: in whom Barnby was also showing a certain interest. Gypsy had taken manifest steps to clean herself up for the party. She was wearing a bright, fussy little frock that emphasised her waif-like appearance. When I noticed her at a later stage of the evening's evolution, sitting on the knee of Howard Craggs, a tall, baldish man, in early middle age, with a voice like a radio announcer's, rich, oily, and precise in its accents, this sight made me think again of her brush with Widmerpool, and wish for a moment that I knew more of its details. Perhaps some processes of thought-transference afforded at that moment an unexpected dispensation from Gypsy herself of further enlightenment to my curiosity.

Craggs had been making fairly free for a considerable time, in a manner that certainly suggested some truth in the aspersions put forward by Barnby. However, this perseverance on his part had apparently promoted no very ardent feeling of sympathy between them, there and then, for she was looking sullen enough. Now she suddenly scrambled out of his lap, straightening her skirt, and pushed her way across the room to where I was sitting on the sofa, talking—as I had been for some time—to a bearded man interested in musical-boxes. This person's connexion with Mr. Deacon was maintained purely and simply through their common interest in the musical-box market, a fact the bearded man kept on explaining: possibly fearing that his reputation might otherwise seem cheap in my eyes. At the arrival of Gypsy, probably supposing that the party was getting too rough for a person of quiet tastes, he rose from his seat, remarking that he must be 'finding Gillian and making for Hampstead'. Gypsy took the deserted place. She sat there for a second or two without speaking.

'We don't much like each other, do we?' she said at length.

I replied, rather lamely, that, even supposing some such mutual hostility to exist between us, there was no good reason why anything of the sort should continue; and it was true that I was conscious, that evening, of finding her notably more engaging than upon earlier meetings, comparatively amicable though some of these had been.

'Have you been seeing much of your friend Widmerpool lately?' she asked.

'I've just had a letter from his mother inviting me to dine with them next week.'

She laughed a lot at this news.

'I expect you heard he forked out,' she said.

'I gathered something of the sort.'

'Did he tell you himself?'

'In a manner of speaking.'

'Was he fed up about it?'

'He was, rather.'

She laughed again, though less noisily. I wondered what unthinkable passages had passed between them. It was evident that any interest, emotional or venal, invested by her in Widmerpool was now expended. There was something odious about her that made her, at the same time—I had to face this—an object of desire.

'After all, somebody had to cough up,' she said, rather defensively.

'So I suppose.'

'In the end he went off in a huff.'

This statement seemed explicit enough. There could be little doubt now that she had made a fool of Widmerpool. I felt, at that moment, she was correct in assuming that I did not like her. She was at once aware of this disapproval.

'Why are you so stuck up?' she asked, truculently.

'I'm just made that way.'

'You ought to fight it.'

'I can't see why.'

As far as I can remember, she went on to speak of the 'social revolution', a subject that occupied a great deal of her conversation and Craggs's, too, while even Mr. Deacon could hold his own in such discussions, though representing a wilder and less regimented point of view than the other two. I was relieved of the necessity of expressing my own opinions on this rather large question—rivalling in intensity Lady Anne Stepney's challenge to the effect that she was herself 'on the side of the People' in the French Revolution—by the sudden appearance of Howard Craggs himself in the neighbourhood of the sofa upon which we were sitting; or rather, by then, lying, since for some reason she had put up her feet in such a manner as to require, so it seemed at the time, a change of position on my own part.

'I'm going soon, Gypsy,' said Craggs in his horrible voice, as if speaking lines of recitation for some public performance, an illusion additionally suggested by the name itself. 'Should you be requiring a lift?'

'I'm dossing down here,' she said. 'But I've got one or two things to tell you before you leave.'

'All right, Gypsy, I'll have one more drink.'

He shambled off. We chatted for a time in a desultory manner—and some sort of an embrace may even have taken place. Soon after that she had said that she must find Craggs and tell him whatever information she wished to pass on. The party was by then drawing to a close, or at least changing its venue, with such disastrous consequences for its host. I did not see Mr. Deacon again, after saying good-night to him on the pavement: nor Barnby until we met at the cremation.

Most funerals incline, through general atmosphere, to suggest the presence, or at least more salient characteristics, of the deceased; and, in the case of Mr. Deacon, the ceremony's emphasis was on the disorganised, undisciplined aspect of his character, rather than an echo of the shrewdness and precision that certainly made up the opposite side of his nature. Matters had been arranged by his sister, a small, grey-haired woman, whose appearance hardly at all recalled her brother. There had been some question as to what rites would be appropriate, as Mr. Deacon, latterly agnostic, was believed to have been a Catholic convert for some years as a young man. His sister had ruled out the suggestion of an undenominational service in favour of that of the Church of England. Upon this subject, according to Barnby, she had had words with Gypsy Jones; with the result that Gypsy, on anti-religious grounds, had finally refused to attend the funeral. This withdrawal had not worried Mr. Deacon's sister in the least. Indeed, it may have relieved her, since there was reason to suppose that she suspected, perhaps not unreasonably, the propriety of Gypsy's connexion with the shop. However, Barnby was extremely annoyed.

'Just like the little bitch,' he said.

The weather had turned warmer, almost muggy. About a dozen or fifteen people showed up, most of them belonging to that race of shabby, anonymous mourners who form the bulk of the congregation at all obsequies, whether high or low, rich or poor; almost as if the identical band trooped round unceasingly—like Archie Gilbert to his dances—from interment to interment. Among the leaden-coloured garments of these perpetual attendants upon Death, the lightish suit of a tall young man in spectacles stood out. The face was, for some reason, familiar to me. During the responses his high, quavering voice, repeating the words from the row behind, resounded throughout the little chapel. The sound was churchly, yet not of the Church. Then I remembered that this young man was Max Pilgrim, the 'public entertainer'—as Mr. Deacon had called him—with whom the scene had taken place at the end of Mrs. Andriadis's party. At the close of the service, his willowy figure shuddering slightly as he walked, Pilgrim hurried away. The reasons that had brought him there, however commendable, were only to be conjectured, and could be interpreted according to taste.

'That was a desperate affair,' Barnby had said, as we returned to the shop together.

We climbed the stairs to his studio, where, in preparation for tea, he put a kettle on a gas-ring, and, although it was still warm, lighted the fire; then, changing into overalls, began to prepare a canvas. I lay on the divan. We talked of Mr. Deacon for a time, until conversation fell into more general channels, and Barnby began to discourse on the subject of love.

'Most of us would like to be thought of as the kind of man who has a lot of women,' he said. 'But take such fellows as a whole, there are few enough of them one would wish to be at all like.'

'Do you wish to change your identity?'

'Not in the least. Merely to improve my situation in certain specific directions.'

'Which particular Don Juan were you thinking of?'

'Oh, myself, of course,' said Barnby. 'Funerals make one's mind drift in the direction of moral relaxation—though it's unaccountable to me the way intimate relations between the sexes are always spoken of, and written about, as if of necessity enjoyable or humorous. In practice they might much more truly be described as encompassing the whole range of human feeling from the height of bliss to the depths of misery.'

'Is something on your mind?'

Barnby agreed that this diagnosis was correct. He was about to enter into some further explanation, when, as if making a kind of rejoinder to the opinion just expressed, the bell of the telephone began to ring from below. Barnby wiped his hands on a cloth, and went off down the stairs to where the instrument stood on a ledge by the back entrance to the shop. For a time I heard him talking. Then he returned to the room, greatly exhilarated.

'That was Mrs. Wentworth,' he said. 'I was about to tell you when the telephone went that she was, in fact, the matter on my mind.'

'Is she coming round here?'

'Better than that. She wants me to go round and see her right away. Do you mind? Finish your tea, of course, and stay here as long as you like.'

He tore off his overalls, and, without attempting to tidy up the material of his painting, was gone almost immediately. I had never before seen him so agitated. The front door slammed. A sense of emptiness fell on the house.

In the circumstances, I could not possibly blame Barnby for absenting himself so precipitately, experiencing at the same time a distinct feeling of being left in a void, not less so on account of the substance of our conversation that had been in this way terminated so abruptly. I poured out another cup of tea, and thought over some of the things he had been saying. I could not help envying the opportune nature, so far as Barnby himself was concerned, of the telephone call, which seemed an outward indication of the manner in which he had—so it seemed to me in those days—imposed his will on the problem at hand.

His life's unusual variety of form provided a link between what I came, in due course, to recognise as the world of Power, as represented, for example, by the ambitions of Widmerpool and Truscott, and that imaginative life in which a painter's time is of necessity largely spent: the imagination, in such a case, being primarily of a visual kind. In the conquest of Mrs. Wentworth, however, other spheres—as the figures of Sir Magnus Donners and Prince Theodoric alone sufficiently illustrated—had inevitably to be invaded by him. These hinterlands are frequently, even compulsively, crossed at one time or another by almost all who practise the arts, usually in the need to earn a living; but the arts themselves, so it appeared to me as I considered the matter, by their ultimately sensual essence, are, in the long run, inimical to those who pursue power for its own sake. Conversely, the artist who traffics in power does so, if not necessarily disastrously, at least at considerable risk. I was making preparations to occupy my mind with such thoughts until it was time to proceed to the Widmerpools'; but the room was warm, and, for a time, I dozed.

Nothing in life can ever be entirely divorced from myriad other incidents; and it is remarkable, though no doubt logical, that action, built up from innumerable causes, each in itself allusive and unnoticed more often than not, is almost always provided with an apparently ideal moment for its final expression. So true is this that what has gone before is often, to all intents and purposes, swallowed up by the aptness of the climax; opportunity appearing, at least on the surface, to be the sole cause of fulfilment. The circumstances that had brought me to Barnby's studio supplied a fair example of this complexity of experience. There was, however, more to come.

When I awoke from these sleepy, barely coherent reflections, I decided that I had had enough of the studio, which merely reminded me of Barnby's apparent successes in a field in which I was then, generally speaking, feeling decidedly unsuccessful. Without any very clear idea of how I would spend my time until dinner, I set off down the stairs, and had just reached the door that led from the back of the shop to the foot of the staircase, when a female voice from the other side shouted: 'Who is that?'

My first thought was that Mr. Deacon's sister had returned to the house. After the cremation, she had announced herself as retiring for the rest of the day to her hotel in Bloomsbury, as she was suffering from a headache. I supposed now that she had changed her mind, and decided to continue the task of sorting her brother's belongings, regarding some of which she had already consulted Barnby, since there were books and papers among Mr. Deacon's property that raised a number of questions of disposal, sometimes of a somewhat delicate kind. She had probably come back to the shop and again sought guidance on some matter. It was to be hoped that the point would not prove an embarrassing one. However, when I said my name, the person beyond the door turned out to be Gypsy.

'Come in for a moment,' she called.

I turned the handle and entered. She was standing behind the screen, in the shadows, at the back of the shop. My first impression was that she had stripped herself stark naked. There was, indeed, good reason for this misapprehension; for a second look showed that she was wearing a kind of bathing-dress, flesh-coloured, and of unusually sparing cut. I must have showed my surprise, because she burst into a paroxysm of laughter.

'I thought you would like to see my dress for the Merry Thought fancy-dress party,' she said. 'I am going as Eve.'

She came closer.

'Where is Barnby?' she asked.

'He went out. Didn't you hear him go? After he spoke on the telephone.'

'I've only just come in,' she said. 'I wanted to try out my costume on both of you.'

She sounded disappointed at having missed such an opportunity to impress Barnby, though I thought the display would have annoyed rather than amused him; which was no doubt her intention.

'Won't you be cold?'

'The place is going to be specially heated. Anyway, the weather is mild enough. Still, shut the door. There's a bit of a draught.'

She sat down on the divan. That part of the shop was shut off from the rest by the screen in such a way as almost to form a cubicle. As Mr. Deacon had described, shawls or draperies of some sort were spread over the surface of this piece of furniture.

'What do you think of the fig leaf?' she asked. 'I made it myself.'

I have already spoken of the common ground shared by conflicting emotions. As Barnby had remarked, the funeral had been 'hard on the nerves', and a consciousness of sudden relief from pressure was stimulating. Gypsy, somewhat altering the manner she had adopted on my first arrival in the shop, now managed to look almost prim. She had the air of waiting for something, of asking a question to which she already knew the answer. There was also something more than a little compelling about the atmosphere of the alcove: the operation perhaps of memories left over as a residue from former states of concupiscence, although so fanciful a condition could hardly be offered in extenuation. I asked myself whether this situation, or something not far from it, was not one often premeditated, and, although I still felt only half awake, not to be lightly passed by.

The lack of demur on her part seemed quite in accordance with the almost somnambulistic force that had brought me into that place, and also with the torpid, dreamlike atmosphere of the afternoon. At least such protests as she put forward were of so formal and artificial an order that they increased, rather than diminished, the impression that a long-established rite was to be enacted, among Staffordshire figures and *papier-mâché* trays, with the compelling, detached formality of nightmare. Perhaps some demand, not to be denied in its overpowering force, had occasioned simultaneously both this summons and Mrs. Wentworth's telephone call; each product of that slow process of building up of events, as already mentioned, coming at last to a head. I was conscious of Gypsy changing her individuality, though at the same time retaining her familiar form; this illusion almost conveying the extraordinary impression that there were really three of us—perhaps even four, because I was aware that alteration had taken place within myself too—of whom the pair of active participants had been, as it were, projected from out of our normally unrelated selves.

In spite of the apparently irresistible nature of the circumstances, when regarded through the larger perspectives that seemed, on reflection, to prevail—that is to say of a general subordination to an intricate design of cause and effect—I could not help admitting, in due course, the awareness of a sense of inadequacy. There was no specific suggestion that anything had, as it might be said, 'gone wrong'; it was merely that any wish to remain any longer present in those surroundings had suddenly and violently decreased, if not disappeared entirely. This feeling was, in its way, a shock. Gypsy, for her part, appeared far less impressed than myself by consciousness of anything, even relatively momentous, having occurred. In fact, after the brief interval of extreme animation, her subsequent indifference, which might almost have been called torpid, was, so it seemed to me, remarkable. This imperturbability was inclined to produce an impression that, so far from knowing each other a great deal better, we had progressed scarcely at all in that direction; even, perhaps, become more than ever, even irretrievably, alienated. Barbara's recurrent injunction to avoid any question of 'getting sentimental' seemed, here in the embodiment of Gypsy, now carried to lengths which might legitimately be looked upon as such a principle's logical conclusion.

This likeness to Barbara was more clearly indicated, however, than by a merely mental comparison of theory, because, while Gypsy lay upon the divan, her hands before her, looking, perhaps rather self-consciously, a little like Goya's *Maja nude*—or possibly it would be nearer the mark to cite that picture's derivative, Manet's *Olympia,* which I had, as it happened, heard her mention on some former occasion—she glanced down, with satisfaction, at her own extremities.

'How brown my leg is,' she said. 'Fancy sunburn lasting that long.'

Were Barbara and Gypsy really the same girl, I asked myself. There was something to be said for the theory; for I had been abruptly reminded of Barbara's remark, uttered under the trees of Belgrave Square earlier in the year: 'How blue my hand is in the moonlight.' Self-admiration apart, there could be no doubt now that they had a great deal in common. It was a concept that made me feel that, in so far as I was personally involved in matters of sentiment, the season was, romantically speaking, autumn indeed; and that the leaves had undeniably fallen from the trees so far as former views on love were concerned: even though such views had been held by me only so short a time before. Here, at least, at the back of Mr. Deacon's shop, some conclusion had been reached, though even that inference, too, might be found open to question. At the same time, I could not help being struck, not only by a kind of wonder that I now found myself, as it were, with Barbara in conditions once pictured as beyond words vain of achievement. but also at that same moment by a sense almost of solemnity at this latest illustration of the pattern that life forms. A new phase in conversation was now initiated by a question from Gypsy.

'What was the funeral like?' she asked, as if making a deliberate return to every-day conditions.

'Short.'

'I think I was right not to go.'

'You didn't miss much.'

'It was a matter of conscience.'

She developed for a time this line of thought, and I agreed that, regarded in the light of her convictions, her absence might be looked upon as excusable, if any such severity of doctrine was indeed insurmountable. I agreed further that Mr. Deacon himself might have appreciated such scruples.

'Max Pilgrim was there.'

'The man who sings the songs?'

'He didn't at the cremation.'

'There comes a moment when you've got to make a stand.'

I presumed that she had returned to the problems of her own conscience rather than to refer to Pilgrim's restraint in having kept himself from breaking into song at the crematorium.

'Where will you stay now that the shop is coming to an end?'

'Howard says he can put me up once in a way at the Vox Populi. They've got a camp-bed there. He's taking me to the party tonight.'

'What's he going as?'

'Adam.'

'Is he arriving here in that guise?'

'We're dining early, and going back to his place to dress up. Only I thought I must try out my costume first. As a matter of fact he is picking me up here fairly soon.'

She looked rather doubtful, and I saw that I must not overstay my welcome. There was nothing to be said for allowing time to slip by long enough for Craggs to arrive. It appeared that Gypsy was going to the country—it was to be presumed with Craggs—in the near future. We said good-bye. Later, as I made my way towards the Widmerpools', association of ideas led inevitably to a reminder, not a specially pleasant one, of Widmerpool himself and his desires; parallel, it appeared, in their duality, with my own: and fated to be defrauded a second time. The fact that I was dining at his flat that evening in no way reduced the accentuation given by events to that sense of design already mentioned. Whatever the imperfections of the situation from which I had just emerged, matters could be considered with justice only in relation to a much larger configuration, the vast composition of which was at present —that at least was clear—by no means even nearly completed.

There is a strong disposition in youth, from which some individuals never escape, to suppose that everyone else is having a more enjoyable time than we are ourselves; and, for some reason, as I moved southwards across London, I was that evening particularly convinced that I had not yet succeeded in striking a satisfactory balance in my manner of conducting life. I could not make up my mind whether the deficiencies that seemed so stridently to exist were attributable to what had already happened that day, or to a growing certainty in my own mind that I should much prefer to be dining elsewhere. The Widmerpools—for I felt that I had already heard so much of Widmerpool's mother that my picture of her could not be far from the truth—were the last persons on earth with whom I wished to share the later part of the evening. I suppose I could have had a meal by myself, thinking of some excuse later to explain my absence; but the will to take so decisive a step seemed to have been taken physically from me.

They lived, as Widmerpool had described, on the top floor of one of the smaller erections of flats in the neighbourhood of Westminster Cathedral. The lift, like an ominously creaking funicular, swung me up to these mountainous regions, and to a landing where light shone through frosted panes of glass. The door was opened by a depressed elderly maid, wearing cap and pince-nez, who showed me into a drawing-room, where Widmerpool was sitting alone, reading *The Times*. I was dimly aware of a picture called *The Omnipresent* hanging on one of the walls, in which three figures in bluish robes stand or kneel on the edge of a precipice. Widmerpool rose, crumpling the paper, as if he were surprised to see me, so that for a painful moment I wondered whether, by some unhappy mistake, I had arrived on the wrong night. However, a second later, he made some remark to show I was expected, and asked me to sit down, explaining that 'in a minute or two' his mother would be ready.

'I am very much looking forward to your meeting my mother,' he said.

He spoke as if introduction to his mother was an experience, rather a vital one, that every serious person had, sooner or later, to undergo. I became all at once aware that this was the first occasion upon which he and I had met anywhere but on neutral ground. I think that Widmerpool, too, realised that a new relationship had immediately risen between us from the moment when I had entered the drawing-room; for he smiled in a rather embarrassed way, after making this remark about his mother, and seemed to make an effort, more conscious than any he had ever shown before, to appear agreeable. In view of the embarrassments he had spoken of when we had last met—and their apparent conclusion so far as he were concerned—I had expected to find him depressed. On the contrary, he was in unusually high spirits.

'Miss Walpole-Wilson is supping with us,' he said.

'Eleanor?'

'Oh, no,' he said, as if such a thing were unthinkable. 'Her aunt. Such a knowledgeable woman.'

Before any comment were possible, Mrs. Widmerpool herself came through the door, upon the threshold of which she paused for a moment, her head a little on one side.

'Why, Mother,' said Widmerpool, speaking with approval, 'you are wearing your bridge-coat.'

We shook hands, and she began to speak at once, before I could take in her appearance.

'And so you were both at Mr. Le Bas's house at school,' she said. 'I never really cared for him as a man. I expect he had his good qualities, but he never quite appreciated Kenneth.'

'He was an odd man in many ways.'

'Kenneth so rarely brings the friends of his school days here.'

I said that we had also stayed together with the same French family in Touraine; for, if I had to be regarded as a close friend of her son's, it was at La Grenadière that I had come to know him best: rather than at school, where he had always seemed a figure almost too grotesque to take seriously.

'At the Leroys'?' she asked, as if amazed at the brilliance of my parents in having hit on the only possible household in the whole of France.

'For six weeks or so.'

She turned to Widmerpool.

'But you never told me that,' she said. 'That was naughty of you!'

'Why should I?' said Widmerpool. 'You didn't know him.'

Mrs. Widmerpool clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Her large features distinctly recalled the lineaments of her son, though she had perhaps been good looking when younger. Even now she seemed no more than in her late forties, though I believe she was, in fact, older than that. However, her well-preserved appearance was in striking contrast with Widmerpool's own somewhat decaying youth, so that the pair of them appeared almost more like contemporaries, even husband and wife, rather than mother and son. Her eyes were brighter than his, and she rolled them, expanding the pupils, in comment to any remark that might be thought at all out of the ordinary. Her double row of firm teeth were set between cheeks of brownish red, which made her a little resemble Miss Walpole-Wilson, with whom she clearly possessed something discernibly in common that explained their friendly connexion. She seemed a person of determination, from whom no doubt her son derived much of his tenacity of purpose. The garment to which he referred was of flowered velvet, with a fringe, and combined many colours in its pattern.

'I hear you know the Gorings,' she said. 'It seems such a pity they have allowed Barbara to run so wild. She used to be such a dear little girl. There really appears to be something a trifle queer about Lord Aberavon's grandchildren.'

'Oh, shut up, Mother,' said Widmerpool, changing his almost amatory manner unexpectedly. 'You don't know anything about it.'

He must have felt, not entirely without reason, that his mother was on delicate ground in bringing up so early, and in such a critical spirit, the subject of Gorings and Walpole-Wilsons. Mrs. Widmerpool seemed not at all put out by the brusque form of address used by her son; continuing to express herself freely on the characteristics, in her eyes, good, bad and indifferent, of Barbara and Eleanor, adding that she understood that neither of the Goring sons were 'very much of a hand at their books'. She felt perhaps that now was the time to unburden herself upon matters hardly to be pursued with the same freedom after the arrival of Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson. From her comments, I supposed that Widmerpool must have given his mother, perhaps involuntarily, some indication that the Gorings were out of favour with him; although it was impossible to guess how accurately she might be informed about her son's former feelings for Barbara: even if she knew of them at all. It was possible that she had attributed the anxiety he had gone through with Gypsy Jones to a later aggravation of his entanglement with Barbara: in fact, the same conclusion to which I had myself first arrived, when, at Stourwater, he had spoken of the troubles that were oppressing him.

'There doesn't seem any sign of Eleanor getting married yet,' said Mrs. Widmerpool, almost dreamily, as if she were descrying in the depths of the gas-fire a vision invisible to the rest of us, revealing the unending cavalcade of Eleanor's potential suitors.

'Perhaps she doesn't want to,' said Widmerpool, in a tone evidently intended to close the subject. 'I expect you two will like a talk on books before the end of the evening.'

'Yes, indeed, for I hear you are in the publishing trade,' said his mother. 'You know, I have always liked books and bookish people. It is one of my regrets that Kenneth is really too serious-minded to enjoy reading for its own sake. I expect you are looking forward to those articles in *The Times* by Thomas Hardy's widow. I know I am.'

While I was making some temporising answer to these reassurances on Mrs. Widmerpool's part regarding her inclination towards literature, Miss Walpole-Wilson was announced, who excused her lateness on the grounds of the chronic irregularity of the bus service from Chelsea, where her flat was situated. She was wearing a mackintosh, of which, for some reason, she had refused to divest herself in the hall; exemplifying in this manner a curious trait common to some persons of wilful nature, whose egotism seems often to make them unwilling, even incapable, of shedding anything of themselves until they can feel that they have safely reached their goal. She now removed this waterproof, folding and establishing it upon a chair—an act watched by her hostess with a fixed smile that might have signified disapproval—revealing that she, too, was wearing a richly-coloured coat. It was made of orange, black, and gold silk: a mandarin's coat, so she explained, that Sir Gavin had given her years before.

The relationship between Mrs. Widmerpool and Miss Walpole-Wilson, in general an amicable one, gave the impression of resting not exactly upon planned alliance so much as community of interest, unavoidable from the nature of the warfare both waged against the rest of the world. Miss Walpole-Wilson was, of course, as she sometimes described herself, 'a woman of wide interests', while Mrs. Widmerpool concerned herself with little that had not some direct reference to the career of her son. At the same time there was an area of common ground where disparagement of other people brought them close together, if only on account of the ammunition with which each was able to provide the other: mutual aid that went far to explain a friendship long established.

Miss Walpole-Wilson's manner that evening seemed intended to notify the possession of some important piece of news to be divulged at a suitable moment. She had, indeed, the same air as Widmerpool: one, that is to say, suggesting that she was unusually pleased with herself. We talked for a time, until the meal was despondently announced by the decrepit house-parlourmaid, who, a minute or two later, after we had sat down to cold food in a neighbouring room, hurried plates and dishes round the table with reckless speed, as if she feared that death—with which the day seemed still associated in my mind—would intervene to terminate her labours. There was a bottle of white wine. I asked Miss Walpole-Wilson whether she had been seeing much of Eleanor.

'Eleanor and I are going for a sea trip together,' she said. 'A banana boat to Guatemala.'

'Rather wise to get her away from her family for a bit,' said Mrs. Widmerpool, making a grimace.

'Her father is full of old-fashioned ideas,' said Miss Walpole-Wilson, 'and he won't be laughed out of them.'

'Eleanor will enjoy the free life of the sea,' Mrs. Widmerpool agreed.

'Of course she will,' said Miss Walpole-Wilson; and, pausing for a brief second to give impetus to her question, added: 'You have heard, I expect, about Barbara?'

It was clear from the way she spoke that she felt safe in assuming that none of us could possibly have heard already whatever her news might be. I thought, though the supposition may have been entirely mistaken, that for an instant she fixed her eyes rather malignantly on Widmerpool; and certainly there was no reason to suggest that she knew anything of his former interest in Barbara. However, if she intended to tease him, she scored a point, for at mention of the name his face at once took on a somewhat guilty expression. Mrs. Widmerpool enquired curtly what had happened. She also seemed to feel that Miss Walpole-Wilson might be trying to provoke her son.

'Barbara is engaged,' said Miss Walpole-Wilson, smiling, though without good-humour.

'Who to?' asked Widmerpool, abruptly.

'I can't remember whether you know him,' she said. 'He is a young man in the Guards. Rich, I think.'

I felt certain, immediately, that she must refer to someone I had never met. Many people can never hear of any engagement without showing envy; and no one can be quite disinterested who has been at one time an implicated party. The thought that the man would turn out to be unknown to me was, therefore, rather a relief.

'But what is the name?' said Widmerpool, insistently.

He was already nettled. There could be no doubt that Miss Walpole-Wilson was deliberately tormenting him, although I could not decide whether this was simply her usual technique in delaying the speed at which she passed on gossip with the object of making it more appetising, or because she knew, either instinctively or from specific information in her possession, that he had been concerned with Barbara. For a moment or two she smiled round the table frostily.

'He is called Pardoe,' she said, at last. 'I think his other name is John.'

'Her parents *must* be pleased,' said Mrs. Widmerpool. 'I always thought that Barbara was becoming—well—almost a problem in a small way. She got so noisy. Such a pity when that happens to a girl.'

I could see from Widmerpool's pursed lips and glassy eyes that he was as astonished as myself. The news went some way to dispel his air of self-satisfaction, that had seemed only momentarily displaced by irritation with Miss Walpole-Wilson before this announcement. I was myself conscious of a faint sense of bitterness, rather indefinite in its application. Among the various men who had, at one time or another, caused me apprehension, just or unjust, in connexion with Barbara, Pardoe had never, at any moment, figured in the smallest degree. Why this immunity from my jealousy should have attached to him, I was now quite unable to understand, when, in the light of the information just imparted, I considered past incidents. Even after deciding that I was no longer in love with Barbara, I could still slightly resent her attitude towards Tompsitt; but objection—like Widmerpool's—to her crossing the supper-room to sit with Pardoe would never have entered my mind.

In fact, Widmerpool's instinct on the matter, if not his action, had, in one sense, been sound, so it now appeared; though it was true that his own emotions were still at that time deeply involved: a condition having a natural tendency to sharpen all perceptions in that particular direction. The manner in which jealousy operates is, indeed, curious enough: having perhaps relatively little bearing on the practical menace offered by a rival. Barnby used to describe a husband and lover known to him, who had both combined against a third—or rather fourth—party, found to be intervening. However, that situation was, of course, poles apart from the one under examination. Widmerpool now made an effort to control his voice.

'When did this happen?' he asked, speaking casually.

'I think they actually became engaged in Scotland,' said Miss Walpole-Wilson, pleased with the impression she had made. 'But it has not been made public yet.'

There was a pause. Widmerpool had failed to rise above the situation. For the moment he had lost all his good-humour. I think he was cross not only at Barbara's engagement, but also at the inability he was experiencing to conceal his own annoyance. I felt a good deal of sympathy for him in what he was going through.

'Rather a ridiculous little man,' he said, after a time. 'Still the fortune is a large one, and I have been told it is a nice house. I hope she will be very happy.'

'Barbara has great possibilities,' said Miss Walpole-Wilson. 'I don't know how she will like being an officer's wife. Personally, I always find soldiers so dull.'

'Oh, not in the *Guards,* surely?' said Mrs. Widmerpool, baring her teeth, as if in expectation, or memory, of behaviour on the part of Guardsmen infinitely removed from anything that could be regarded as dull, even by the most satiated.

'Of course, one of Barbara's brothers went into the Army,' said Miss Walpole-Wilson, as if that might be calculated to soften the blow.

Discussion of the engagement continued in a desultory manner. Such matters are habitually scrutinised from angles that disregard almost everything that might be truly looked upon as essential in connexion with a couple's married life together; so that, as usual, it was hard to think with even moderate clearness how the marriage would turn out. The issues were already hopelessly confused, not only by Miss Walpole-Wilson and Mrs. Widmerpool, but also by the anarchical litter enveloping the whole subject, more especially in the case of the particular pair concerned: a kind of phantasmagoria taking possession of the mind at the thought of them as husband and wife; for the surroundings provided by the Widmerpool flat were such as to encourage, for some reason, the worst flights of imagination, possibly on account of some inexplicable moral inadequacy in which its inhabitants seemed themselves to exist. Barbara's engagement lasted as a topic throughout the meal.

'Shall we leave the gentlemen to their port?' said Mrs. Widmerpool, when finally the subject had been picked bone-dry.

She mouthed the words 'gentlemen' and 'port' as if they might be facetiously disputable as strictly literal descriptions in either case. Widmerpool shut the door, evidently glad to be rid of both women for the time being. I wondered whether he would begin to speak of Barbara or Gypsy. To my surprise, neither girl turned out to be his reason for his so impatiently desiring a *tête-à-tête* conversation.

'I say, I've had an important move up at Donners-Brebner,' he said. 'That speech at the Incorporated Metals dinner had repercussions. The Chief was pleased about it.'

'Did he forgive you for knocking his garden about?'

Widmerpool laughed aloud at the idea that such a matter should have been brought up against him.

'You know,' he said, 'you sometimes make me feel that you must live completely out of the world. A man like Sir Magnus Donners does not bother about an accident of that sort. He has something more important to worry about. For example, he said to me the other day that he did not give tuppence what degrees a man had. What he wanted was someone who knew the ropes and could think and act quickly.'

'I remember him saying something of the sort when Charles Stringham went into Donners-Brebner.'

'Stringham is leaving us now that he is married. Just as well, in my opinion. I believe Truscott really thinks so too. People talk a great deal about "charm", but something else is required in business, I can assure you. Perhaps Stringham will settle down now. I believe he had some rather undesirable connexions.'

I enquired what Stringham was going to do now that he was departing from Donners-Brebner, but Widmerpool was ignorant on that point. I was unable to gather from him precisely what form his own promotion, with which he was so pleased, would take, though he implied that he would probably go abroad in the near future.

'I think I may be seeing something of Prince Theodoric,' he said. 'I believe you just met him.'

'Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson could tell you all about Theodoric.'

'I think I may say I have better sources of information at hand than that to be derived from diplomats who have been "unstuck",' said Widmerpool, with complacency. 'I have been brought in touch recently with a man you probably know from your university days, Sillery—"Sillers"—I find him quite a character in his way.'

Feeling in no mood to discuss Sillery with Widmerpool, I asked him what he thought about Barbara and Pardoe.

'I suppose it was only to be expected,' he said, reddening a bit.

'But had you any idea?'

'I really do not devote my mind to such matters.'

In saying this, I had no doubt that he was speaking the truth. He was one of those persons capable of envisaging others only in relation to himself, so that, when in love with Barbara, it had been apparently of no interest to him to consider what other men might stand in the way. Barbara was either in his company, or far from him; the latter state representing a kind of void in which he was uninterested except at such a moment as that at the Huntercombes', when her removal was brought painfully to his notice. Turning things over in my mind, I wondered whether I could be regarded as having proved any more sentient myself. However, I felt now that the time had come to try and satisfy my curiosity about the other business.

'What about the matter you spoke of at Stourwater?'

Widmerpool pushed back his chair. He took off his spectacles and rubbed the lenses. I had the impression that he was about to make some important pronouncement: rather in the manner of the Prime Minister allowing some aspect of governmental policy to be made known at the Lord Mayor's Banquet or Royal Academy Dinner.

'I am rather glad you asked that,' he said, slowly. 'I wondered if you would. Will you do me a great favour?'

'Of course—if I can.'

'Never mention the subject again.'

'All right.'

'I behaved unwisely, perhaps, but I gained something.'

'You did?'

I had accented the question in the wrong manner. Widmerpool blushed again.

'Possibly we do not mean the same thing,' he said. 'I referred to being brought in touch with a new side of life—even new political opinions.'

'I see.'

'I am going to tell you something else about myself.'

'Go ahead.'

'No woman who takes my mind off my work is ever to play a part in my life in the future.'

'That sounds a wise decision so far as it goes.'

'And another thing . . .'

'Yes?'

'If I were you, Nicholas—I hope, by the way, you will call me Kenneth in future, we know each other well enough by now to use Christian names—I should avoid all that set. Deacon and the whole lot of them. You won't get any good out of it.'

'Deacon is dead.'

'What?'

'I went to the funeral this afternoon. He was cremated.'

'Really,' said Widmerpool.

He demanded no details, so I supplied none. I felt now that we were, in a curious way, fellow-conspirators, even though Widmerpool might be unaware of this; and I was myself not unwilling to connive at his desire to draw a veil over the matter of which we had spoken. For a time we talked of other things, such as the arrangements to be made when he went abroad. After a while we moved into the next room, where Miss Walpole-Wilson was describing experiences in the Far East. When I left, at a comparatively early hour, she was still chronicling the occasion when she had trudged across the face of Asia.

'You must come again soon,' said Mrs. Widmerpool. 'We never managed to have our chat about books.'

During the descent in the lift, still groaning precariously, thinking over Widmerpool and his mother, and their life together, it came to me in a flash who it was Mrs. Andriadis had resembled when I had seen her at the party in Hill Street. She recalled, so I could now see, two persons I had met; and although these two were different enough from each other, their elements, or at least some of them, were combined in her. These two were Stringham's mother and her former secretary, Miss Weedon. I remembered the dialogue that had taken place when Stringham had quarrelled with Mrs. Andriadis at the end of that night. 'As you wish, Milly,' he had said; just as I could imagine him, in his younger days, saying to Miss Weedon: 'As you wish, Tuffy', at the termination of some trivial dispute at his home.

It was a moonlight night. That region has an atmosphere peculiar to itself, separated in spirit as far from the historic gloom of Westminster's more antique streets as from the *louche* seediness and Victorian decay of the wide squares of Pimlico beyond Vauxhall Bridge Road. For some reason, perhaps the height of the tower, or more probably the prodigal inappropriateness to London of the whole structure's architectural style, the area immediately adjacent to the cathedral imparts a sense of vertigo, a dizziness almost alarming in its intensity: lines and curves of red brick appearing to meet in a kind of vortex, rather than to be ranged in normal forms of perspective. I had noticed this before when entering the terrain from the north, and now the buildings seemed that evening almost as if they might swing slowly forward from their bases, and downward in complete prostration.

Certain stages of experience might be compared with the game of Russian billiards, played (as I used to play with Jean, when the time came) on those small green tables, within the secret recesses of which, at the termination of a given passage of time—a quarter of an hour, I think—the hidden gate goes down; after the descent of which, the coloured balls return no longer to the slot to be replayed; and all scoring is doubled. This is perhaps an image of how we live. For reasons not always at the time explicable, there are specific occasions when events begin suddenly to take on a significance previously unsuspected; so that, before we really know where we are, life seems to have begun in earnest at last, and we ourselves, scarcely aware that any change has taken place, are careering uncontrollably down the slippery avenues of eternity.

The Acceptance World

For
Adrian

1.

ONCE in a way, perhaps as often as every eighteen months, an invitation to Sunday afternoon tea at the Ufford would arrive on a postcard addressed in Uncle Giles's neat, constricted handwriting. This private hotel in Bayswater, where he stayed during comparatively rare visits to London, occupied two corner houses in a latent, almost impenetrable region west of the Queen's Road. Not only the battleship-grey colour, but also something at once angular and top-heavy about the block's configuration as a whole, suggested a large vessel moored in the street. Even within, at least on the ground floor, the Ufford conveyed some reminder of life at sea, though certainly of no luxuriously equipped liner; at best one of those superannuated schooners of Conrad's novels, perhaps decorated years before as a rich man's yacht, now tarnished by the years and reduced to ignoble uses like traffic in tourists, pilgrims, or even illegal immigrants; pervaded—to borrow an appropriately Conradian mannerism—with uneasy memories of the strife of men. That was the feeling the Ufford gave, riding at anchor on the sluggish Bayswater tides.

To this last retrospective, and decidedly depressing, aspect of the hotel's character, Uncle Giles himself had no doubt in a small degree contributed. Certainly he had done nothing to release the place from its air of secret, melancholy guilt. The passages seemed catacombs of a hell assigned to the subdued regret of those who had lacked in life the income to which they felt themselves entitled; this suspicion that the two houses were an abode of the dead being increased by the fact that no one was ever to be seen about, even at the reception desk. The floors of the formerly separate buildings, constructed at different levels, were now joined by unexpected steps and narrow, steeply slanting passages. The hall was always wrapped in silence; letters in the green baize board criss-crossed with tape remained yellowing, for ever unclaimed, unread, unchanged.

However, Uncle Giles himself was attached to these quarters. 'The old pub suits me,' I had once heard him mutter thickly under his breath, high commendation from one so sparing of praise; although of course the Ufford, like every other institution with which he came in contact, would fall into disfavour from time to time, usually on account of some 'incivility' offered him by the management or staff. For example, Vera, a waitress, was an old enemy, who would often attempt to exclude him from his favourite table by the door 'where you could get a breath of air'. At least once, in a fit of pique, he had gone to the De Tabley across the road; but sooner or later he was back again, grudgingly admitting that the Ufford, although going downhill from the days when he had first known the establishment, was undoubtedly convenient for the purposes of his aimless, uncomfortable, but in a sense dedicated life.

Dedicated, it might well be asked, to what? The question would not be easy to answer. Dedicated, perhaps, to his own egotism; his determination to be—without adequate moral or intellectual equipment—absolutely different from everybody else. That might offer one explanation of his behaviour. At any rate, he was propelled along from pillar to post by some force that seemed stronger than a mere instinct to keep himself alive; and the Ufford was the nearest thing he recognised as a home. He would leave his luggage there for weeks, months, even years on end; complaining afterwards, when he unpacked, that dinner-jackets were not only creased but also ravaged by moth, or that oil had been allowed to soak through the top of his cane trunk and ruin the tropical clothing within; still worse —though exact proof was always lacking—that the pieces left in the hotel's keeping had actually been reduced in number by at least one canvas valise, leather hat-box, or uniform-case in black tin.

On most of the occasions when I visted the Ufford, halls and reception rooms were so utterly deserted that the interior might almost have been Uncle Giles's private residence. Had he been a rich bachelor, instead of a poor one, he would probably have lived in a house of just that sort: bare: anonymous: old-fashioned: draughty: with heavy mahogany cabinets and sideboards spaced out at intervals in passages and on landings; nothing that could possibly commit him to any specific opinion, beyond general disapproval of the way the world was run.

We always had tea in an apartment called 'the lounge', the back half of a large double drawing-room, the inner doors of which were kept permanently closed, thus detaching 'the lounge' from 'the writing-room', the half overlooking the street. (Perhaps, like the doors of the Temple of Janus, they were closed only in time of Peace; because, years later, when I saw the Ufford in war-time these particular doors had been thrown wide open.) The lace-curtained windows of the lounge gave on to a well; a bleak outlook, casting the gloom of perpetual night, or of a sky for ever dark with rain. Even in summer the electric light had to be switched on during tea.

The wallpaper's intricate floral design in blue, grey and green ran upwards from a cream-coloured lincrusta dado to a cornice also of cream lincrusta. The pattern of flowers, infinitely faded, closely matched the chintz-covered sofa and armchairs, which were roomy and unexpectedly comfortable. A palm in a brass pot with ornamental handles stood in one corner: here and there were small tables of Moorish design upon each of which had been placed a heavy white globular ash-tray, equipped with an attachment upon which to rest a cigar or cigarette. Several circular gilt looking-glasses hung about the walls, but there was only one picture, an engraving placed over the fireplace, of Landseer's *Bolton Abbey in the Olden Time*. Beneath this crowded scene of medieval plenty—presenting a painful contrast with the Ufford's *cuisine*—a clock, so constructed that pendulum and internal works were visible under its glass dome, stood eternally at twenty minutes past five. Two radiators kept the room reasonably warm in winter, and the coal, surrounded in the fireplace with crinkled pink paper, was never alight. No sign of active life was apparent in the room except for several much-thumbed copies of *The Lady* lying in a heap on one of the Moorish tables.

'I think we shall have this place to ourselves,' Uncle Giles used invariably to remark, as if we had come there by chance on a specially lucky day, 'so that we shall be able to talk over our business without disturbance. Nothing I hate more than having some damn'd fellow listening to every word I say.'

Of late years his affairs, in so far as his relatives knew anything of them, had become to some extent stabilised, although invitations to tea were inclined to coincide with periodical efforts to extract slightly more than his agreed share from 'the Trust'. Either his path had grown more tranquil than formerly, or crises were at longer intervals and apparently less violent. This change did not imply that he approached life itself in a more conciliatory spirit, or had altered his conviction that worldly success was a matter of 'influence'. The country's abandondment of the Gold Standard at about this time—and the formation of the

National Government—had particularly annoyed him. He propagated contrary, and far more revolutionary, economic theories of his own as to how the European monetary situation should be regulated.

He was, however, a shade less abrupt in personal dealings. The anxiety of his relations that he might one day get into a really serious financial tangle, never entirely at rest, had considerably abated in comparison with time past; nor had there been recently any of those once recurrent rumours that he was making preparations for an unsuitable marriage. He still hovered about the Home Counties, seen intermittently at Reading, Aylesbury, Chelmsford, or Dover—and once so far afield as the Channel Islands—his 'work' now connected with the administration of some charitable organisation which paid a small salary and allowed a reasonably high expense account.

I was not sure, however, in the light of an encounter during one of my visits to the Ufford, that Uncle Giles, although by then just about in his sixties, had wholly relinquished all thought of marriage. There were circumstances that suggested a continued interest in such a project, or at least that he still enjoyed playing with the idea of matrimony when in the company of the opposite sex.

On that particular occasion, the three fish-paste sandwiches and slice of seed cake finished, talk about money was about to begin. Uncle Giles himself never ate tea, though he would usually remove the lid of the teapot on its arrival and comment: 'A good sergeant-major's brew you've got there,' sometimes sending the tea back to the kitchen if something about the surface of the liquid specially displeased him. He had blown his nose once or twice as a preliminary to financial discussion, when the door of the lounge quietly opened and a lady wearing a large hat and purple dress came silently into the room.

She was between forty and fifty, perhaps nearer fifty, though possibly her full bosom and style of dress, at a period when it was fashionable to be thin, made her seem a year or two older than her age. Dark red hair piled high on her head in what seemed to me an outmoded style, and good, curiously blurred features from which looked out immense, misty, hazel eyes, made her appearance striking. Her movements, too, were unusual. She seemed to glide rather than walk across the carpet, giving the impression almost of a phantom, a being from another world; this illusion no doubt heightened by the mysterious, sombre *ambiance* of the Ufford, and the fact that I had scarcely ever before seen anybody but Uncle Giles himself, or an occasional member of the hotel's staff, inhabit its rooms.

'Why, Myra,' said Uncle Giles, rising hurriedly, and smoothing the worn herring-bone tweed of his trouser leg, 'I thought you said you were going to be out all day.'

He sounded on the whole pleased to see her, although perhaps a trifle put out that she should have turned up just at that moment. He would very occasionally, and with due warning, produce an odd male acquaintance for a minute or two, never longer, usually an elderly man, probably a retired accountant, said to possess 'a very good head for business', but never before had I seen him in the company of a woman not a member of the family. Now as usual his habitual air of hardly suppressed irritation tended to cloak any minor emotion by the strength of its cosmic resentment. All the same, a very rare thing with him, faint patches of colour showed for a moment in his cheeks, disappearing almost immediately, as he fingered his moustache with a withered, skinny hand, as if uncertain how best to approach the situation.

'This is my nephew Nicholas,' he said; and to me: 'I don't think you have met Mrs. Erdleigh.'

He spoke slowly, as if, after much thought, he had chosen me from an immense number of other nephews to show her at least one good example of what he was forced to endure in the way of relatives. Mrs. Erdleigh gazed at me for a second or two before taking my hand, continuing to encircle its fingers even after I had made a slight effort to relax my own grasp. Her palm felt warm and soft, and seemed to exude a mysterious tremor. Scent, vaguely Oriental in its implications, rolled across from her in great stifling waves. The huge liquid eyes seemed to look deep down into my soul, and far, far beyond towards nameless, unexplored vistas of the infinite.

'But he belongs to another order,' she stated at once.

She spoke without surprise and apparently quite decisively; indeed as if the conclusion had been the logical inference of our hands' prolonged contact. At the same time she turned her head towards Uncle Giles, who made a deprecatory sound in his throat, though without venturing to confirm or deny her hypothesis. It was evident that he and I were placed violently in contrast together in her mind, or rather, I supposed, her inner consciousness. Whether she referred to some indefinable difference of class or bearing, or whether the distinction was in moral standards, was not at all clear. Nor had I any idea whether the comparison was in my uncle's favour or my own. In any case I could not help feeling that the assertion, however true, was untimely as an opening gambit after introduction.

I had half expected Uncle Giles to take offence at the words, but, on the contrary, he seemed not at all annoyed or surprised; even appearing rather more resigned than before to Mrs. Erdleigh's presence. It was almost as if he now knew that the worst was over; that from this moment relations between the three of us would grow easier.

'Shall I ring for some more tea?' he asked, without in any way pressing the proposal by tone of voice.

Mrs. Erdleigh shook her head dreamily. She had taken the place beside me on the sofa.

'I have already had tea,' she said softly, as if that meal had been for her indeed a wonderful experience.

'Are you sure?' asked my uncle, wonderingly; confirming by his manner that such a phenomenon was scarcely credible.

'Truly.'

'Well, I won't, then.'

'No, please, Captain Jenkins.'

I had the impression that the two of them knew each other pretty well; certainly much better than either was prepared at that moment to admit in front of me. After the first surprise of seeing her, Uncle Giles no longer called Mrs. Erdleigh 'Myra', and he now began to utter a disconnected series of conventional remarks, as if to display how formal was in fact their relationship. He explained for the hundredth time how he never took tea as a meal, however much encouraged by those addicted to the habit, commented in desultory phrases on the weather, and sketched in for her information a few of the outward circumstances of my own life and employment.

'Art books, is it?' he said. 'Is that what you told me your firm published?'

'That's it.'

'He sells art books,' said Uncle Giles, as if he were explaining to some visitor the strange habits of the aborigines in the land where he had chosen to settle.

'And other sorts too,' I added, since he made the publication of art books sound so shameful a calling.

In answering, I addressed myself to Mrs. Erdleigh, rather in the way that a witness, cross-questioned by counsel, replies to the judge. She seemed hardly to take in these trivialities, though she smiled all the while, quietly, almost rapturously, rather as if she were enjoying a warm bath after a trying day's shopping. I noticed that she wore no wedding ring, carrying in its place on her third finger a large opal, enclosed by a massive gold serpent swallowing its own tail.

'I see you are wondering about my opal,' she said, suddenly catching my eye.

'I was admiring the ring.'

'Of course I was born in October.'

'Otherwise it would be unlucky?'

'But *not* under the Scales.'

'I am the Archer.'

I had learned that fact a week or two before from the astrological column of a Sunday newspaper. This seemed a good moment to make use of the knowledge. Mrs. Erdleigh was evidently pleased even with this grain of esoteric apprehension. She took my hand once more, and held the open palm towards the light.

'You interest me,' she said.

'What do you see?'

'Many things.'

'Nice ones?'

'Some good, some less good.'

'Tell me about them.'

'Shall I?'

Uncle Giles fidgeted. I thought at first he was bored at being momentarily out of the conversation, because, in his self-contained, unostentatious way, he could never bear to be anything less than the centre of interest; even when that position might possess an unpleasant significance as sometimes happened at family gatherings. However, another matter was on his mind.

'Why not put the cards out?' he broke in all at once with forced cheerfulness. 'That is, if you're in the mood.'

Mrs. Erdleigh did not reply immediately to this suggestion. She continued to smile, and to investigate the lines of my palm.

'Shall I?' she again said softly, almost to herself. 'Shall I ask the cards about you both?'

I added my request to my uncle's. To have one's fortune told gratifies, after all, most of the superficial demands of egotism. There is no mystery about the eternal popularity of divination. All the same, I was surprised that Uncle Giles should countenance such pursuits. I felt sure he would have expressed loud contempt if anyone else had been described to him as indulging in efforts to foretell the future. Mrs. Erdleigh pondered a few seconds, then rose, still smiling, and glided away across the room. When she had shut the door we remained in silence for some minutes. Uncles Giles grunted several times. I suspected he might be feeling rather ashamed of himself for having put this request to her. I made some enquiries about his friend.

'Myra Erdleigh?' he said, as if it were strange to meet anyone unaware of Mrs. Erdleigh's circumstances. 'She's a widow, of course. Husband did something out in the East. Chinese Customs, was it? Burma Police? Something of the sort.'

'And she lives here?'

'A wonderful fortune-teller,' said Uncle Giles, ignoring the last question. 'Really wonderful. I let her tell mine once in a while. It gives her pleasure, you know—and it interests me to see how often she is right. Not that I expect she will have much to promise me at my time of life.'

He sighed; though not, I thought, without a certain self-satisfaction. I wondered how long they had known one another. Long enough, apparently, for the question of fortune-telling to have cropped up between them a number of times.

'Does she tell fortunes professionally?'

'Has done, I believe, in the past,' Uncle Giles admitted. 'But of course there wouldn't be any question of a five guinea consultation fee this evening.'

He gave a short, angry laugh to show that he was joking, adding rather guiltily: 'I don't think anyone is likely to come in. Even if they did, we could always pretend we were taking a hand at cut-throat.'

I wondered if Mrs. Erdleigh used Tarot cards. If so, three-handed bridge might not look very convincing to an intruder; for example, should one of us try to trump 'the drowned Phoenician Sailor' with 'the Hanged Man'. In any case, there seemed no reason why we should not have our fortunes told in the lounge. That would at least be employing the room to some purpose. The manner in which Uncle Giles had spoken made me think he must enjoy 'putting the cards out' more than he cared to acknowledge.

Mrs. Erdleigh did not come back to the room immediately. We awaited her return in an atmosphere of expectancy induced by my uncle's unconcealed excitement. I had never before seen him in this state. He was breathing heavily. Still Mrs. Erdleigh did not appear. She must have remained away at least ten minutes or a quarter of an hour. Uncle Giles began humming to himself. I picked up one of the tattered copies of *The Lady*. At last the door opened once more. Mrs. Erdleigh had removed her hat, renewed the blue make-up under her eyes, and changed into a dress of sage green. She was certainly a conspicuous, perhaps even a faintly sinister figure. The cards she brought with her were grey and greasy with use. They were not a Tarot pack. After a brief discussion it was agreed that Uncle Giles should be the first to look into the future.

'You don't think it has been too short an interval?' he asked, obviously with some last-moment apprehensions.

'Nearly six months,' said Mrs. Erdleigh, in a more matter-of-fact voice than that she had used hitherto; adding, as she began to shuffle the pack: 'Although, of course, one should not question the cards too often, as I have sometimes warned you.'

Uncle Giles slowly rubbed his hands together, watching her closely as if to make certain there was no deception, and to ensure that she did not deliberately slip in a card that would bring him bad luck. The rite had something solemn about it: something infinitely ancient, as if Mrs. Erdleigh had existed long before the gods we knew, even those belonging to the most distant past. I asked if she always used the same pack.

'Always the same dear cards,' she said, smiling; and to my uncle, more seriously: 'Was there anything special?'

'Usually need to look ahead in business,' he said, gruffly. 'That would be Diamonds, I suppose. Or Clubs?'

Mrs. Erdleigh continued to smile without revealing any of her secrets, while she set the cards in various small heaps on one of the Moorish tables. Uncle Giles kept a sharp eye on her, still rubbing his hands, making me almost as nervous as himself at the thought of what the predictions could involve. There might always be grave possibilities to be faced for someone of his erratic excursion through life. However, I was naturally much more interested in what she would say about myself. Indeed, I was then so far from grasping the unchanging mould of human nature that I found it even surprising that at his age he could presuppose anything to be called 'a future'. So far as I myself was concerned, on the other hand, there seemed no reason to curb the wildest absurdity of fancy as to what might happen the very next moment.

However, when Uncle Giles's cards were examined, their secrets did not appear to be anything like so ominous as might have been feared. There was a good deal of opposition to his 'plans', perhaps not surprisingly; also, it was true, much gossip, even some calumny surrounded him.

'Don't forget you have Saturn in the Twelfth House,' Mrs. Erdleigh remarked in an aside. 'Secret enemies.'

As against these threatening possibilities, someone was going to give him a present, probably money; a small sum, but acceptable. It looked as if this gift might come from a woman. Uncle Giles, whose cheeks had become furrowed at the thought of all the gossip and calumny, cheered up a little at this. He was told he had a good friend in a woman—possibly the one who was to make him a present—the Queen of Hearts, in fact. This, too, Uncle Giles accepted willingly enough.

'That was the marriage card that turned up, wasn't it?' he asked at one point.

'Could be.'

'Not necessarily?'

'Other influences must be taken into consideration.'

Neither of them commented on this matter, though their words evidently had regard to a question already reconnoitred in the past. For a moment or two there was perhaps a faint sense of additional tension. Then the cards were collected and shuffled again.

'Now let's hear about *him*,' said Uncle Giles.

He spoke more with relief that his own ordeal was over, rather than because he was seriously expressing any burning interest in my own fate.

'I expect *he* wants to hear about *love*,' said Mrs. Erdleigh, beginning to titter to herself again.

Uncle Giles, to show general agreement with this supposition, grunted a disapproving laugh. I attempted some formal denial, although it was perfectly true that the thought was uppermost in my mind. The situation in that quarter was at the moment confused. In fact, so far as 'love' was concerned, I had been living for some years past in a rather makeshift manner. This was not because I felt the matter to be of little interest, like a man who hardly cares what he eats provided hunger is satisfied, or one prepared to discuss painting, should the subject arise, though never tempted to enter a picture gallery. On the contrary, my interest in love was keen enough, but the thing itself seemed not particularly simple to come by. In that direction, other people appeared more easily satisfied than myself. That at least was how it seemed to me. And yet, in spite of some show of picking and choosing, my experiences, on subsequent examination, were certainly no more admirable than those to which neither Templer nor Barnby, for example, would have given a second thought; they were merely fewer in number. I hoped the cards would reveal nothing too humiliating to my own self-esteem.

'There is a link between us,' said Mrs. Erdleigh, as she set out the little heaps. 'At present I cannot see what it is—but there is a link.'

This supposed connexion evidently puzzled her.

'You are musical?'

'No.'

'Then you write—I think you have written a book?'

'Yes.'

'You live between two worlds,' she said. 'Perhaps even more than two worlds. You cannot always surmount your feelings.'

I could think of no possible reply to this indictment.

'You are thought cold, but you possess deep affections, sometimes for people worthless in themselves. Often you are at odds with those who might help you. You like women, and they like you, but you often find the company of men more amusing. You expect too much, and yet you are also too resigned. You must try to understand life.'

Somewhat awed by this searching, even severe analysis, I promised I would do better in future.

'People can only be themselves,' she said. 'If they possessed the qualities you desire in them, they would be different people.'

'That is what I should like them to be.'

'Sometimes you are too serious, sometimes not serious enough.'

'So I have been told.'

'You must make a greater effort in life.'

'I can see that.'

These strictures certainly seemed just enough; and yet any change of direction would be hard to achieve. Perhaps I was irrevocably transfixed, just as she described, half-way between dissipation and diffidence. While I considered the matter, she passed on to more circumstantial things. It turned out that a fair woman was not very pleased with me; and a dark one almost equally vexed. Like my uncle—perhaps some family failing common to both of us—I was encompassed by gossip.

'They do not signify at all,' said Mrs. Erdleigh, referring thus rather ruthlessly to the women of disparate colouring. 'This is a much more important lady—medium hair, I should say—and I think you have run across her once or twice before, though not recently. But there seems to be another man interested, too. He might even be a husband. You don't like him much. He is tallish, I should guess. Fair, possibly red hair. In business. Often goes abroad.'

I began to turn over in my mind every woman I had ever met.

'There is a small matter in *your* business that is going to cause inconvenience,' she went on. 'It has to do with an elderly man—and two young ones connected with him.'

'Are you sure it is not two elderly men and one young man?'

It had immediately struck me that she might be *en rapport* with my firm's growing difficulties regarding St. John Clarke's introduction to *The Art of Horace Isbister*. The elderly men would be St. John Clarke and Isbister themselves—or perhaps St. John Clarke and one of the partners—and the young man was, of course, St. John Clarke's secretary, Mark Members.

'I see the two young men quite plainly,' she said. 'Rather a troublesome couple, I should say.'

This was all credible enough, including the character sketch, though perhaps not very interesting. Such trivial comment, mixed with a few home truths of a personal nature, provide, I had already learnt, the commonplaces of fortune-telling. Such was all that remained in my mind of what Mrs. Erdleigh prophesied on that occasion. She may have foretold more. If so, her words were forgotten by me. Indeed, I was not greatly struck by the insight she had shown; although she impressed me as a woman of dominant, even oddly attractive personality, in spite of a certain absurdity of demeanour. She herself seemed well pleased with the performance.

At the end of her sitting it was time to go. I was dining that evening with Barnby, picking him up at his studio. I rose to say good-bye, thanking her for the trouble she had taken.

'We shall meet again.'

'I hope so.'

'In about a year from now.'

'Perhaps before.'

'No,' she said, smiling with the complacence of one to whom the secrets of human existence had been long since occultly revealed. 'Not before.'

I did not press the point. Uncle Giles accompanied me to the hall. He had by then returned to the subject of money, the *mystique* of which was at least as absorbing to him as the rites upon which we had been engaged.

'. . . and then one could not foresee that San Pedro Warehouses Deferred would become entirely valueless,' he was saying. 'The expropriations were merely the result of a liberal dictator coming in—got to face these changes. There was one of those quite natural revulsions against foreign capital. . . .'

He broke off. Supposing our meeting now at an end, I turned from him, and made preparations to plunge through the opaque doors into the ocean of streets, in the grey ebb and flow of which the Ufford floated idly upon the swell. Uncle Giles put his hand on my arm.

'By the way,' he said, 'I don't think I should mention to your parents the matter of having your fortune told. I don't want them to blame me for leading you into bad habits, superstitious ones, I mean. Besides, they might not altogether approve of Myra Erdleigh.'

His brown, wrinkled face puckered slightly. He still retained some vestige of good looks, faintly military in character. Perhaps this hint, increased with age, of past regimental distinction in some forgotten garrison town was what Mrs. Erdleigh admired in him. Neither my parents, nor any of the rest of Uncle Giles's relations, were likely to worry about his behaviour if the worst he ever did was to persuade other members of the family to have their fortunes told. However, recognising that silence upon the subject of Mrs. Erdleigh might be a reasonable request, I assured him that I would not speak of our meeting.

I was curious to know what their relationship might be. Possibly they were planning marriage. The 'marriage card' had clearly been of interest to my uncle. There was something vaguely 'improper' about Mrs. Erdleigh, almost deliberately so; but impropriety of an unremembered, Victorian kind: a villa in St. John's Wood, perhaps, and eccentric doings behind locked doors and lace curtains on sultry summer afternoons. Uncle Giles was known to possess a capacity for making himself acceptable to ladies of all sorts, some of whom had even been rumoured to contribute at times a trifle towards his expenses; those many expenses to which he was subject, and never tired of detailing. Mrs. Erdleigh looked not so much 'well off' as eminently capable of pursuing her own interests effectively. Possibly Uncle Giles considered her a good investment. She, on her side, no doubt had her uses for him. Apart from material considerations, he was obviously fascinated by her occult powers, with which he seemed almost religiously preoccupied. Like all such associations, this one probably included a fierce struggle of wills. It would be interesting to see who won the day. On the whole, my money was on Mrs. Erdleigh. I thought about the pair of them for a day or two, and then they both passed from my mind.

As I made my way towards the neighbourhood of Fitzroy Square, experiencing as usual that feeling of release that always followed parting company with Uncle Giles, I returned to the subject of future business difficulties foretold in the cards. These, as I have said, had seemed to refer to St. John Clarke's introduction to *The Art of Horace Isbister,* already a tiresome affair, quite likely to pass from bad to worse. The introduction had been awaited for at least a year now, and we seemed no nearer getting the manuscript. The delay caused inconvenience at the office, since blocks had been made for a series of forty-eight monochrome plates and four three-colour half-tones; to which St. John Clarke was to add four or five thousand words of biographical reminiscence.

Isbister himself had been ill, on and off, for some little time, so that it had not been possible through him to bring pressure to bear on St. John Clarke, although the painter was the novelist's old friend. They may even have been at school together. Isbister had certainly executed several portraits of St. John Clarke, one of them (the sitter in a high, stiff collar and limp spotted bow tie) showing him as quite a young man. The personal legend of each, for publicity purposes, took the form of a country lad who had 'made good', and they would occasionally refer in print to their shared early struggles. St. John Clarke, in the first instance, had positively gone out of his way to arrange that the introduction should be written by himself, rather than by some suitable hack from amongst the Old Guard of the art critics, several of whom were in much more need of the fee, not a very princely one, that my firm was paying for the work.

That a well-known novelist should take on something that seemed to call in at least a small degree for an accredited expert on painting was not so surprising as might at first sight have appeared, because St. John Clarke, although certainly quieter of late years, had in the past often figured in public controversy regarding the arts. He had been active, for example, in the years before the war in supporting the erection of the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens: a dozen years later, vigorously opposing the establishment of Rima in the bird sanctuary of the same neighbourhood. At one of the Walpole-Wilsons' dinner parties I could remember talk of St. John Clarke's intervention in the question of the Haig memorial, then much discussed. These examples suggest a special interest in sculpture, but St. John Clarke often expressed himself with equal force regarding painting and music. He had certainly been associated with opposition to the Post-Impressionists in 1910: also in leading some minor skirmish in operatic circles soon after the Armistice.

I myself could not have denied a taste for St. John Clarke's novels at about the period when leaving school. In fact Le Bas, my housemaster, finding me reading one of them, had taken it from my hand and glanced through the pages.

'Rather morbid stuff, isn't it?' he had remarked.

It was a statement rather than a question, though I doubt whether Le Bas had ever read any of St. John Clarke's novels himself. He merely felt, in one sense correctly, that there was something wrong with them. At the same time he made no attempt to disallow, or confiscate, the volume. However, I had long preferred to forget the days when I had regarded St. John Clarke's work as fairly daring. In fact I had become accustomed to refer to him and his books with the savagery which, when one is a young man, seems—perhaps rightly—the only proper and serious attitude towards anyone, most of all an older person, practising the arts in an inept or outworn manner.

Although a few years younger than the generation of H. G. Wells and J. M. Barrie, St. John Clarke was connected in my mind with those two authors, chiefly because I had once seen a snapshot of the three of them reproduced in the memoirs of an Edwardian hostess. The photograph had probably been taken by the lady herself. The writers were standing in a group on the lawn of a huge, rather gracelessly pinnacled country seat. St. John Clarke was a little to one side of the picture. A tall, cadaverous man, with spectacles and long hair, a panama hat at the back of his head, he leant on a stick, surveying his more diminutive fellow guests with an expression of uneasy interest; rather as if he were an explorer or missionary, who had just coaxed from the jungle these powerful witch-doctors of some neighbouring, and on the whole unfriendly, tribe. He seemed, by his expression, to feel that constant supervision of the other two was necessary to foil misbehaviour or escape. There was something of the priest about his appearance.

The picture had interested me because, although I had already read books by these three writers, all had inspired me with the same sense that theirs was not the kind of writing I liked. Later, as I have said, I came round for a time to St. John Clarke with that avid literary consumption of the immature which cannot precisely be regarded either as enjoyment or the reverse. The flavour of St. John Clarke's novels is hard to describe to those unfamiliar with them, perhaps on account of their own inexactitudes of thought and feeling. Although no longer looked upon as a 'serious' writer, I believe he still has his readers in number not to be disregarded. In his early years he had been treated with respect by most of the eminent critics of his time, and to the day of his death he hoped in vain for the Nobel Prize. Mark Members, his secretary, used to say that once, at least, that award had seemed within his grasp.

We had never met, but I had seen him in Bond Street, walking with Members. Though his hair was by then white and straggling, he still looked remarkably like his picture in the book of memoirs. He was wearing a grey soft hat, rather high in the crown with a band of the same colour, a black suit and buff double-breasted waistcoat. As he strolled along he glanced rather furtively about him, seeming scarcely aware of Members, sauntering by his side. His features bore that somewhat exasperated expression that literary men so often acquire in middle life. For a second I had been reminded of my old acquaintance, Mr. Deacon, but a Mr. Deacon far more capable of coping with the world. Members, in his black homburg, swinging a rolled umbrella, looked quite boyish beside him.

St. John Clarke's reputation as a novelist had been made by the time he was in his thirties. For many years past he had lived the life of a comparatively rich bachelor, able to indulge most of his whims, seeing only the people who suited him, and making his way in what he used to call, 'rather lovingly', so Members said, the *'beau monde'*. Even in those days, critics malicious enough to pull his books to pieces in public were never tired of pointing out that investigations of human conduct, based on assumptions accepted when St. John Clarke was a young man, were hopelessly out of date. However, fortunately his sales did not depend on favourable reviews, although, in spite of this, he was said to be—like so many financially successful writers—painfully sensitive to hostile criticism. It was perhaps partly for the reason that he felt himself no longer properly appreciated that he had announced he would write no more novels. In due course memoirs would appear, though he confessed he was in no hurry to compose them.

His procrastination regarding the introduction had, therefore, nothing to do with pressure of work. Putting the Isbister task in its least idealistic and disinterested light, it would give him a chance to talk about himself, a perfectly legitimate treat he was as a rule unwilling to forgo. Friendship made him a suitable man for the job. Those who enjoy finding landmarks common to different forms of art might even have succeeded in tracing a certain similarity of approach tenuously relating the novels of St. John Clarke with the portrait painting of Isbister. The delay was, indeed, hard to explain.

There had been, however, various rumours recently current regarding changes supposedly taking place in St. John Clarke's point of view. Lately, he had been seen at parties in Bloomsbury, and elsewhere, surrounded by people who were certainly not readers of his books. This was thought to show the influence of Members, who was said to be altering his employer's outlook. Indeed, something suggesting a change of front in that quarter had been brought to my own notice in a very personal manner.

St. John Clarke had contributed an article to a New York paper in which he spoke of the younger writers of that moment. Amongst a rather oddly assorted collection of names, he had commented, at least by implication favourably, upon a novel of my own, published a month or two before—the 'book' to which Mrs. Erdleigh had referred. Latterly, St. John Clarke had rarely occupied himself with occasional journalism, and in print he had certainly never before shown himself well disposed towards a younger generation. His remarks, brief and relatively guarded though they had been, not unnaturally aroused my interest, especially because any recommendation from that quarter was so entirely unexpected. I found myself looking for excuses to cover what still seemed to me his own shortcomings as a novelist.

As I turned over these things in my mind, on the way to Barnby's studio, it struck me that Barnby himself might be able to tell me something of St. John Clarke as a person; for, although unlikely it was that Barnby had read the novels, the two of them might well have met in the widely different circles Barnby frequented. I began to make enquiries soon after my arrival there.

Barnby rubbed his short, stubby hair, worn *en brosse,* which, with his blue overalls, gave him the look of a *sommelier* at an expensive French restaurant. By then we had known each other for several years. He had moved house more than once since the days when he had lived above Mr. Deacon's antique shop, emigrating for a time as far north as Camden Town. Still unmarried, his many adventures with women were a perpetual topic between us. In terms of literature, Barnby might have found a place among Stendhal's heroes, those power-conscious young men, anxious to achieve success with women without the banal expedient of 'falling in love': a state, of course, necessarily implying, on the part of the competitor, a depletion, if not entire abrogation, of 'the will'. Barnby was, on the whole, more successful than his Stendhalian prototypes, and he was certainly often 'in love'. All the same, he belonged in that group. Like Valmont in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses,* he set store 'upon what terms' he possessed a woman, seeking a relationship in which sensuality merged with power, rather than engaging in their habitual conflict.

Like everyone else, at that moment, Barnby was complaining of 'the slump', although his own reputation as a painter had been rising steadily during the previous two or three years. The murals designed by him for the Donners-Brebner Building had received, one way and another, a great deal of public attention; the patronage of Sir Magnus Donners himself in this project having even survived Barnby's love affair with Baby Wentworth, supposed mistress of Sir Magnus. Indeed, it had been suggested that 'the Great Industrialist', as Barnby used to call him, had been glad to make use of that or some other indiscretion, soon after the completion of the murals, as an excuse for bringing to an end his own association with Mrs. Wentworth. There appeared to be no bad feeling between any of the persons concerned in this triangular adjustment. Sir Magnus was now seen about with a *jolie laide* called Matilda Wilson; although, as formerly in the Baby Wentworth connexion, little or nothing definite was known of this much discussed liaison. Baby herself had married an Italian and was living in Rome.

'You'll never get that introduction now,' Barnby said, after listening to my story. 'St. John Clarke in these days would think poor old Isbister much too *pompier*.'

'But they are still great friends.'

'What does that matter?'

'Besides, St. John Clarke doesn't know a Van Dyck from a Van Dongen.'

'Ah, but he does now,' said Barnby. 'That's where you are wrong. You are out of date. St. John Clarke has undergone a conversion.'

'To what?'

'Modernism.'

'Steel chairs?'

'No doubt they will come.'

'Pictures made of shells and newspaper?'

'At present he is at a slightly earlier stage.'

I asked for further details.

'The outward and visible sign of St. John Clarke's conversion,' said Barnby, portentously, 'is that he has indeed become a collector of modern pictures—though, as I understand it, he still loves them on this side Surrealism. As a matter of fact he bought a picture of mine last week.'

'This conversion explains his friendly notice of my book.'

'It does.'

'I see.'

'You yourself supposed that something unusual in the quality of your writing had touched him?'

'Naturally.'

'I fear it is all part of a much larger design.'

'Just as good for me.'

'Doubtless.'

All the same, I felt slightly less complimented than before. The situation was now clear. The rumours already current about St. John Clarke, less explicit than Barnby's words, had equally suggested some kind of intellectual upheaval. Isbister's portraits of politicians, business men and ecclesiastics, executed with emphatic, almost aggressive disregard for any development of painting that could possibly be called 'modern', would now certainly no longer appeal to his old friend. At the same time the ray of St. John Clarke's approval directed towards myself, until then so phenomenal, was in fact only one minute aspect of the novelist's new desire to ally himself with forces against which, for many years, he had openly warred.

'That secretary of his even suggested Clarke might commission a portrait.'

'It is Members, of course, who has brought this about.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Barnby. 'This sort of thing often happens to successful people when they begin to get old. They suddenly realise what dull lives they have always led.'

'But St. John Clarke hasn't led a dull life. I should have thought he had done almost everything he wanted—with just sufficient heights still to climb to give continued zest to his efforts.'

'I agree in one sense,' said Barnby. 'But for a man of his comparative intelligence, St. John Clarke has always limited himself to the dullest of dull ideas—in order to make money, of course, a very reasonable aim, thereby avoiding giving offence to his public. Think of the platitudes of his books. True, I have only read a few pages of one of them, but that was sufficient. And then that professional world of bogus artists and bogus writers which he himself frequents. No wonder he wants to escape from it once in a while, and meet an occasional duchess. Men like him always feel they have missed something. You can leave the arts alone, but it is very dangerous to play tricks with them. After all, you yourself tell me he has agreed to write an introduction to the work of Isbister—and then you ask me why I consider St. John Clarke leads a dull life.'

'But will this new move make his life any better?'

'Why not?'

'He must always have been picture-blind.'

'Some of my best patrons are that. Don't be so idealistic.'

'But if you are not really interested in pictures, liking a Bonnard doesn't make you any happier than liking a Bouguereau.'

'The act of conversion does, though.'

'Besides, this will open up a new, much more lively world of social life. One must admit that.'

'Of course.'

'You are probably right.'

Perhaps it was surprising that nothing of the kind had happened earlier, because St. John Clarke had employed a whole dynasty of secretaries before Members. But former secretaries had been expected to work hard in the background, rather than to exist as an important element in the household. Members had built up the post to something far more influential than anything achieved by those who had gone before him. The fact was that, as St. John Clarke grew older, he wrote less, while his desire to cut a social figure gained in volume. He began to require a secretary who was something more than a subordinate to answer the telephone and remember the date of invitations. It was natural enough that St. John Clarke, who was unmarried, should wish to delegate power in his establishment, and rely on someone to help him plan his daily life. He was fortunate in finding a young man so well equipped for the job; for even those who did not much care for Members personally had to admit that his methods, often erratic, were on the whole admirably suited to the life St. John Clarke liked to lead.

'Nothing equivocal about the position of Members in that *ménage,* do you think?' said Barnby.

'Not in the least.'

'I don't think St. John Clarke is interested in either sex,' said Barnby. 'He fell in love with himself at first sight and it is a passion to which he has always remained faithful.'

'Self-love seems so often unrequited.'

'But not in the case of St. John Clarke,' said Barnby. 'He is entirely capable of getting along without what most of the rest of us need.'

I had often heard that particular question discussed. Although his novels not uncommonly dealt with the intricate problems of married life, St. John Clarke did not, in general, greatly care for the society of women, except that of ladies in a position to invite him to agreeable dinners and week-end parties. Such hospitality was, after all, no more than a small and fitting return for the labours of a lifetime, and one that few but the envious would have begrudged him. However, this lack of interest in the opposite sex had from time to time given rise to gossip. Those persons who make a hobby, even a kind of duty, of tracking down malicious whispers to their source were forced to report in the case of St. John Clarke that nothing in the smallest degree reprobate could be confirmed. This did not prevent the circulation of a certain amount of rather spiteful badinage on the subject of his secretary. Members was impervious to any such innuendo, perhaps even encouraging it to screen his own affairs with women. St. John Clarke, indifferent to this indulgence himself, naturally disapproved of an irregular life in others: especially in someone at such close quarters.

'So there he goes,' said Barnby. 'Head-first into the contemporary world.'

He hunched his shoulders, and made a grimace, as if to express the violence, even agony, that had accompanied St. John Clarke's æsthetic metamorphosis. By easy stages we moved off to dinner at Foppa's.

2.

A YEAR or more later Isbister died. He had been in bad health for some little time, and caught pneumonia during a period of convalescence. The question of the introduction, pigeon-holed indefinitely, since St. John Clarke utterly refused to answer letters on the subject, was now brought into the light again by the obituaries. Little or no general news was about at the time, so these notices were fuller than might have been expected. One of them called Isbister 'the British Franz Hals'. There were photographs of him, with his Van Dyck beard and Inverness cape, walking with Mrs. Isbister, a former model, the 'Morwenna' of many of his figure subjects. This was clearly the occasion to make another effort to complete and publish *The Art of Horace Isbister*. Artists, especially academic artists, can pass quickly into the shadows: forgotten as if they had never been.

Almost as a last resort, therefore, it had been arranged that I should meet Mark Members out of office hours, and talk things over 'as man to man'. For this assignation Members had chosen—of all places—the Ritz. Since becoming St. John Clarke's secretary he had acquired a taste for rich surroundings. It was that prolonged, flat, cheerless week that follows Christmas. My own existence seemed infinitely stagnant, relieved only by work on another book. Those interminable latter days of the dying year create an interval, as it were, of moral suspension: one form of life already passed away before another has had time to assert some new, endemic characteristic. Imminent change of direction is for some reason often foreshadowed by such colourless patches of time.

Along Piccadilly a north wind was blowing down the side streets, roaring hoarsely for a minute or two at a time, then dropping suddenly into silence; and then again, after a brief pause, beginning to roar once more, as if perpetually raging against the inconsistency of human conduct. The arches of the portico gave some shelter from this hurricane, at the same time forming a sort of antechamber leading on one side, through lighted glass, into another, milder country, where struggle against the forces of nature was at least less explicit than on the pavements. Outside was the northern winter; here among the palms the climate was almost tropical.

Although a Saturday evening, the place was crowded. A suggestion of life in warmer cities, far away from London, was increased by the presence of a large party of South Americans camped out not far from where I found a seat at one of the grey marble-topped tables. They were grouped picturesquely beneath the figure of the bronze nymph perched in her grotto of artificial rocks and fresh green ferns, a large family spreading over three or four of the tables while they chatted amicably with one another. There were swarthy young men with blue chins and pretty girls in smart frocks, the latter descending in point of age to mere children with big black eyes and brightly coloured bows in their hair. A bald, neat, elderly man, the rosette of some order in his buttonhole, his grey moustache closely clipped, discoursed gravely with two enormously animated ladies, both getting a shade plump in their black dresses.

Away on her pinnacle, the nymph seemed at once a member of this Latin family party, and yet at the same time morally separate from them: an English girl, perhaps, staying with relations possessing business interests in South

America, herself in love for the first time after a visit to some neighbouring estancia. Now she had strayed away from her hosts to enjoy delicious private thoughts in peace while she examined the grimacing face of the river-god carved in stone on the short surface of wall by the grotto. Pensive, quite unaware of the young tritons violently attempting to waft her away from the fountain by sounding their conches at full blast, she gazed full of wonder that no crystal stream gushed from the water-god's contorted jaws. Perhaps in such a place she expected a torrent of champagne. Although stark naked, the nymph looked immensely respectable; less provocative, indeed, than some of the fully dressed young women seated below her, whose olive skins and silk stockings helped to complete this most unwintry scene.

Waiting for someone in a public place develops a sense of individual loneliness, so that amongst all this pale pink and sage green furniture, under decorations of rich cream and dull gold, I felt myself cut off from the rest of the world. I began to brood on the complexity of writing a novel about English life, a subject difficult enough to handle with authenticity even of a crudely naturalistic sort, even more to convey the inner truth of the things observed. Those South Americans sitting opposite, coming from a Continent I had never visited, regarding which I possessed only the most superficial scraps of information, seemed in some respects easier to conceive in terms of a novel than most of the English people sitting round the room. Intricacies of social life make English habits unyielding to simplification, while understatement and irony—in which all classes of this island converse—upset the normal emphasis of reported speech.

How, I asked myself, could a writer attempt to describe in a novel such a young man as Mark Members, for example, possessing so much in common with myself, yet so different? How could this difference be expressed to that grave middle-aged South American gentleman talking to the plump ladies in black? Viewed from some distance off, Members and I might reasonably be considered almost identical units of the same organism, scarcely to be differentiated even by the sociological expert. We were both about the same age, had been to the same university, and were committed to the same profession of literature; though Members could certainly claim in that sphere a more notable place than myself, having by then published several books of poems and made some name for himself as a critic.

Thinking about Members that evening, I found myself unable to consider him without prejudice. He had been, I now realised, responsible for preventing St. John Clarke from writing the Isbister introduction. That was in itself understandable. However, he had also prevaricated about the matter in a way that showed disregard for the fact that we had known each other for a long time; and had always got along together pretty well. There were undoubtedly difficulties on his side too. Prejudice was to be avoided if—as I had idly pictured him—Members were to form the basis of a character in a novel. Alternatively, prejudice might prove the very element through which to capture and pin down unequivocally the otherwise elusive nature of what was of interest, discarding by its selective power the empty, unprofitable shell making up that side of Members untranslatable into terms of art; concentrating his final essence, his position, as it were, in eternity, into the medium of words.

Any but the most crude indication of my own personality would be, I reflected, equally hard to transcribe; at any rate one that did not sound a little absurd. It was all very well for Mrs. Erdleigh to generalise; far less easy to take an objective view oneself. Even the bare facts had an unreal, almost satirical ring when committed to paper, say in the manner of innumerable Russian stories of the nineteenth century: 'I was born in the city of L——, the son of an infantry officer . . .' To convey much that was relevant to the reader's mind by such phrases was in this country hardly possible. Too many factors had to be taken into consideration. Understatement, too, had its own banality; for, skirting cheap romanticism, it could also encourage evasion of unpalatable facts.

However, these meditations on writing were dispersed by the South Americans, who now rose in a body, and, with a good deal of talking and shrill laughter, trooped down the steps, making for the Arlington Street entrance. Their removal perceptibly thinned the population of the palm court. Among a sea of countenances, stamped like the skin of Renoir's women with that curiously pink, silky surface that seems to come from prolonged sitting about in Ritz hotels, I noticed several familiar faces. Some of these belonged to girls once encountered at dances, now no longer known, probably married; moving at any rate in circles I did not frequent.

Margaret Budd was there, with a lady who looked like an aunt or mother-in-law. In the end this 'beauty' had married a Scotch landowner, a husband rather older than might have been expected for such a lovely girl. He was in the whisky business, said to be hypochondriacal and bad-tempered. Although by then mother of at least two children, Margaret still looked like one of those golden-haired, blue-eyed dolls which say, 'Ma-Ma' and 'Pa-Pa', closing their eyes when tilted backward: unchanged in her possession of that peculiarly English beauty, scarcely to be altered by grey hair or the pallor of age. Not far from her, on one of the sofas, sandwiched between two men, both of whom had the air of being rather rich, sat a tall, blonde young woman I recognised as Lady Ardglass, popularly supposed to have been for a short time mistress of Prince Theodoric. Unlike Margaret Budd—whose married name I could not remember—Bijou Ardglass appeared distinctly older: more than a little ravaged by the demands of her strenuous existence. She had lost some of that gay, energetic air of being ready for anything which she had so abundantly possessed when I had first seen her at Mrs. Andriadis's party. That occasion seemed an eternity ago.

As time passed, people leaving, others arriving, I began increasingly to suspect that Members was not going to show up. That would not be out of character, because cutting appointments was a recognised element in his method of conducting life. This habit—to be in general associated with a strong, sometimes frustrated desire to impose the will—is usually attributed on each specific occasion to the fact that 'something better turned up'. Such defaulters are almost as a matter of course reproached with trying to make a more profitable use of their time. Perhaps, in reality, self-interest in its crudest form plays less part in these deviations than might be supposed. The manœuvre may often be undertaken for its own sake. The person awaited deliberately withholds himself from the person awaiting. Mere absence is in this manner turned into a form of action, even potentially violent in its consequences.

Possibly Members, from an inner compulsion, had suddenly decided to establish ascendancy by such an assertion of the will. On the other hand, the action would in the circumstances represent such an infinitesimal score against life in general that his absence, if deliberate, was probably attributable to some minor move in domestic politics vis-à-vis St. John Clarke. I was thinking over these possibilities, rather gloomily wondering whether or not I would withdraw or stay a few minutes longer, when an immensely familiar head and shoulders became visible for a second through a kind of window, or embrasure, looking out from the palm court on to the lower levels of the passage and rooms beyond. It was Peter Templer. A moment later he strolled up the steps.

For a few seconds Templer gazed thoughtfully round the room, as if contemplating the deterioration of a landscape, known from youth, once famed for its natural beauty, now ruined beyond recall. He was about to turn away, when he caught sight of me and came towards the table. It must have been at least three years since we had met. His sleekly brushed hair and long, rather elegant stride were just the same. His face was perhaps a shade fuller, and his eyes at once began to give out that familiar blue mechanical sparkle that I remembered so well from our schooldays. With a red carnation in the buttonhole of his dark suit, his shirt cuffs cut tightly round the wrist so that somehow his links asserted themselves unduly, Templer's air was distinctly prosperous. But he also looked as if by then he knew what worry was, something certainly unknown to him in the past.

'I suppose you are waiting for someone, Nick,' he said, drawing up a chair. 'Some ripe little piece?'

'You're very wide of the mark.'

'Then a dowager is going to buy your dinner—after which she will make you an offer?'

'No such luck.'

'What then?'

'I'm waiting for a man.'

'I say, old boy, sorry to have been so inquisitive. Things have come to that, have they?'

'You couldn't know.'

'I should have guessed.'

'Have a drink, anyway.'

I remembered reading, some years before, an obituary notice in the *Morning Post,* referring to his father's death. This paragraph, signed 'A.S.F.', was, in fact, a brief personal memoir rather than a bald account of the late Mr. Templer's career. Although the deceased's chairmanship of various companies was mentioned—his financial interests had been chiefly in cement—more emphasis was laid on his delight in sport, especially boxing, his many undisclosed benefactions to charity, and the kind heart within him, always cloaked by a deceptively brusque manner. The initials, together with a certain banality of phrasing, suggested the hand of Sunny Farebrother, Mr. Templer's younger City associate I had met at their house. That visit had been the sole occasion when I had seen Templer's father. I had wondered vaguely—to use a favourite expression of his son's—'how much he had cut up for'. Details about money are always of interest; even so, I did not give the matter much thought. Already I had begun to think of Peter Templer as a friend of my schooldays rather than one connected with that more recent period of occasional luncheons together, during the year following my own establishment in London after coming down from the university. When, once in a way, I had attended the annual dinner for members of Le Bas's House, Templer had never been present.

That we had ceased to meet fairly regularly was due no doubt to some extent to Templer's chronic inability—as our housemaster Le Bas would have said—to 'keep up' a friendship. He moved entirely within the orbit of events of the moment, looking neither forward nor backward. If we happened to run across each other, we arranged to do something together; not otherwise. This mutual detachment had been brought about also by the circumstances of my own life. To be circumscribed by people constituting the same professional community as myself was no wish of mine; rather the contrary. However, an inexorable law governs all human existence in that respect, ordaining that sooner or later everyone must appear before the world as he is. Many are not prepared to face this sometimes distasteful principle. Indeed, the illusion that anyone can escape from the marks of his vocation is an aspect of romanticism common to every profession; those occupied with the world of action claiming their true interests to lie in the pleasure of imagination or reflection, while persons principally concerned with reflective or imaginative pursuits are for ever asserting their inalienable right to participation in an active sphere.

Perhaps Templer himself lay somewhere within the range of this definition. If so, he gave little indication of it. In fact, if taxed, there can be no doubt that he would have denied any such thing. The outward sign that seemed to place him within this category was his own unwillingness ever wholly to accept the people amongst whom he had chosen to live. A curious streak of melancholy seemed to link him with a less arid manner of life than that to which he seemed irrevocably committed. At least I supposed something of that sort could still be said of his life; for I knew little or nothing of his daily routine, in or out of the office, though suspecting that neither his activities, nor his friends, were of a kind likely to be very sympathetic to myself.

However, various strands, controlled without much method and then invisible to me, imparted a certain irregular pattern to Templer's personal affairs. For example, he liked his friends to be rich and engrossed in whatever business occupied them. They had to be serious about money, though relatively dissipated in their private lives; to possess no social ambitions whatever, though at the same time to be disfigured by no grave social defects. The women had to be good-looking, the men tolerably proficient at golf and bridge, without making a fetish of those pastimes. Both sexes, when entertained by him, were expected to drink fairly heavily; although, here again, intoxication must not be carried to excess. In fact, broadly speaking, Templer disliked anything that could be labelled 'bohemian', as much as anything with claims to be 'smart'. He did not fancy even that sort of 'smartness' to be found to a limited extent in the City, a form of life which had, after all, so much in common with his own tastes.

'You know, I really rather hate the well-born,' he used to say. 'Not that I see many of them these days.'

Nothing might be thought easier than gratification of these modest requirements among a circle of intimates; and the difficulty Templer found in settling down to any one set of persons limited by these terms of reference, and at the same time satisfactory to himself, was really remarkable. This side of him suggested a kind of 'spoiled intellectual'. There was also the curious sympathy he could extend to such matters as the story of the St. John Clarke introduction, which he now made me outline after I had explained my purpose in the Ritz. The facts could scarcely have been very interesting to him, but he followed their detail as if alteration of the bank rate or fluctuations of the copper market were ultimately concerned. Perhaps this capacity for careful attention to other people's affairs was the basis of his own success in business.

'Of course I know about Isbister, R.A.,' he said. 'He painted that shocking picture of my old man. I tried to pop it when he dropped off the hooks, but there were no takers. I know about St. John Clarke, too. Mona reads his books. Absolutely laps them up, in fact.'

'Who is Mona?'

'Oh, yes, you haven't met her yet, have you? Mona is my wife.'

'But, my dear Peter, I had no idea you were married.'

'Strange, isn't it? Our wedding anniversary, matter of fact. Broke as I am, I thought we could gnaw a cutlet at the Grill to celebrate. Why not join us? Your chap is obviously not going to turn up.'

He began to speak of his own affairs, talking in just the way he did when we used to have tea together at school. Complaining of having lost a lot of money in 'the slump', he explained that he still owned a house in the neighbourhood of Maidenhead.

'More or less camping out there now,' he said. 'With a married couple looking after us. The woman does the cooking. The man can drive a car and service it pretty well, but he hasn't the foggiest idea about looking after my clothes.'

I asked about his marriage.

'We met first at a road-house near Staines. Mona was being entertained there by a somewhat uncouth individual called Snider, an advertising agent. Snider's firm was using her as a photographer's model. You'll know her face when you see her. Laxatives—halitosis—even her closest friend wouldn't tell her—and so on.'

I discovered in due course that Mona's chief appearance on the posters had been to advertise toothpaste; but both she and her husband were inclined to emphasise other more picturesque possibilities.

'She'd already had a fairly adventurous career by then,' Templer said.

He began to enlarge on this last piece of information, like a man unable to forgo irritating the quiescent nerve of a potentially aching tooth. I had the impression that he was still very much in love with his wife, but that things were perhaps not going as well as he could wish. That would explain a jerkiness of manner that suggested worry. The story itself seemed commonplace enough, yet containing implications of Templer's own recurrent desire to escape from whatever world enclosed him.

'She *says* she's partly Swiss,' he said. 'Her father was an engineer in Birmingham, always being fired for being tight. However, both parents are dead. The only relation she's got is an aunt with a house in Worthing—a boarding-house, I think.'

I saw at once that Mona, whatever else her characteristics, was a wife liberally absolving Templer from additional family ties. That fact, perhaps counting for little compared with deeper considerations, would at the same time seem a great advantage in his eyes. This desire to avoid new relations through marriage was connected with an innate unwillingness to identify himself too closely with any one social group. In that taste, oddly enough, he resembled Uncle Giles, each of them considering himself master of a more sweeping mobility of action by voluntary withdrawal from competition at any given social level of existence.

At the time of narration, I did not inwardly accept all Templer's highly coloured statements about his wife, but I was impressed by the apparent depths of his feeling for Mona. Even when telling the story of how his marriage had come about, he had completely abandoned any claim to have employed those high-handed methods he was accustomed to advocate for handling girls of her sort. I asked what time she was due at the Ritz.

'When she comes out of the cinema,' he said. 'She was determined to see *Mädchen in Uniform*. I couldn't face it. After all, one meets quite enough lesbians in real life without going to the pictures to see them.'

'But it isn't a film about lesbians.'

'Oh, isn't it?' said Templer. 'Mona thought it was. She'll be disappointed if you're right. However, I'm sure you're wrong. Jimmy Brent told me about it. He usually knows what's what in matters of that kind. My sister Jean is with Mona. Did you ever meet her? I can't remember. They may be a little late, but I've booked a table. We can have a drink or two while we wait.'

Jean's name recalled the last time I had seen her at that luncheon party at Stourwater where I had been taken by the Walpole-Wilsons. I had not thought of her for ages, though some small residue of inner dissatisfaction, that survives all emotional expenditure come to nothing, now returned.

'Jean's having a spot of trouble with that husband of hers,' said Templer. 'That is why she is staying with us for the moment. She married Bob Duport, you know. He is rather a handful.'

'So I should imagine.'

'You don't know him.'

'We met when you drove us all into the ditch in your famous second-hand Vauxhall.'

'My God,' said Templer, laughing. 'That was a shambles, wasn't it? Fancy your remembering that. It must be nearly ten years ago now. The row those bloody girls made. Old Bob was in poor form that day, I remember. He thought he'd picked up a nail after a binge he'd been on a night or two before. Completely false alarm, of course.'

'As Le Bas once said: "I can't accept ill health as a valid excuse for ill manners."'

'Bob's not much your sort, but he's not a bad chap when you get to know him. I was surprised you'd ever heard of him. I've had worse brothers-in-law, although, God knows, that's not saying much. But Bob *is* difficult. Bad enough running after every girl he meets, but when he goes and loses nearly all his money on top of that, an awkward situation is immediately created.'

'Are they living apart?'

'Not officially. Jean is looking for a small flat in town for herself and the kid.'

'What sex?'

'Polly, aged three.'

'And Duport?'

'Gone abroad, leaving a trail of girl-friends and bad debts behind him. He is trying to put through some big stuff on the metal market. I think the two of them will make it up in due course. I used to think she was mad about him, but you can never tell with women.'

The news that Polly was to be born was the last I had heard of her mother. Little as I could imagine how Jean had brought herself to marry Duport—far less be 'mad about him'—I had by then learnt that such often inexplicable things must simply be accepted as matters of fact. His sister's matrimonial troubles evidently impressed Templer as vexatious, though in the circumstances probably unavoidable; certainly not a subject for prolonged discussion.

'Talking of divorces and such things,' he said. 'Do you ever see Charles Stringham now?'

There had been little or no scandal connected with the break-up of Stringham's marriage. He and Peggy Stepney had parted company without apparent reason, just as their reason for marrying had been outwardly hard to understand. They had bought a house somewhere north of the Park, but neither ever seemed to have lived there for more than a few weeks at a time, certainly seldom together. The house itself, decorated by the approved decorator of that moment, was well spoken of, but I had never been there. The marriage had simply collapsed, so people said, from inanition. I never heard it suggested that Peggy had taken a lover. Stringham, it was true, was seen about with all kinds of women, though nothing specific was alleged against him either. Soon after the decree had been made absolute, Peggy married a cousin, rather older than herself, and went to live in Yorkshire, where her husband possessed a large house, noted in books of authentically recorded ghost stories for being rather badly haunted.

'That former wife of his—The Lady Peggy—was a good-looking piece,' said Templer. 'But, as you know, such grand life is not for me. I prefer simpler pleasures——

' "Oh, give me a man to whom naught comes amiss,
One horse or another, that country or this. . . ." '

'You know you've always hated hunting and hunting people. Anyway, whose sentiments were those?'

'Ah,' he said, 'chaps like you think I'm not properly educated, in spite of the efforts of Le Bas and others, and that I don't know about beautiful poetry. You find you're wrong. I know all sorts of little snatches. As a matter of fact I was thinking of women, really, rather than horses, and taking 'em as you find 'em. Not being too choosy about it as Charles has always been. Of course they are easier to take than to find, in my experience—though of course it is not gentlemanly to boast of such things. Anyway, as you know, I have given up all that now.'

At school I could remember Templer claiming that he had never read a book for pleasure in his life; and, although an occasional Edgar Wallace was certainly to be seen in his hand during the period of his last few terms, the quotation was surprising. That was a side of him not entirely unexpected, but usually kept hidden. Incidentally, it was a conversational trick acquired—perhaps consciously copied—from Stringham.

'You remember the imitations Charles used to do of Widmerpool?' he said. 'I expect he is much too grand to remember Widmerpool now.'

'I saw Widmerpool not so long ago. He is with Donners-Brebner.'

'But not much longer,' said Templer. 'Widmerpool is joining the Acceptance World.'

'What on earth is that?'

'Well, actually he is going to become a bill-broker,' said Templer, laughing. 'I should have made myself clearer to one not involved in the nefarious ways of the City.'

'What will he do?'

'Make a lot of heavy weather. He'll have to finish his lunch by two o'clock and spend the rest of the day wasting the time of the banks.'

'But what is the Acceptance World?'

'If you have goods you want to sell to a firm in Bolivia, you probably do not touch your money in the ordinary way until the stuff arrives there. Certain houses, therefore, are prepared to 'accept' the debt. They will advance you the money on the strength of your reputation. It is all right when the going is good, but sooner or later you are tempted to plunge. Then there is an alteration in the value of the Bolivian exchange, or a revolution, or perhaps the firm just goes bust—and you find yourself stung. That is, if you guess wrong.'

'I see. But why is he leaving Donners-Brebner? He always told me he was such a success there and that Sir Magnus liked him so much.'

'Widmerpool was doing all right in Donners-Brebner—in fact rather well, as you say,' said Templer. 'But he used to bore the pants off everyone in the combine by his intriguing. In the end he got on the nerves of Donners himself. Did you ever come across a fellow called Truscott? Widmerpool took against him, and worked away until he had got him out. Then Donners regretted it, after Truscott had been sacked, and decided Widmerpool was getting too big for his boots. He must go too. The long and the short of it is that Widmerpool is joining this firm of bill-brokers—on the understanding that a good deal of the Donners-Brebner custom follows him there.'

I had never before heard Templer speak of Widmerpool in this matter-of-fact way. At school he had disliked him, or, at best, treated him as a harmless figure of fun. Now, however, Widmerpool had clearly crystallised in Templer's mind as an ordinary City acquaintance, to be thought of no longer as a subject for laughter, but as a normal vehicle for the transaction of business; perhaps even one particularly useful in that respect on account of former associations.

'I was trying to get Widmerpool to lend a hand with old Bob,' said Templer.

'What would he do?'

'Bob has evolved some scheme for collecting scrap metal from some place in the Balkans and shipping it home. At least that is the simplest way of explaining what he intends. Widmerpool has said he will try to arrange for Bob to have the agency for Donners-Brebner.'

I was more interested in hearing of this development in Widmerpool's career than in examining its probable effect on Duport, whose business worries were no concern of mine. However, my attention was at that moment distracted from such matters by the sudden appearance in the palm court of a short, decidedly unconventional figure who now came haltingly up the steps. This person wore a black leather overcoat. His arrival in the Ritz—in those days—was a remarkable event.

Pausing, with a slight gesture of exhaustion that seemed to imply arduous travel over many miles of arid desert or snowy waste (according to whether the climate within or without the hotel was accepted as prevailing), he looked about the room; gazing as if in amazement at the fountain, the nymph, the palms in their pots of Chinese design: then turning his eyes to the chandeliers and the glass of the roof. His bearing was at once furtive, resentful, sagacious, and full of a kind of confidence in his own powers. He seemed to be surveying the tables as if searching for someone, at the same time unable to believe his eyes, while he did so, at the luxuriance of the oasis in which he found himself. He carried no hat, but retained the belted leather overcoat upon which a few drops of moisture could be seen glistening as he advanced farther into the room, an indication that snow or sleet had begun to fall outside. This black leather garment gave a somewhat official air to his appearance, obscurely suggesting a Wellsian man of the future, hierarchic in rank. Signs of damp could also be seen in patches on his sparse fair hair, a thatch failing to roof in completely the dry, yellowish skin of his scalp.

This young man, although already hard to think of as really young on account of the maturity of his expression, was J. G. Quiggin. I had been reflecting on him only a short time earlier in connexion with Mark Members; for the pair of them—Members and Quiggin—were, for some reason, always associated together in the mind. This was not only because I myself had happened to meet both of them during my first term at the university. Other people, too, were accustomed to link their names together, as if they were a business firm, or, more authentically, a couple whose appearance together in public inevitably invoked the thought of a certain sort of literary life. Besides that, a kind of love-hate indissolubly connected them.

Whether or not the birth of this relationship had in fact taken place at that tea party in Sillery's rooms in college, where we had all met as freshmen, was not easy to say. There at any rate I had first seen Quiggin in his grubby starched collar and subfusc suit. On that occasion Sillery had rather maliciously suggested the acquaintance of Members and Quiggin dated from an earlier incarnation; in fact boyhood together—like Isbister and St. John Clarke—in some Midland town. So far as I knew, that assertion had neither been proved nor disproved. Some swore Quiggin and Members were neighbours at home; others that the story was a pure invention, produced in malice, and based on the fact that Sillery had found the two names in the same provincial telephone directory. Sillery certainly devoted a good deal of his time to the study of such works of reference as telephone books and county directories, from which he managed to extract a modicum of information useful to himself. At the same time there were those who firmly believed Members and Quiggin to be related; even first cousins. The question was largely irrelevant; although the acutely combative nature of their friendship, if it could be so called, certainly possessed all that intense, almost vindictive rivalry of kinship.

Quiggin had quietly disappeared from the university without taking a degree. Now, like Members, he had already made some name for himself, though at a somewhat different literary level. He was a professional reviewer of notable ability, much disliked by some of the older critics for the roughness with which he occasionally handled accepted reputations. One of the smaller publishing houses employed him as 'literary adviser'; a firm of which his friend Howard Craggs (formerly of the Vox Populi Press, now extinct, though partly reincorporated as Boggis & Stone) had recently become a director. A book by Quiggin had been advertised to appear in the spring, but as a rule his works never seemed, at the last moment, to satisfy their author's high standard of self-criticism. Up to then his manuscripts had always been reported as 'burnt', or at best held back for drastic revision.

Quiggin, certainly to himself and his associates, represented a more go-ahead school of thought than Members and his circle. Although not himself a poet, he was a great adherent of the new trends of poetry then developing, which deprecated 'Art for Art's sake', a doctrine in a general way propagated by Members. However, Members, too, was moving with the times, his latest volume of verse showing a concern with psychoanalysis; but, although 'modern' in the eyes of a writer of an older generation like St. John Clarke, Members—so Quiggin had once remarked—'drooped too heavily over the past, a crutch with which we younger writers must learn to dispense'. Members, for his part, had been heard complaining that he himself was in sympathy with 'all liberal and progressive movements', but 'J.G. had advanced into a state of mind too political to be understood by civilised people'. In spite of such differences, and reported statements of both of them that they 'rarely saw each other now', they were not uncommonly to be found together, arguing or sulking on the banquettes of the Café Royal.

When Quiggin caught sight of me in the Ritz he immediately made for our table. As he moved across the white marble floor his figure seemed thicker than formerly. From being the spare, hungry personage I had known as an undergraduate he had become solid, almost stout. It was possible that Members, perhaps maliciously, perhaps as a matter of convenience to himself, had arranged for Quiggin to pick him up for dinner at an hour when our business together would be at an end. Supposing this had been planned, I was preparing to explain that Members had not turned up, when all at once Quiggin himself began to speak in his small, hard, grating North Country voice; employing a tone very definitely intended to sweep aside any question of wasting time upon the idle formalities of introduction, or indeed anything else that might postpone, even momentarily, some matter that was his duty to proclaim without delay.

'I could not get away earlier,' he began, peremptorily. 'St. J. is rather seriously ill. It happened quite suddenly. Not only that, but a difficult situation has arisen. I should like to discuss things with you.'

This introductory speech was even less expected than Quiggin's own arrival, although the tense, angry seriousness with which he had invested these words was not uncommon in his way of talking. Once I had thought this abrupt, aggressive manner came from a kind of shyness; but later that theory had to be abandoned when it became clear that Quiggin's personality expressed itself naturally in this form. I was surprised to hear him refer to St. John Clarke as 'St. J.', a designation appropriated to himself by Mark Members, and rarely used by others; in fact a nickname almost patented by Members as an outward sign of his own intimacy with his friend and employer.

I could not imagine why Quiggin, on that particular night, should suddenly wish that we should dine *tête-à-tête*. In the past we had occasionally spent an evening together after meeting at some party, always by accident rather than design. We were on quite good terms, but there was no subject involving St. John Clarke likely to require urgent discussion between us. At the university, where he had seemed a lonely, out-of-the-way figure, I had felt an odd interest in Quiggin; but our acquaintance there, such as it was, he now treated almost as a matter to live down. Perhaps that was natural as he came to invest more and more of his personality in his own literary status. At that moment, for example, his manner of speaking implied that any of his friends should be prepared to make sacrifices for an exceptional occasion like this one: a time when opportunity to be alone with him and talk seriously was freely offered.

'Did you come to meet Mark?' I asked. 'He hasn't turned up. It is not very likely he will appear now.'

Quiggin, refusing an invitation to sit down, stood upright by the table, still enveloped in his black, shiny livery. He had unfastened the large buttons of the overcoat, which now flapped open like Bonaparte's, revealing a dark grey jumper that covered all but the knot of a red tie. The shirt was also dark grey. His face wore the set, mask-like expression of an importunate beggar tormenting a pair of tourists seated on the perimeter of a café's *terrasse*. I felt suddenly determined to be no longer a victim of other people's disregard for their social obligations. I introduced Templer out of hand—an operation Quiggin had somehow prevented until that moment—explaining at the same time that I was that evening already irrevocably booked for a meal.

Quiggin showed annoyance at this downright refusal to be dislodged, simultaneously indicating his own awareness that Members had been unable to keep this appointment. It then occurred to me that Members had persuaded Quiggin to make the excuses for his own absence in person. Such an arrangement was unlikely, and would in any case not explain why Quiggin should expect me to dine with him. However, Quiggin shook his head at this suggestion, and gave a laugh—rather in Uncle Giles's manner—expressing scorn rather than amusement. Templer watched us with interest.

'As a matter of fact St. J. has a new secretary,' said Quiggin slowly, through closed lips. 'That is why Mark did not come this evening.'

'What, has Mark been sacked?'

Quiggin was evidently not prepared to reply directly to so uncompromising an enquiry. He laughed a little, though rather more leniently than before.

'Honourably retired, perhaps one might say.'

'On a pension?'

'You are very inquisitive, Nicholas.'

'You have aroused my interest. You should be flattered.'

'Life with St. J. never really gave Mark time for his own work.'

'He always produced a fair amount.'

'Too much, from one point of view,' said Quiggin, savagely; adding in a less severe tone: 'Mark, as you know, always insists on taking on so many things. He could not always give St. J. the attention a man of his standing quite reasonably demands. Of course, the two of them will continue to see each other. I think, in fact, Mark is going to look in once in a way to keep the library in order. After all, they are close friends, first and foremost, quite apart from whether or not Mark is St. J.'s secretary. As you probably know, there have been various difficulties from time to time. Minor ones, of course. Still, one thing leads to another. Mark can be rather querulous when he does not get his own way.'

'Who is taking Mark's place?'

'It is not exactly a question of one person taking another's place. Merely coping with the practical side of the job more —well—conscientiously.'

Quiggin bared his teeth, as if to excuse this descent on his own part to a certain smugness of standpoint.

'Yourself?'

'At first just as an experiment on both sides.'

I saw at once that in this change, if truly reported, all kind of implications were inherent. Stories had circulated in the past of jobs for which Quiggin and Members had been in competition, most of them comparatively unimportant employments in the journalistic field. This was rather larger game; because, apart from other considerations, there was the question of who was to be St. John Clarke's heir. He was apparently alone in the world. It was not a vast fortune, perhaps, but a tidy sum. A devoted secretary might stand in a favourable position for at least a handsome bequest. Although I had never heard hints that Quiggin was anxious to replace Members in the novelist's household, such an ambition was by no means unthinkable. In fact the change was likely to have been brought about by long intrigue rather than sudden caprice. The news was surprising, though of a kind to startle by its essential appropriateness rather than from any sense of incongruity.

Although I did not know St. John Clarke, I could not help feeling a certain pity for him, smitten down among his first editions, press cuttings, dinner invitations, and signed photographs of eminent contemporaries, a sick man of letters, fought over by Members and Quiggin.

'That was why I wanted to have a talk about St. J.'s affairs,' said Quiggin, continuing to speak in his more conciliatory tone. 'There have been certain changes lately in his point of view. You probably knew that. I think you are interested in getting this introduction. I see no reason why he should not write it. But I am of the opinion that he will probably wish to approach Isbister's painting from a rather different angle. The pictures, after all, offer a unique example of what a capitalist society produces where art is concerned. However, I see we shall have to discuss that another time.'

He stared hard at Templer as chief impediment to his plans for the evening. It was at that point that 'the girls' arrived; owing to this conversation, entering the room unobserved by me until they were standing beside us. I was immediately aware that I had seen Templer's wife before. Then I remembered that he had warned me I should recognise the stylised, conventionally smiling countenance, set in blonde curls, that had formerly appeared so often, on the walls of buses and underground trains, advocating a well-known brand of toothpaste. She must have been nearly six foot in height: in spite of a rather coarse complexion, a beautiful girl by any standards.

'It was *too* wonderful,' she said, breathlessly.

She spoke to Templer, but turned almost at once in the direction of Quiggin and myself. At the sight of her, Quiggin went rather red in the face and muttered inaudible phrases conveying that they already knew one another. She replied civilly to these, though evidently without any certainty as to where that supposed meeting had taken place. She was obviously longing to talk about the film, but Quiggin was not prepared for the matter of their earlier encounter to be left vague.

'It was years ago at a party over an antique shop,' he insisted, 'given by an old queen who died soon after. Mark Members introduced us.'

'Oh, yes,' she said, indifferently, 'I haven't seen Mark for ages.'

'Deacon, he was called.'

'I believe I remember.'

'Off Charlotte Street.'

'There were a lot of parties round there,' she agreed.

Then I knew that something other than the toothpaste advertisements had caused Mona's face to seem so familiar. I, too, had seen her at Mr. Deacon's birthday party. Since then she had applied peroxide to her naturally dark hair. When Templer had spoken of his wife's former profession I had not connected her with 'Mona', the artist's model of whom Barnby, and others, used sometimes to speak. Barnby had not mentioned her for a long time.

In due course I found that Mona had abandoned that 'artist's' world for commercial employments that were more lucrative. The people she met in these less pretentious circles were also no doubt on the whole more sympathetic to her, although she would never have admitted that. Certainly the impact of her earlier career as a model for painters and sculptors was never erased from her own mind. With the extraordinary adaptability of women, she had managed to alter considerably the lines of her figure, formerly a striking synthesis of projections and concavities that certainly seemed to demand immediate expression in bronze or stone. Now her body had been disciplined into a fashionable, comparatively commonplace mould. She smiled in a friendly way at Quiggin, but made no effort to help him out in his efforts to suggest that they really already knew each other.

Quiggin himself continued to stand for a time resentfully beside us, giving the impression not so much that he wished to join the Templer party, as that he hoped for an invitation to do so, which would at once be curtly refused; though whether, had the chance arisen, he would in fact have withheld his company was, of course, speculative. Mona threw him another smile, her regular rows of teeth neatly displayed between pink lips parted in a cupid's bow: an ensemble invoking more than ever her career on the hoardings. For some reason this glance confirmed Quiggin's intention to depart. After a final word with me to the effect that he would ring up early the following week and arrange a meeting, he nodded in an offended manner to the world in general, and tramped away across the room and down the steps. He held himself tautly upright, as if determined to avoid for ever in future such haunts of luxury and those who frequent them.

Just as he was making this move, Lady Ardglass, followed by her spruce, grey-haired admirers, at heel like a brace of well-groomed, well-bred, obedient sporting dogs, passed us on the way out. A natural blonde, Bijou Ardglass possessed a fleeting facial resemblance to Mona. She was said to have been a mannequin before her marriage. My attention had been caught momentarily by Quiggin's words, but, even while he was speaking, I was aware of this resemblance as Lady Ardglass approached; although her smooth hair and mink made a strong contrast with Mona's camel-hair coat and rather wild appearance. All the same there could be no doubt that the two of them possessed something in common. As the Ardglass cortège came level with us, I saw exchanged between the two of them one of those glances so characteristic of a woman catching sight of another woman who reminds her of herself: glances in which deep hatred and also a kind of passionate love seem to mingle voluptuously together for an instant of time.

Templer, at the same moment, shot out an all-embracing look, which seemed in an equally brief space to absorb Bijou Ardglass in her entirety. He appeared to do this more from force of habit than because she greatly interested him. It was a memorandum for some future date, should the need ever arise, recording qualities and defects, charms and blemishes, certainties and potentialities, both moral and physical. Jean saw Lady Ardglass too. Just as Quiggin was making his final remark to me, I was conscious that she touched her brother's arm and muttered something to him that sounded like 'Bob's girl': words at which Templer raised his eyebrows.

I did not fully take in Jean's appearance until that moment. She was wearing a red dress with a black coat, and some kind of a scarf, folded over like a stock, emphasised the long, graceful curve of her neck. Mona's strident personality occupied the centre of the stage, and, besides, I felt for some reason a desire to postpone our meeting. Now, as she spoke to her brother, her face assumed an expression at once mocking and resigned, which had a sweetness about it that reminded me of the days when I had thought myself in love with her. I could still feel the tension her presence always brought, but without any of that hopeless romantic longing, so characteristic of love's very early encounters: perhaps always imperfectly recaptured in the more realistic love-making of later life. Now, I experienced a kind of resentment at the reserve which enclosed her. It suggested a form of self-love, not altogether attractive. Yet the look of irony and amusement that had come into her face when she whispered the phrase about 'Bob's girl' seemed to add something unexpected and charming to her still mysterious personality.

She was taller than I remembered, and carried herself well. Her face, like her brother's, had become a shade fuller, a change that had coarsened his appearance, while in her the sharp, almost animal look I remembered was now softened. She had not entirely lost her air of being a school-girl; though certainly, it had to be admitted, a very smartly dressed school-girl. I thought to myself, not without complacence, that I was able to appreciate her without in any way losing my head, as I might once have done. There was still a curious fascination about her grey-blue eyes, slanting a little, as it were caught tightly between soft, lazy lids and dark, luxurious lashes. Once she had reminded me of Rubens's *Chapeau de Paille*. Now for some reason—though there was not much physical likeness between them—I thought of the woman smoking the hookah in Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement.* Perhaps there was something of the odalisque about Jean, too. She looked pale and rather tired. Any girl might excusably have appeared pale beside Mona, whose naturally high colouring had been increased by her own hand, almost as if for the stage or a cabaret performance.

'Do you remember where we last met?' she said, when Quiggin was gone.

'At Stourwater.'

'What a party.'

'Was it awful?'

'Some of it wasn't very nice. Terrible rows between Baby and our host.'

'But I thought they never had rows in public.'

'They didn't. That was what was so awful. Sir Magnus tremendously bland all the time and Baby absolutely bursting with bad temper.'

'Do you ever hear from Baby Wentworth now?'

'I had a card at Christmas. She is cloudlessly happy with her Italian.'

'What is his profession?'

'I don't think I know you well enough to tell you. Perhaps after dinner.'

This, I remembered, was the way things had been at Stourwater: brisk conversation that led in the end to acres of silence. I made up my mind that this time I would not feel put out by her behaviour, whatever form it took.

'Let's have some food,' said Templer, 'I'm famished. So must you girls be, after your intellectual film.'

Afterwards, I could never recall much about that dinner in the Grill, except that the meal conveyed an atmosphere of powerful forces at work beneath the conversation. The sight of her husband's mistress had no doubt been disturbing to Jean, who as usual spoke little. It soon became clear that the Templers' mutual relationship was not an easy one. Different couples approach with varied technique the matrimonial vehicle's infinitely complicated machinery. In the case of the Templers, their method made it hard to believe that they were really married at all. Clearly each of them was accustomed to a more temporary arrangement. Their conduct was normal enough, but they remained two entirely separate individuals, giving no indication of a life in common. This was certainly not because Templer showed any lack of interest in his wife. On the contrary, he seemed extravagantly, almost obsessively fond of her, although he teased her from time to time. In the past he had sometimes spoken of his love affairs to me, but I had never before seen him, as it were, in action. I wondered whether he habitually showed this same tremendous outward enthusiasm when pursuing more casual inclinations; or whether Mona had touched off some hitherto unkindled spark.

How far Mona herself reciprocated these feelings was less easy to guess. Possibly she was already rather bored with being a wife, and her surfeit in this respect might explain her husband's conciliatory attitude. She spoke and acted in a manner so affected and absurd that there was something appealing about the artificiality of her gestures and conversation. She was like some savage creature, anxious to keep up appearances before members of a more highly civilised species, although at the same time keenly aware of her own superiority in cunning. There was something hard and untamed about her, probably the force that had attracted Templer and others. She seemed on good terms with Jean, who may have found her sister-in-law's crude, violent presence emphasised to advantage her own quieter, though still undisclosed nature.

Quiggin had made an impression upon Mona, because, almost immediately after we sat down to dinner, she began to make enquiries about him. Possibly, on thinking it over, she felt that his obvious interest in her had deserved greater notice. In answer to her questions, I explained that he was J. G. Quiggin, the literary critic. She at once asserted that she was familiar with his reviews in one of the 'weeklies', mentioning, as it happened, a periodical for which, so far as I knew, he had never written.

'He was a splendid fellow in his old leather overcoat,' said Templer. 'Did you notice his shirt, too? I expect you know lots of people like that, Nick. To think I was rather worried at not having struggled into a dinner-jacket tonight, and he just breezed in wearing the flannel trousers he had been sleeping in for a fortnight, and not caring a damn. I admire that.'

'I couldn't remember a thing about meeting him before,' said Mona. 'I expect I must have been a bit tight that night, otherwise I should have known his name. He said Mark Members introduced us. Have you heard of him? He is a well-known poet.'

She said this with an ineffable silliness that was irresistible.

'I was going to meet him here, as a matter of fact, but he never turned up.'

'Oh, *were* you?'

She was astonished at this; and impressed. I wondered what on earth Members had told her about himself to have won such respect in her eyes. Afterwards, I found that it was his status as 'a poet', rather than his private personality, that made him of such interest to her.

'I never knew Mark well,' she said, rather apologetic at having suggested such ambitious claims.

'He and Quiggin are usually very thick together.'

'I didn't realise Nick was waiting for an old friend of yours, sweetie,' said Templer. 'Is he one of those fascinating people you sometimes tell me about, who wear beards and sandals and have such curious sexual habits?'

Mona began to protest, but Jean interrupted her by saying: 'He's not a bad poet, is he?'

'I think rather good,' I said, feeling a sudden unaccountable desire to encourage in her an interest in poetry. 'He is St. John Clarke's secretary—or, at least, he was.'

I remembered then that, if Quiggin was to be believed, the situation between Members and St. John Clarke was a delicate one.

'I used to like St. John Clarke's novels,' said Jean. 'Now I think they are rather awful. Mona adores them.'

'Oh, but they are *too* wonderful.'

Mona began to detail some of St. John Clarke's plots, a formidable undertaking at the best of times. This expression of Jean's views—that Members was a goodish poet and St. John Clarke a bad novelist—seemed to me to indicate an impressive foothold in literary criticism. I felt now that I wanted to discuss all kind of things with her, but hardly knew where to begin on account of the barrier she seemed to have set up between herself and the rest of the world. I suspected that she might merely be trying to veer away conversation from a period of Mona's life that would carry too many painful implications for Templer as a husband. It could be design, rather than literary interest. However, Mona herself was unwilling to be deflected from the subject.

'Do you run round with all those people?' she went on. 'I used to myself. Then—oh, I don't know—I lost touch with them. Of course Peter doesn't much care for that sort of person, do you, sweetie?'

'Rubbish,' said Templer. 'I've just said how much I liked Mr. J. G. Quiggin. In fact I wish I could meet him again, and find out the name of his tailor.'

Mona frowned at this refusal to take her remark seriously. She turned to me and said: 'You know, you are not much like most of Peter's usual friends yourself.'

That particular matter was all too complicated to explain, even if amenable to explanation, which I was inclined to doubt. I knew, of course, what she meant. Probably there was something to be said for accepting that opinion. The fact that I was not specially like the general run of Templer's friends had certainly been emphasised by the appearance of Quiggin. I was rather displeased that the Templers had seen Quiggin. To deal collectively with them on their own plane would have been preferable to that to which Quiggin had somehow steered us all.

'What was the flick like?' Templer enquired.

'Marvellous,' said Mona. 'The sweetest—no, really—but *the* sweetest little girl you ever saw.'

'She was awfully good,' said Jean.

'But what happened?'

'Well, this little girl—who was called Manuela—was sent to a very posh German school.'

'Posh?' said Templer. 'Sweetie, what an awful word. Please never use it in my presence again.'

Rather to my surprise, Mona accepted this rebuke meekly: even blushing slightly.

'Well, Manuela went to this school, and fell *passionately* in love with one of the mistresses.'

'What did I tell you?' said Templer. 'Nick insisted the film wasn't about lesbians. You see he just poses as a man of the world, and hasn't really the smallest idea what is going on round him.'

'It isn't a bit what *you* mean,' said Mona, now bursting with indignation. 'It was a really beautiful story. Manuela tried to *kill* herself. I cried and cried and cried.'

'It really was good,' said Jean to me. 'Have you seen it?'

'Yes. I liked it.'

'He's lying,' said Templer. 'If he had seen the film, he would have known it was about lesbians. Look here, Nick, why not come home with us for the week-end? We can run you back to your flat and get a toothbrush. I should like you to see our house, uncomfortable as staying there will be.'

'Yes, *do* come, darling,' said Mona, drawing out the words with her absurd articulation. 'You will find everything quite mad, I'm afraid.'

She had by then drunk rather a lot of champagne.

'You must come,' said Jean, speaking in her matter-of-fact tone, almost as if she were giving an order. 'There are all sorts of things I want to talk about.'

'Of course he'll come,' said Templer. 'But we might have the smallest spot of armagnac first.'

Afterwards, that dinner in the Grill seemed to partake of the nature of a ritual feast, a rite from which the four of us emerged to take up new positions in the formal dance with which human life is concerned. At the time, its charm seemed to reside in a difference from the usual run of things. Certainly the chief attraction of the projected visit would be absence of all previous plan. But, in a sense, nothing in life is planned—or everything is—because in the dance every step is ultimately the corollary of the step before; the consequence of being the kind of person one chances to be.

While we were at dinner heavy snow was descending outside. This downfall had ceased by the time my things were collected, though a few flakes were still blowing about in the clear winter air when we set out at last for the

Templers' house. The wind had suddenly dropped. The night was very cold.

'Had to sell the Buick,' Templer said. 'I'm afraid you won't find much room at the back of this miserable vehicle.'

Mona, now comatose after the wine at dinner, rolled herself up in a rug and took the seat in front. Almost immediately she went to sleep. Jean and I sat at the back of the car. We passed through Hammersmith, and the neighbourhood of Chiswick: then out on to the Great West Road. For a time I made desultory conversation. At last she scarcely answered, and I gave it up. Templer, smoking a cigar in the front, also seemed disinclined to talk now that he was at the wheel. We drove along at a good rate.

On either side of the highway, grotesque buildings, which in daytime resembled the temples of some shoddy, utterly unsympathetic Atlantis, now assumed the appearance of an Arctic city's frontier forts. Veiled in snow, these hideous monuments of a lost world bordered a broad river of black, foaming slush, across the surface of which the car skimmed and jolted with a harsh crackling sound, as if the liquid beneath were scalding hot.

Although not always simultaneous in taking effect, nor necessarily at all equal in voltage, the process of love is rarely unilateral. When the moment comes, a secret attachment is often returned with interest. Some know this by instinct; others learn in a hard school.

The exact spot must have been a few hundred yards beyond the point where the electrically illuminated young lady in a bathing dress dives eternally through the petrol-tainted air; night and day, winter and summer, never reaching the water of the pool to which she endlessly glides. Like some image of arrested development, she returns for ever, voluntarily, to the springboard from which she started her leap. A few seconds after I had seen this bathing belle journeying, as usual, imperturbably through the frozen air, I took Jean in my arms.

Her response, so sudden and passionate, seemed surprising only a minute or two later. All at once everything was changed. Her body felt at the same time hard and yielding, giving a kind of glow as if live current issued from it. I used to wonder afterwards whether, in the last resort, of all the time we spent together, however ecstatic, those first moments on the Great West Road were not the best.

To what extent the sudden movement that brought us together was attributable to sentiment felt years before; to behaviour that was almost an obligation within the Templer orbit; or, finally, to some specific impetus of the car as it covered an unusually bad surface of road, was later impossible to determine with certainty. All I knew was that I had not thought it all out beforehand. This may seem extraordinary in the light of what had gone before; but the behaviour of human beings is, undeniably, extraordinary. The incredible ease with which this evolution took place was almost as if the two of us had previously agreed to embrace at that particular point on the road. The timing had been impeccable.

We had bowled along much farther through the winter night, under cold, glittering stars, when Templer turned the car off the main road. Passing through byways lined with beech trees, we came at last to a narrow lane where snow still lay thick on the ground. At the end of this, the car entered a drive, virginally white. In the clear moonlight the grotesquely gabled house ahead of us, set among firs, seemed almost a replica of that mansion by the sea formerly inhabited by Templer's father. Although smaller in size, the likeness of general outline was uncanny. I almost expected to hear the crash of wintry waves beneath a neighbouring cliff. The trees about the garden were powdered with white. Now and then a muffled thud resounded as snow fell through the branches on to the thickly coated ground. Otherwise, all was deathly silent.

Templer drew up with a jerk in front of the door, the wheels churning up the snow. He climbed quickly from his seat, and went round to the back of the car, to unload from the boot some eatables and wine they had brought from London. At the same moment Mona came out of her sleep or coma. With the rug still wrapped round her, she jumped out of her side of the car, and ran across the Sisley landscape to the front door, which someone had opened from within. As she ran she gave a series of little shrieks of agony at the cold. Her footprints left deep marks on the face of the drive, where the snow lay soft and tender, like the clean, clean sheets of a measureless bed.

'Where shall I find you?'

'Next to you on the left.'

'How soon?'

'Give it half an hour.'

'I'll be there.'

'Don't be too long.'

She laughed softly when she said that, disengaging herself from the rug that covered both of us.

The interior of the house was equally reminiscent of the Templers' former home. Isbister's huge portrait of Mr. Templer still hung in the hall, a reminder of everyday life and unsolved business problems. Such things seemed far removed from this mysterious, snowy world of unreality, where all miracles could occur. There were the same golf clubs and shooting-sticks and tennis racquets; the same barometer, marking the weather on a revolving chart; the same post-box for letters; even the same panelling in light wood that made the place seem like the interior of a vast, extravagant cabinet for cigars.

‘What we need,’ said Templer, ‘is a drink. And then I think we shall all be ready for bed.’

For a second I wondered whether he were aware that something was afoot; but, when he turned to help Mona with the bottles and glasses, I felt sure from their faces that neither had given a thought to any such thing.

3.

EARLY in the morning, snow was still drifting from a darkened sky across the diamond lattices of the window-panes; floating drearily down upon the white lawns and grey muddy paths of a garden flanked by pines and fir trees. Through these coniferous plantations, which arose above thick laurel bushes, appeared at no great distance glimpses of two or three other houses similar in style to the one in which I found myself; the same red brick and gables, the same walls covered with ivy or virginia creeper.

This was, no doubt, a settlement of prosperous business men; a reservation, like those created for indigenous inhabitants, or wild animal life, in some region invaded by alien elements: a kind of refuge for beings unfitted to battle with modern conditions, where they might live their own lives, undisturbed and unexploited by an aggressive outer world. In these confines the species might be saved from extinction. I felt miles away from everything, lying there in that bedroom: almost as if I were abroad. The weather was still exceedingly cold. I thought over a conversation I had once had with Barnby.

'Has any writer ever told the truth about women?' he had asked.

One of Barnby's affectations was that he had read little or nothing, although, as a matter of fact, he knew rather thoroughly a small, curiously miscellaneous collection of books.

'Few in this country have tried.'

'No one would believe it if they did.'

'Possibly. Nor about men either, if it comes to that.'

'I intend no cheap cynicism,' Barnby said. 'It is merely that in print the truth is not credible for those who have not thought deeply of the matter.'

'That is true of almost everything.'

'To some extent. But painting, for example—where women are concerned—is quite different from writing. In painting you can state everything there is to be said on the subject. In other words, the thing is treated purely æsthetically, almost scientifically. Writers always seem to defer to the wishes of the women themselves.'

'So do painters. What about Reynolds or Boucher?'

'Of course, of course,' said Barnby, whose capacity for disregarding points made against him would have supplied the foundation for a dazzling career at the Bar. 'But in writing—perhaps, as you say, chiefly writing in this country—there is no equivalent, say, of Renoir's painting. Renoir did not think that all women's flesh was *literally* a material like pink satin. He used that colour and texture as a convention to express in a simple manner certain pictorial ideas of his own about women. In fact he did so in order to get on with the job in other aspects of his picture. I never find anything like that in a novel.'

'You find plenty of women with flesh like that sitting in the Ritz.'

'Maybe. And I can paint them. But can you write about them?'

'No real tradition of how women behave exists in English writing. In France there is at least a good rough and ready convention, perhaps not always correct—riddled with every form of romanticism—but at least a pattern to which a writer can work. A French novelist may conform with the convention, or depart from it. His readers know, more or less, which he is doing. Here, every female character has to be treated empirically.'

'Well, after all, so does every woman,' said Barnby, another of whose dialectical habits was suddenly to switch round and argue against himself. 'One of the troubles, I think, is that there are too many novelists like St. John Clarke.'

'But novelists of the first rank have not always been attracted to women physically.'

'If of the first rank,' said Barnby, 'they may rise above it. If anything less, abnormal novelists are, I believe, largely responsible for some of the extraordinary ideas that get disseminated about women and their behaviour.'

Barnby's sententious tone had already indicated to me that he was himself entangled in some new adventure. Those utterances, which Mr. Deacon used to call 'Barnby's generalisations about women', were almost always a prelude to a story involving some woman individually. So it had turned out on that occasion.

'When you first make a hit with someone,' he had continued, 'you think everything is going all right with the girl, just because it is all right with you. But when you are more used to things, you are always on your guard—prepared for trouble of one sort or another.'

'Who is it this time?'

'A young woman I met on a train.'

'How promiscuous.'

'She inspired a certain confidence.'

'And things are going wrong?'

'On the contrary, going rather well. That is what makes me suspicious.'

'Have you painted her?'

Barnby rummaged among the brushes, tubes of paint, newspapers, envelopes and bottles that littered the table; coming at last to a large portfolio from which he took a pencil drawing. The picture was of a girl's head. She looked about twenty. The features, suggested rather than outlined, made her seem uncertain of herself, perhaps on the defensive. Her hair was untidy. There was an air of self-conscious rebellion. Something about the portrait struck me as familiar.

'What is her name?'

'I don't know.'

'Why not?'

'She won't tell me.'

'How very secretive.'

'That's what I think.'

'How often has she been here?'

'Two or three times.'

I examined the drawing again.

'I've met her.'

'Who is she?'

'I'm trying to remember.'

'Have a good think,' said Barnby, sighing. 'I like to clear these matters up.'

But for the moment I was unable to recall the girl's name. I had the impression our acquaintance had been slight, and was of a year or two earlier. There had been something absurd, or laughable, in the background of the occasion when we had met.

'It would be only polite to reveal her identity by now,' Barnby said, returning the drawing to the portfolio and making a grimace.

'How did it start?'

'I was coming back from a week-end with the Manaschs'. She arrived in the compartment about an hour before we reached London. We began to talk about films. For some reason we got on to the French Revolution. She said she was on the side of the People.'

'Dark eyes and reddish hair?'

'The latter unbrushed.'

'Christian name, Anne?'

'There was certainly an "A" on her handkerchief. That was a clue I forgot to tell you.'

'Generally untidy?'

'Decidedly. As to baths, I shouldn't think she overdid them.'

'I think I can place her.'

'Don't keep me in suspense.'

'Lady Anne Stepney.'

'A friend of yours?'

'I sat next to her once at dinner years ago. She made the same remark about the French Revolution.'

'Did she, indeed,' said Barnby, perhaps a shade piqued at this apparently correct guess. 'Did you follow up those liberal convictions at the time?'

'On the contrary. I doubt if she would even remember my name. Her sister married Charles Stringham, whom I've sometimes talked of. They are getting a divorce, so I saw in the paper.'

'Oh, yes,' said Barnby. 'I read about it too. Stringham was the Great Industrialist's secretary at one moment, wasn't he? I met him with Baby and liked him. He has that very decorative mother, Mrs. Foxe, whom really I wouldn't——'

He became silent; then returned to the subject of the girl.

'Her parents are called Bridgnorth?'

'That's it.'

'One starts these things,' Barnby said, 'and then the question arises: how is one to continue them? Before you know where you are, you are thoroughly entangled. That is what we all have to remember.'

'We do, indeed.'

Lying in bed in the Templers' house, feeling more than a little unwilling to rise into a chilly world, I thought of these words of Barnby's. There could be no doubt that I was now, as he had said, 'thoroughly entangled'.

Everyone came down late to breakfast that morning. Mona was in a decidedly bad temper. Her irritation was perhaps due to an inner awareness that a love affair was in the air, the precise location of which she was unable to identify; for I was fairly certain that neither of the Templers guessed anything was 'on' between Jean and myself. They seemed, indeed, fully occupied by the discord of their own relationship. As it happened, I found no opportunity to be alone with Jean. She seemed almost deliberately to arrange that we should always be chaperoned by one of the other two. She would once more have appeared as calm, distant, unknown to me, as when first seen, had she not twice smiled submissively, almost shyly, when our eyes met.

Mona's sulkiness cast a gloom over the house. Although obviously lazy and easy-going in her manner of life, she possessed also an energy and egotism that put considerable force behind this display of moodiness. Templer made more than one effort to cheer her up, from time to time becoming annoyed himself at his lack of success; when conciliation would suddenly turn to teasing. However, his continued attempts to fall in with his wife's whims led in due course to an unexpected development in the composition of the party.

We were sitting in a large room of nebulous character, where most of the life of the household was carried on, reading the Sunday papers, talking, and playing the gramophone. The previous night's encounter with Quiggin had enflamed Mona's memories of her career as an artist's model. She began to talk of the 'times' she had had in various studios, and to question me about Mark Members; perhaps regretting that she had allowed this link with her past to be severed so entirely. Professionally, she had never come across such figures as Augustus John, or Epstein, trafficking chiefly with a few of the lesser academic painters; though she had known a few young men, like Members and Barnby, who frequented more 'advanced' circles. She had never even sat for Isbister, so she told me. All the same, that period of her life was now sufficiently far away to be clouded with romance; at least when compared in her own mind with her married circumstances.

When I agreed that both Members and Quiggin were by then, in their different ways, quite well-known 'young writers', she became more than ever enthusiastic about them, insisting that she must meet Quiggin again. In fact conversation seemed to have been deliberately steered by her into these channels with that end in view. Templer, lying in an armchair with his legs stretched out in front of him, listened indifferently to her talk while he idly turned the pages of the *News of the World*. His wife's experiences among 'artists' probably cropped up fairly often as a subject: a regular, almost legitimate method of exciting a little domestic jealousy when life at home seemed flat. Her repeated questions at last caused me to explain the change of secretary made by St. John Clarke.

'But this is all *too* thrilling,' she said. 'I told you St. John Clarke was my favourite author. Can't we get Mr. Quiggin to lunch and ask him what really *has* happened?'

'Well——'

'Look, Pete,' she exclaimed noisily. '*Do* let's ask J. G.

Quiggin to lunch today. He could get a train. Nick would ring him up—you will, won't you, darling?'

Templer threw the *News of the World* on to the carpet, and, turning towards me, raised his eyebrows and nodded his head slowly up and down to indicate the fantastic lengths to which caprice could be carried by a woman.

'But would Mr. Quiggin want to come?' he asked, imitating Mona's declamatory tone. 'Wouldn't he want to finish writing one of his brilliant articles?'

'We could try.'

'By all means, if you like. Half-past eleven on the day of the luncheon invitation is considered a bit late in the best circles, but fortunately we do not move in the best circles. I suppose there will be enough to eat. You remember Jimmy is bringing a girl friend?'

'Jimmy doesn't matter.'

'I agree.'

'What do you think, Nick?' she asked. 'Would Quiggin come?'

One of the charms of staying with the Templers had seemed the promise of brief escape from that routine of the literary world so relentlessly implied by the mere thought of Quiggin. It was the world in which I was thoroughly at home, and certainly did not wish to change for another, only for once to enjoy a week-end away from it. However, to prevent the Templers from asking Quiggin to lunch if they so desired was scarcely justifiable to anyone concerned. Besides, I was myself curious to hear further details regarding St. John Clarke; although I should have preferred by then to have heard Members's side of the story. Apart from all that—indeed quite overriding such considerations—were my own violent feelings about Jean which had to be reduced inwardly to some manageable order.

'Who is "Jimmy"?' I asked.

'Surely you remember Jimmy Stripling when you stayed with us years ago?' said Templer. 'My brother-in-law. At least he was until Babs divorced him. Somehow I've never been able to get him out of my life. Babs can demand her freedom and go her own way. For me there is no legal redress. Jimmy hangs round my neck like a millstone. I can't even get an annulment.'

'Didn't he go in for motor racing?'

'That's the chap.'

'Who disliked Sunny Farebrother so much?'

'Hated his guts. Well, Jimmy is coming to lunch today and bringing some sort of a piece with him—he asked if he could. Not too young, I gather, so your eyes need not brighten up. I can't remember her name. I could not refuse for old times' sake, though he is a terrible bore is poor old Jimmy these days. He had a spill at Brooklands a year or two ago. Being shot out of his car arse-first seems to have affected his brain in some way—though you wouldn't think there was much there to affect.'

'What does he do?'

'An underwriter at Lloyd's. It is not his business capacity so much as his private life that has seized up. He still rakes in a certain amount of dough. But he has taken up astrology and theosophy and numerology and God knows what else. Could your friend Quiggin stand that? Probably love it, wouldn't he? The more the merrier so far as I'm concerned.'

'Quiggin would eat it up.'

'*Do* ring him, then,' said Mona.

'Shall I?'

'Go ahead,' said Templer. 'The telephone is next door.'

There was no reply from Quiggin's Bloomsbury flat, so I rang St. John Clarke's number; on the principle that if a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing well. The bell buzzed for some seconds, and then Quiggin's voice sounded, gratingly, at the other end of the line. As I had supposed, he was already engaged on his new duties. At first he was very suspicious of my seeking him out at that place. These suspicions were not allayed when I explained about the invitation to lunch with the Templers.

'But *today*?' he said, irritably. 'Lunch today? Why, it's nearly lunch-time already.'

I repeated to him Mona's apologies for the undoubted lateness of the invitation.

'But I don't know them,' said Quiggin. 'Are they very rich?'

He still sounded cross, although a certain interest was aroused in him. I referred again to his earlier meeting with Mona.

'So she remembered me at Deacon's party after all?' he asked, rather more hopefully this time.

'She has talked of nothing but that evening.'

'I don't think I ought to leave St. J.'

'Is he bad?'

'Better, as a matter of fact. But there ought to be someone responsible here.'

'Couldn't you get Mark?' I asked, to tease him.

'St. J. does not want to see Mark just at the moment,' said Quiggin, in his flattest voice, ignoring any jocular implications the question might have possessed. 'But I suppose there is really no reason why the maid should not look after him perfectly well if I went out for a few hours.'

This sounded like weakening.

'You could catch the train if you started now.'

He was silent for a moment, evidently anxious to accept, but at the same time trying to find some excuse for making himself so easily available.

'Mona reads your articles.'

'She does?'

'Always quoting them.'

'Intelligently?'

'Come and judge for yourself.'

'Should I like their house?'

'You'll have the time of your life.'

'I think I will,' he said. 'Of course I shall be met at the station?'

'Of course.'

'All right, then.'

He replaced the receiver with a bang, as if closing an acrimonious interchange. I returned to the drawing-room. Templer was sprawling on the sofa, apparently not much interested whether Quiggin turned up or not.

'He's coming.'

'Is he *really*?' said Mona, shrilly. 'How *wonderful*.'

'Mona gets a bit bored with my friends,' said Templer. 'I must say I don't blame her. Now you can sample something of another kind at lunch, sweetie.'

'Well, we never see anybody *interesting*, sweetie,' said Mona, putting on a stage pout. 'He'll at least remind me of the days when I *used* to meet intelligent people.'

'Intelligent people?' said Templer. 'Come, come, darling, you aren't being very polite to Nick. He regards himself as tremendously intelligent.'

'Then we are providing some intelligent company for him,' said Mona. 'Your ex-brother-in-law isn't likely to come out with anything very sparkling in the way of conversation—unless he has changed a lot since we went with him to Wimbledon.'

'What do you expect at Wimbledon?' said Templer. 'To sit in the centre court listening to a flow of epigrams about foot-faults and forehand drives? Still, I see what you mean.'

I remembered Jimmy Stripling chiefly on account of various practical jokes in which he had been concerned when, as a boy, I had stayed with the Templers. In this horseplay he had usually had the worst of it. He remained in my memory as a big, gruff, bad-tempered fellow, full of guilty feelings about having taken no part in the war. I had not much cared for him. I wondered how he would get on with Quiggin, who could be crushing to people he disliked. However, one of the traits possessed by Quiggin in common with his new employer was a willingness to go almost anywhere where a free meal was on offer; and this realistic approach to social life implied, inevitably, if not toleration of other people, at least a certain rough and ready technique for dealing with all sorts. I could not imagine why Mona was so anxious to see Quiggin again. At that time I failed entirely to grasp the extent to which in her eyes Quiggin represented high romance.

'What happened to Babs when she parted from Jimmy Stripling?'

'Married a lord,' said Templer. 'The family is going up in the world. But I expect she still thinks about Jimmy. After all, you couldn't easily forget a man with breath like his.'

Some interruption changed the subject before I was able to ask the name of Babs's third husband. Mona went to tell the servants that there would be an additional guest. Templer followed her to look for more cigarettes. For a moment Jean and I were left alone together. I slipped my hand under her arm. She pressed down upon it, giving me a sense of being infinitely near to her; an assurance that all would be well. There is always a real and an imaginary person you are in love with; sometimes you love one best, sometimes the other. At that moment it was the real one I loved. We had scarcely time to separate and begin a formal conversation when Mona returned to the room.

There the four of us remained until the sound came of a car churning up snow before the front door. This was Quiggin's arrival. Being, in a way, so largely responsible for his presence at the Templers' house, I was rather relieved to observe, when he entered the room, that he had cleaned himself up a bit since the previous evening. Now he was wearing a suit of cruelly blue cloth and a green knitted tie. From the start it was evident that he intended to make himself agreeable. His sharp little eyes darted round the walls, taking in the character of his hosts and their house.

'I see you have an Isbister in the hall,' he said, dryly.

The harsh inflexion of his voice made it possible to accept this comment as a compliment, or, alternatively, a shared joke. Templer at once took the words in the latter sense.

'Couldn't get rid of it,' he said. 'I suppose you don't know anybody who would make an offer? An upset price, of course. Now's the moment.'

'I'll look about,' said Quiggin. 'Isbister was a typical artist-business man produced by a decaying society, don't you think? As a matter of fact Nicholas and I have got to have a talk about Isbister in the near future.'

He grinned at me. I hoped he was not going to raise the whole question of St. John Clarke's introduction there and then. His tone might have meant anything or nothing, so far as his offer of help was concerned. Perhaps he really intended to suggest that he would try to sell the picture for Templer; and get a rake-off. His eyes continued to stray over the very indifferent nineteenth-century seascapes that covered the walls; hung together in patches as if put up hurriedly when the place was first occupied. No doubt that was exactly what had happened to them. In the Templers' house by the sea they had hung in the dining-room. Before the Isbister could be discussed further, the two other guests arrived.

The first through the door was a tall, rather overpowering lady, followed closely by Jimmy Stripling himself, looking much older than I had remembered him. The smoothness of the woman's movements, as she advanced towards Mona, almost suggested that Stripling was propelling her in front of him like an automaton on castors. I knew at once that I had seen her before, but could not at first recall the occasion: one so different, as it turned out, from that of the moment.

'How are you, Jimmy?' said Templer.

Stripling took the woman by the arm.

'This is Mrs. Erdleigh,' he said, in a rather strangled voice. 'I have told you so much about her, you know, and here she is.'

Mrs. Erdleigh shook hands graciously all round, much as if she were a visiting royalty. When she came to me, she took my hand in hers and smiled indulgently.

'You see I was right,' she said. 'You did not believe me, did you? It is just a year.'

Once more, suffocating waves of musk-like scent were distilled by her presence. By then, as a matter of fact, a month or two must have passed beyond the year that she had foretold would precede our next meeting. All the same, it was a respectable piece of prognostication. I thought it wiser to leave Uncle Giles unmentioned. If she wished to speak of him, she could always raise the subject herself. I reflected, at the same time, how often this exterior aspect of Uncle Giles's personality must have remained 'unmentioned' throughout his life; especially where his relations were concerned.

However, Mrs. Erdleigh gave the impression of knowing very well what was advisable to 'mention' and what inadvisable. She looked well; younger, if anything, than when I had seen her at the Ufford, and smartly dressed in a style that suggested less than before her inexorably apocalyptic role in life. In fact, her clothes of that former occasion seemed now, in contrast, garments of a semi-professional kind; vestments, as it were, appropriate to the ritual of her vocation. With Stripling under her control—as he certainly was—she could no doubt allow herself frivolously to enjoy the fashion of the moment.

Stripling himself, on the other hand, had changed noticeably for the worse in the ten years or more gone since our former meeting. His bulk still gave the impression that he was taking up more than his fair share of the room, but the body, although big, seemed at the same time shrivelled. His hair, still parted in the middle, was grey and grizzled. Although at that time still perhaps under forty, he looked prematurely old. There was an odd, disconnected stare in his eyes, which started from his head when he spoke at all emphatically. He appeared to be thoroughly under the thumb of Mrs. Erdleigh, whose manner, kindly though firm, implied supervision of a person not wholly responsible for his own actions. Later, it was noticeable how fixedly he watched her, while in conversation he inclined to refer even the most minor matters to her arbitration. In spite of his cowed air, he was far more friendly than when we had met before, an occasion he assured me he remembered perfectly.

'We had a lot of fun that summer with my old pal, Sunny Farebrother, didn't we?' he said in a melancholy voice.

He spoke as if appealing for agreement that the days when fun could be had with Sunny Farebrother, or indeed with anyone else, were now long past.

'Do you remember how we were going to put a po in his hat-box or something?' he went on. 'How we all laughed. Good old Sunny. I never seem to see the old boy now, though I hear he's making quite a bit of money.

It's just the same with so many folks one used to know. They pass by on the other side or join the Great Majority.'

His face had lighted up when, upon entering the room, he had seen Jean, and he had taken both her hands in his and kissed her enthusiastically. She did not seem to regard this act as anything out of the way, nor even specially repugnant to her. I felt a twinge of annoyance at that kiss. I should have liked no one else to kiss her for at least twenty-four hours. However, I reminded myself that such familiarity was reasonable enough in an ex-brother-in-law; in fact, if it came to that, reasonable enough in any old friend; though for that reason no more tolerable to myself. Stripling also held Jean's arm for a few seconds, but, perhaps aware of Mrs. Erdleigh's eye upon him, removed his hand abruptly. Fumbling in his pocket, he produced a long gold cigarette-case and began to fill it from a packet of Players. Although physically dilapidated, he still gave the impression of being rich. The fact that his tweeds were crumpled and the cuffs of his shirt greasy somehow added to this impression of wealth. If there had been any doubt about Stripling's money, his satisfactory financial position could have been estimated from Quiggin's manner towards him, a test like litmus paper where affluence was concerned. Quiggin was evidently anxious—as I was myself—to learn more of this strange couple.

'How's the world, Jimmy?' said Templer, clapping his former brother-in-law on the back, and catching my eye as he handed him an unusually stiff drink.

'Well,' said Stripling, speaking slowly, as if Templer's enquiry deserved very serious consideration before an answer was made, 'well, I don't think the *World* will get much better as long as it clings to material values.'

At this Quiggin laughed in a rather more aggressive manner than he had adopted hitherto. He was evidently trying to decide whether it would be better to be ingratiating to Stripling or to attack him; either method could be advantageous from its respective point of view.

'*I* think material values are just what want reassessing,' Quiggin said. 'Nor do I see how we can avoid clinging to them, since they are the only values that truly exist. However, they might be linked with a little social justice for a change.'

Stripling disregarded this remark, chiefly, I think, because his mind was engrossed with preoccupations so utterly different that he had not the slightest idea what Quiggin was talking about. Templer's eyes began to brighten as he realised that elements were present that promised an enjoyable clash of opinions. Luncheon was announced. We passed into the dining-room. As I sat down at the table I saw Mrs. Erdleigh's forefinger touch Mona's hand.

'As soon as I set eyes on you, my dear,' she said, gently, 'I knew that you belonged to the Solstice of Summer. When *is* your birthday?'

As usual, her misty gaze seemed to envelop completely whomsoever she addressed. There could be no doubt that her personality had immediately delighted Mona, who had by then already lost all her earlier sulkiness. Indeed, as the meal proceeded, Mrs. Erdleigh showed herself to be just what Mona had required. She provided limitlessly a kind of conversational balm at once maternal and sacerdotal. The two of them settled down to a detailed discussion across the table of horoscopes and their true relation to peculiarities of character. I was for some reason reminded of Sillery dealing with some farouche undergraduate whom he wished especially to enclose within his net. Even Mona's so recently excited interest in Quiggin was forgotten in this torrent of astrological self-examination, systematically controlled, in spite of its urgency of expression, by such a sympathetic informant. Mona seemed now entirely absorbed in Mrs. Erdleigh, whose manner, vigorous, calm, mystical, certainly dominated the luncheon table.

The meal passed off, therefore, with more success than might have been expected from such oddly assorted company. I reflected, not for the first time, how mistaken it is to suppose there exists some 'ordinary' world into which it is possible at will to wander. All human beings, driven as they are at different speeds by the same Furies, are at close range equally extraordinary. This party's singular composition was undoubtedly enhanced by the commonplace nature of its surroundings. At the same time it was evident that the Templers themselves saw nothing in the least out-of-the-way about the guests collected round their table for Sunday luncheon; except possibly the fact that both Quiggin and I were professionally connected with books.

If Quiggin disapproved—and he did undoubtedly disapprove—of the turn taken by Mona's and Mrs. Erdleigh's talk, he made at first no effort to indicate his dissatisfaction. He was in possession of no clue to the fact that he had been arbitrarily deposed from the position of most honoured guest in the house that day. In any case, as a person who himself acted rarely if ever from frivolous or disinterested motives, he would have found it hard, perhaps impossible, to understand the sheer irresponsibility of his invitation. To have been asked simply and solely on account of Mona's whim, if he believed that to be the reason, must have been in itself undeniably flattering to his vanity; but, as Mr. Deacon used sadly to remark, 'those who enjoy the delights of caprice must also accustom themselves to bear caprice's lash'. Even if Quiggin were aware of this harsh law's operation, he had no means of appreciating the ruthless manner in which it had been put into execution that afternoon. Mona's wish to see him had been emphasised by me when I had spoken with him on the telephone. If she continued to ignore him, Quiggin would logically assume that for one reason or another either Templer, or I myself, must have desired his presence. He would suspect some ulterior motive as soon as he began to feel sceptical as to Mona's interest in him being the cause of his invitation. As the meal progressed, this lack of attention on her part undoubtedly renewed earlier suspicions. By the time we were drinking coffee he was already showing signs of becoming less amenable.

I think this quite fortuitous situation brought about by the presence of Mrs. Erdleigh was not without effect on Quiggin's future behaviour towards Mona herself. If Mrs. Erdleigh had not been at the table he would undoubtedly have received the full force of his hostess's admiration. This would naturally have flattered him, but his shrewdness would probably also have assessed her deference as something fairly superficial. As matters turned out, apparent disregard for him keenly renewed his own former interest in her. Perhaps Quiggin thought she was deliberately hiding her true feelings at luncheon. Perhaps he was right in thinking that. With a woman it is impossible to say.

In the early stages of the meal Quiggin had been perfectly agreeable, talking to Jean of changes taking place in contemporary poetry, and of the personalities involved in these much advertised literary experiments. He explained that he considered the work of Mark Members commendable, if more than a trifle old-fashioned.

'Mark has developed smoothly from beginnings legitimately influenced by Browning, paused perhaps too long in byways frequented by the Symbolists, and reached in his own good time a categorically individual style and phraseology. Unfortunately his *œuvre* is at present lacking in any real sense of social significance.'

He glanced at Mona after saying this, perhaps hoping that a former friend of Gypsy Jones might notice the political implications of his words. However he failed to catch her attention, and turned almost immediately to lighter matters, evidently surprising even Templer by sagacious remarks regarding restaurant prices in the South of France, and an unexpected familiarity with the *Barrio chino* quarter in Barcelona. However, in spite of this conversational versatility, I was aware that Quiggin was inwardly turning sour. This could be seen from time to time in his face, especially in the glances of dislike he was beginning to cast in the direction of Stripling. He had probably decided that, rich though Stripling might be, he was not worth cultivating.

Stripling, for his part, did not talk much; when he spoke chiefly addressing himself to Jean. He had shown—perhaps not surprisingly—no interest whatever in Quiggin's admirably lucid exposition of the New School's poetic diction, in which Communist convictions were expressed in unexpected metre and rhyme. On the other hand Stripling did sometimes rouse himself in an attempt to break into the stream of astrological chatter that bubbled between Mrs. Erdleigh and Mona. His mind seemed to wander perpetually through the mystic territories of clairvoyance, a world of the spirit no doubt incarnate to him in Mrs. Erdleigh herself. Although this appearance of permanent preoccupation, coupled with his peculiar, jerky manner, conveyed the impression that he might not be quite sane, Templer seemed to attach more importance to Stripling's City gossip than his father had ever done. Mr. Templer, I remembered, had been very curt with his son-in-law when financial matters were in question.

All the while I felt horribly bored with the whole lot of them, longing to be alone once more with Jean, and yet also in some odd manner almost dreading the moment when that time should come; one of those mixed sensations so characteristic of intense emotional excitement. There is always an element of unreality, perhaps even of slight absurdity, about someone you love. It seemed to me that she was sitting in an awkward, almost melodramatic manner, half-turned towards Quiggin, while she crumbled her bread with fingers long and subtly shaped. I seemed to be looking at a picture of her, yet felt that I could easily lose control of my senses, and take her, then and there, in my arms.

'But in these days you can't believe in such things as astrology,' said Quiggin. 'Why, even apart from other considerations, the very astronomical discoveries made since the time of the ancients have negatived what was once thought about the stars.'

We had returned to the drawing-room. Already it was obvious that the afternoon must be spent indoors. The leaden, sunless sky, from which sleet was now falling with a clatter on to the frozen snow of the lawn, created in the house an atmosphere at once gloomy and sinister: a climate in itself hinting of necromancy. The electric light had to be turned on, just as if we were sitting in the lounge of the Ufford. The heavy claret drunk at luncheon prompted a desire to lie at full length on the sofa, or at least to sit well back and stretch out the legs and yawn. For a second —soft and exciting and withdrawn immediately—I felt Jean's hand next to mine on the cushion. Quiggin lurked in the corners of the room, pretending to continue his examination of the pictures, his silence scarcely concealing the restlessness that had overtaken him. From time to time he shot out a remark, more or less barbed. He must by then have tumbled to the implications of his own status at the party. Nettled at Mrs. Erdleigh's capture of Mona, he was probably planning how best to express his irritation openly.

'Oh, but I *do*,' said Mona, drawling out the words. 'I think those occult things are almost always right. They are in my case, I *know*.'

'Yes, yes,' said Quiggin, brushing aside this affirmation with a tolerant grin, as the mere fancy of a pretty girl, and at the same time addressing himself more directly to Stripling, at whom his first attack had certainly been aimed, 'but *you* can't believe all that—a hard-headed business man like yourself?'

'That's just it,' said Stripling, ignoring, in fact probably not noticing, the sneering, disagreeable tone of Quiggin's voice. 'It's just the fact that I *am* occupied all day long with material things that makes me realise they are not the whole of life.'

However, his eyes began to start from his head, so that he was perhaps becoming aware that Quiggin was deliberately teasing him. No doubt he was used to encountering a certain amount of dissent from his views, though opposition was probably not voiced as usual in so direct and dialectical a manner as this. Quiggin continued to smile derisively.

'You certainly find in me no champion of the City's methods,' he said. 'But at least what you call "material things" represent reality.'

'Hardly at all.'

'Oh, come.'

'Money is a delusion.'

'Not if you haven't got any.'

'That is just when you realise most money's unreality.'

'Why not get rid of yours, then?'

'I might any day.'

'Let me know when you decide to.'

'You must understand the thread that runs through life,' said Stripling, now speaking rather wildly, and looking stranger than ever. 'It does not matter that there may be impurities and errors in one man's method of seeking the Way. What matters is that he *is* seeking it—and knows there is a Way to be found.'

'Commencement—Opposition—Equilibrium,' said Mrs. Erdleigh in her softest voice, as if to offer Stripling some well-earned moral support. 'You can't get away from it—Thesis—Antithesis—Synthesis.'

'That's just what I mean,' said Stripling, as if her words brought him instant relief. 'Brahma—Vishnu—Siva.'

'It all sounded quite Hegelian until you brought in the Indian gods,' said Quiggin angrily.

He would no doubt have continued to argue had not a new element been introduced at this moment by Jean: an object that became immediately the focus of attention.

While this discussion had been in progress she had slipped from the room. I had been wondering how I could myself quietly escape from the others and look for her, when she returned carrying in her hand what first appeared to be a small wooden palette for oil paints. Two castors, or wheels, were attached to this heart-shaped board, the far end of which was transfixed with a lead pencil. I recalled the occasion when Sunny Farebrother had ruined so many of Stripling's starched collars in a patent device in which he had a business interest, and I wondered whether this was something of a similar kind. However, Mrs. Erdleigh immediately recognised the significance of the toy and began to laugh a little reprovingly.

'Planchette?' she said. 'You know, I really rather disapprove. I do not think Good Influences make themselves known through Planchette as a rule. And the things it writes cause such a lot of bad feeling sometimes.'

'It really belongs to Baby,' said Jean. 'She heard of it somewhere and made Sir Magnus Donners get her one. She brought it round to us once when she was feeling depressed about some young man of hers. We couldn't make it work. She forgot to take it away and I have been carrying it round—meaning to give it back to her—ever since.'

Stripling's eyes lit up and began once more to dilate.

'Shall we do it?' he asked, in a voice that shook slightly. 'Do let's.'

'Well,' said Mrs. Erdleigh, speaking kindly, as if to a child who has proposed a game inevitably associated with the breakage of china, 'I *know* trouble will come of it if we do.'

'But for once,' begged Stripling. 'Don't you think for once, Myra? It's such a rotten afternoon.'

'Then don't complain afterwards that I did not warn you.'

Although I had often heard of Planchette, I had never, as it happened, seen the board in operation; and I felt some curiosity myself to discover whether its writings would indeed set down some of the surprising disclosures occasionally described by persons in the habit of playing with it. The very name was new to both the Templers. Stripling explained that the machine was placed above a piece of blank paper, upon which the pencil wrote words, when two or three persons lightly rested their fingers upon the wooden surface: castors and pencil point moving without deliberate agency. Stripling was obviously delighted to be allowed for once to indulge in this forbidden practice, in spite of Mrs. Erdleigh's tempered disparagement. Whether her disapproval was really deep-seated, or due merely to a conviction that the game was unwise in that particular company, could only be guessed.

Quiggin was plainly annoyed; even rather insulted, at this step taken towards an actual physical attempt to invoke occult forces.

'I thought such things had been forgotten since the court of Napoleon III,' he said. 'You don't really believe it will write anything, do you?'

'You may be surprised by the knowledge it displays of your own life, old chap,' said Stripling, with an effort to recover the breeziness of earlier days.

'Obviously—when someone is rigging it.'

'It's hardly possible to rig it, old chap. You try and write something, just using the board by yourself. You'll find it damned difficult.'

Quiggin gave an annoyed laugh. Some sheets of foolscap, blue and ruled with red lines for keeping accounts, were found in a drawer. One of these large sheets of paper was set out upon a table. The experiment began with Mona, Stripling and Mrs. Erdleigh as executants, the last of whom, having once registered her protest, showed no ungraciousness in her manner of joining the proceedings, if they were fated to take place. Templer obviously felt complete scepticism regarding the whole matter, which he could not be induced to take seriously even to the extent of agreeing to participate. Quiggin, too, refused to join in, though he showed an almost feverish interest in what was going forward.

Naturally, Quiggin was delighted when, after a trial of several minutes, no results whatever were achieved. Then the rest of us, in various combinations of persons, attempted to work the board. All these efforts were unsuccessful. Sometimes the pencil shot violently across the surface of the paper, covering sheet after sheet, as a new surface was substituted, with dashes and scribbles. More often, it would not move at all.

'You none of you seem to be getting very far,' said Templer.

'It may be waste of time,' said Mrs. Erdleigh. 'Planchette can be very capricious. Perhaps there is an unsympathetic presence in the room.'

'I should not be at all surprised,' said Quiggin, speaking with elaborately satirical emphasis.

He stood with his heels on the fender, his hands in his pockets—rather in the position Le Bas used to adopt when giving a lecture on wiping your boots before coming into the house—very well pleased with the course things were taking.

'I think you are horrid,' said Mona.

She made a face at him; in itself a sign of a certain renewed interest.

'I don't think you ought to believe in such things,' said Quiggin, nasally.

"But I *do*.'

She smiled encouragingly. She had probably begun to feel that occult phenomena, at least by its absence, was proving itself a bore; and that perhaps she might find more fun in returning to her original project of exploring Quiggin's own possibilities. However, this exchange between them was immediately followed by sudden development among the group resting their fingers on the board. Jean and Mona had been trying their luck with Stripling as third partner. Jean now rose from the table, and, dropping one of those glances at once affectionate and enquiring that raised such a storm within me, she said: 'You have a go.'

I took the chair and placed my fingers lightly where hers had been. Previously, when I had formed a trio with Mrs.

Erdleigh and Mona—who had insisted on being party to every session—nothing of note had happened. Now, almost at once, Planchette began to move in a slow, regular motion.

At first, from the 'feel' of the movement, I thought Stripling must be manipulating the board deliberately. A glassy look had come into his eye and his loose, rather brutal mouth sagged open. Then the regular, up-and-down rhythm came abruptly to an end. The pencil, as if impatient of all of us, shot off the paper on to the polished wood of the table. A sentence had been written. It was inverted from where Stripling was sitting. In fact the only person who could reasonably be accused of having written the words was myself. The script was long and sloping, Victorian in character. Mrs. Erdleigh took a step forward and read it aloud:

'Karl is not pleased.'

There was great excitement at this. Everyone crowded round our chairs.

'You must ask who "Karl" is,' said Mrs. Erdleigh, smiling.

She was the only one who remained quite unmoved by this sudden manifestation. Such things no longer surprised her. Quiggin, on the other hand, moved quickly round to my side of the table. He seemed divided between a wish to accuse me of having written these words as a hoax, and at the same time an unwillingness to make the admission, obviously necessary in the circumstances, that any such deception must have required quite exceptional manipulative agility. In the end he said nothing, but stood there frowning hard at me.

'Is it Karl speaking?' asked Stripling, in a respectful, indeed reverential voice.

We replaced our hands on the board.

'Who else,' wrote Planchette.

'Shall we continue?'

'Antwortet er immer.'

'Is that German?' said Stripling.

'What does it mean, Pete?' Mona called out shrilly.

Templer looked a little surprised at this.

'Isn't it: "He always answers"?' he said. 'My German is strictly commercial—not intended for communication with the Next World.'

'Have you a message? Please write in English if you do not mind.'

Stripling's voice again trembled a little when he said this.

'Nothing to the Left.'

This was decidedly enigmatic.

'Does he mean we should move the coffee tray?' Mona almost shouted, now thoroughly excited. 'He doesn't say whose left. Perhaps we should clear the whole table.'

Quiggin took a step nearer.

'Which of you is faking this?' he said roughly. 'I believe it is you, Nick.'

He was grinning hard, but I could see that he was extremely irritated. I pointed out that I could not claim to write neat Victorian calligraphy sideways, and also upside-down, at considerable speed: especially when unable to see the paper written upon.

'You must know "Nothing to the Left" is a quotation,' Quiggin insisted.

'Who said it?'

'You got a degree in history, didn't you?'

'I must have missed out that bit.'

'Robespierre, of course,' said Quiggin, with great contempt. 'He was speaking politically. Does no one in this country take politics seriously?'

I could not understand why he had become quite so angry.

'Let's get on with it,' said Templer, now at last beginning to show some interest. 'Perhaps he'll make himself clearer if pressed.'

'This is *too* exciting,' said Mona.

She clasped her hands together. We tried again.

'*Wives in common.*'

This was an uncomfortable remark. It was impossible to guess what the instrument might write next. However, everyone was far too engrossed to notice whether the comment had brought embarrassment to any individual present.

'Look here——' began Quiggin.

Before he could complete the sentence, the board began once more to race beneath our fingers.

'*Force is the midwife.*'

'I hope he isn't going to get too obstetric,' said Templer.

Quiggin turned once more towards me. He was definitely in a rage.

'You must know where these phrases come from,' he said. 'You can't be as ignorant as that.'

'Search me.'

'You are trying to be funny.'

'Never less.'

'Marx, of course, Marx,' said Quiggin testily, but perhaps wavering in his belief that I was responsible for faking the writing. '*Das Kapital*. . . . The Communist Manifesto.'

'So it's Karl Marx, is it?' asked Mona.

The name was evidently vaguely familiar to her, no doubt from her earlier days when she had known Gypsy Jones; had perhaps even taken part in such activities as selling *War Never Pays!*

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Quiggin, by implication including Mona in this reproof, probably more violently than he intended. 'It was quite obvious that one of you was rigging the thing. I admit I can't at present tell which of you it was. I suspect it was Nick, as he is the only one who knows I am a practising Marxist—and he persuaded me to come here.'

'I didn't know anything of the sort—and I've already told you I can't write upside-down.'

'Steady on,' said Templer. 'You can't accuse a fellow guest of cheating at Planchette. Duels have been fought for less. This will turn into another Tranby Croft case unless we moderate our tone.'

Quiggin made a despairing gesture at such frivolity of manner.

'I can't believe no one present knows the quotation, "Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one," ' he said. 'You will be telling me next you never heard the words, "The Workers have no country." '

'I believe Karl Marx has been "through" before,' said Stripling, slowly and with great solemnity. 'Wasn't he a revolutionary writer?'

'He was,' said Quiggin, with heavy irony. 'He *was* a revolutionary writer.'

'*Do* let's try again,' said Mona.

This time the writing changed to a small, niggling hand, rather like that of Uncle Giles.

'He is sick.'

'Who is sick?'

'You know well.'

'Where is he?'

'In his room.'

'Where is his room?'

'The House of Books.'

The writing was getting smaller and smaller. I felt as if I were taking part in one of those scenes from *Alice in Wonderland* in which the characters change their size.

'What can it mean now?' asked Mona.

'You have a duty.'

Quiggin's temper seemed to have moved from annoyance, mixed with contempt, to a kind of general uneasiness.

'I suppose it isn't talking about St. John Clarke,' I suggested.

Quiggin's reaction to this remark was unexpectedly violent. His sallow skin went white, and, instead of speaking with his usual asperity, he said in a quiet, worried voice: 'I was beginning to wonder just the same thing. I don't know that I really ought to have left him. Look here, can I ring up the flat—just to make sure that everything is all right?'

'Of course,' said Templer.

'This way?'

We tried again. Before Quiggin had reached the door, the board had moved and stopped. This time the result was disappointing. Planchette had written a single word, monosyllabic and indecent. Mona blushed.

'That sometimes happens,' said Mrs. Erdleigh, calmly.

She spoke as if it were as commonplace to see such things written on blue ruled accounting paper as on the door or wall of an alley. Neatly detaching that half of the sheet, she tore it into small pieces and threw them into the waste-paper basket.

'Only too often,' said Stripling with a sigh.

He had evidently accepted the fact that his enjoyment for that afternoon was at an end. Mona giggled.

'We will stop now,' said Mrs. Erdleigh, speaking with the voice of authority. 'It is really no use continuing when a Bad Influence once breaks through.'

'I'm surprised he knew such a word,' said Templer.

We sat for a time in silence. Quiggin's action in going to the telephone possessed the force of one of those utterly unexpected conversions, upon which a notorious drunkard swears never again to touch alcohol, or a declared pacifist enlists in the army. It was scarcely credible that Planchette should have sent him bustling out of the room to enquire after St. John Clarke's health, even allowing for the importance to himself of the novelist as a livelihood.

'We shall have to be departing soon, *mon cher,*' said Mrs. Erdleigh, showing Stripling the face of her watch.

'Have some tea,' said Templer. 'It will be appearing at any moment.'

'No, we shall certainly have to be getting along, Pete,' said Stripling, as if conscious that, having been indulged over Planchette, he must now behave himself specially well. 'It has been a wonderful afternoon. Quite like the old days. Wish old Sunny could have been here. Most interesting too.'

He had evidently not taken in Quiggin's reason for hurrying to the telephone, nor had any idea of the surprising effect that Planchette's last few sentences had had on such a professional sceptic. Perhaps he would have been pleased to know that Quiggin had acquired at least enough belief to be thrown into a nervous state by those cryptic remarks. More probably, he would not have been greatly interested. For Stripling, this had been a perfectly normal manner of passing his spare time. He would never be able to conceive how far removed were such activities from Quiggin's daily life and manner of approaching the world. In Stripling, profound belief had taken the place of any sort of halting imagination he might once have claimed.

Quiggin now reappeared. He was even more disturbed than before.

'I am afraid I must go home immediately,' he said, in some agitation. 'Do you know when there is a train? And can I be taken to the station? It is really rather urgent.'

'Is he dying?' asked Mona, in an agonised voice.

She was breathless with excitement at the apparent confirmation of a message from what Mrs. Erdleigh called 'the Other Side'. She took Quiggin's arm, as if to soothe him. He did not answer at once, apparently undecided at what should be made public. Then he addressed himself to me.

'The telephone was answered by Mark,' he said, through his teeth.

For Quiggin to discover Members reinstated in St. John Clarke's flat within a few hours of his own departure was naturally a serious matter.

'And *is* St. John Clarke worse?'

'I couldn't find out for certain,' said Quiggin, almost wretchedly, 'but I think he must be for Mark to be allowed back. I suppose St. J. wanted something done in a hurry, and told the maid to ring up Mark as I wasn't there. I must go at once.'

He turned towards the Templers.

'I am afraid there is no train for an hour,' Templer said, 'but Jimmy is on his way to London, aren't you, Jimmy? He will give you a lift.'

'Of course, old chap, of course.'

'Of course he can. So you can go with dear old Jimmy and arrive in London in no time. He drives like hell.'

'No longer,' said Mrs. Erdleigh, with a smile. 'He drives with care.'

I am sure that the last thing Quiggin wanted at that moment was to be handed over to Stripling and Mrs. Erdleigh, but there was no alternative if he wanted to get to London with the least possible delay. A curious feature of the afternoon had been the manner in which all direct contact between himself and Mrs. Erdleigh had somehow been avoided. Each no doubt realised to the full that the other possessed nothing to offer: that any exchange of energy would have been waste of time.

In Quiggin's mind, the question of St. John Clarke's worsened state of health, as such, had now plainly given place to the more immediate threat of Members re-entering the novelist's household on a permanent footing. His fear that the two developments might be simultaneous was, I feel sure, not necessarily based upon entirely cynical premises. In a weakened state, St. John Clarke might easily begin to regret his earlier suspension of Members as a secretary. Sick persons often vacillate. Quiggin's anxiety was understandable. No doubt he regarded himself, politically and morally, as a more suitable secretary than Members. It was, therefore, reasonable that he should wish to return as soon as possible to the field of operations.

Recognising at once that he must inevitably accompany the two of them, Quiggin accepted Stripling's offer of conveyance. He did this with a bad grace, but at the same time insistently, to show there must be no delay now the matter had been decided. This sudden disintegration of the party was displeasing to Mona, who probably felt now that she had wasted her opportunity of having Quiggin in the house; just as on the previous day she had wasted her meeting with him in the Ritz. She seemed, at any rate, overwhelmed with vague, haunting regrets for the manner in which things had turned out; all that unreasoning bitterness and mortification to which women are so subject. For a time she begged them to stay, but it was no good.

'But *promise* you will ring up.'

She took Quiggin's hand. He seemed surprised, perhaps even rather touched at the warmth with which she spoke. He replied with more feeling than was usual in his manner that he would certainly communicate with her.

'I will let you know how St. J. is.'

'Oh, *do*.'

'Without fail.'

'Don't forget.'

Mrs. Erdleigh, in her travelling clothes, had reverted to my first impression of her at the Ufford as priestess of some esoteric cult. Wrapped about with scarves, veils and stoles, she took my hand.

'Have you met *her* yet?' she enquired in a low voice.

'Yes.'

'Just as I told you?'

'Yes.'

Mrs. Erdleigh smiled to herself. They piled into the car, Quiggin glowering in the back, hatless, but with a fairly thick overcoat. Stripling drove off briskly, sending the crisp snow in a shower from the wheels. The car disappeared into the gloomy shadows of the conifers.

We returned to the drawing-room. Templer threw himself into an armchair.

'What a party,' he said. 'Poor old Jimmy really has landed something this time. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't have to marry that woman. She's like Rider Haggard's *She—She who must be obeyed.*'

'I thought she was wonderful,' said Mona.

'So does Jimmy,' said Templer. 'You know, I can see a look of Babs. Something in the way she carries herself.'

I, too, had noticed an odd, remote resemblance in Mrs. Erdleigh to his elder sister. However, Mona disagreed strongly, and they began to argue.

'It was extraordinary all that stuff about Marx coming up,' said Templer. 'I suppose it was swilling about in old Quiggin's head and somehow got released.'

'Of course, you can never believe anything you can't explain quite simply,' said Mona.

'Why should I?' said Templer.

Tea merged into drinks. Mona's temper grew worse. I began to feel distinctly tired. Jean had brought out some work, and was sewing. Templer yawned in his chair. I wondered why he and his wife did not get on better. It was extraordinary that he seemed to please so many girls, and yet not her.

'It was a pretty stiff afternoon,' he said.

'I enjoyed it,' said Mona. 'It was a change.'

'It certainly was.'

They began to discuss Planchette again; ending inevitably in argument. Mona stood up.

'Let's go out tonight.'

'Where to?'

'We could dine at Skindles.'

'We've done that exactly a thousand and twenty-seven times. I've counted.'

'Then the Ace of Spades.'

'You know how I feel about the Ace of Spades after what happened to me there.'

'But I like it.'

'Anyway, wouldn't it be nicer to eat in tonight? Unless Nick and Jean are mad to make a night of it.'

I had no wish to go out to dinner; Jean was non-committal. The Templers continued to argue. Suddenly Mona burst into tears.

'You never want to do *anything* I want,' she said. 'If I can't go out. I shall go to bed. They can send up something on a tray. As a matter of fact I haven't been feeling well all day.'

She turned from him, and almost ran from the room.

'Oh, hell,' said Templer. 'I suppose I shall have to see about this. Help yourselves to another drink when you're ready.'

He followed his wife through the door. Jean and I were alone. She gave me her hand, smiling, but resisting a closer embrace.

'Tonight?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Not a good idea.'

'I see.'

'Sorry.'

'When?'

'Any time.'

'Will you come to my flat?'

'Of course.'

'When?'

'I've told you. Any time you like.'

'Tuesday?'

'No, not Tuesday.'

'Wednesday, then?'

'I can't manage Wednesday either.'

'But you said any time.'

'Any time but Tuesday or Wednesday.'

I tried to remember what plans were already made, and which could be changed. Thursday was a tangle of engagements, hardly possible to rearrange at short notice without infinite difficulties arising. Matters must be settled quickly, because Templer might return to the room at any moment.

'Friday?'

She looked doubtful. I thought she was going to insist on Thursday. Perhaps the idea of doing so had crossed her mind. A measure of capriciousness is, after all, natural in women; perhaps fulfils some physiological need for both sexes. A woman who loves you likes to torment you from time to time; if not actually hurt you. If her first intention had been to make further difficulties, she abandoned the idea, but at the same time she did not speak. She seemed to have no sense of the urgency of making some arrangement quickly—so that we should not lose touch with each other, and be reduced to the delay of writing letters. I suffered some agitation. This conversation was failing entirely to express my own feelings. Perhaps it seemed equally unreal to her. If so, she was unwilling, perhaps unable, to alleviate the strain. Probably women enjoy such moments, which undoubtedly convey by intensity and uncertainty a heightened awareness of their power. In spite of apparent coldness of manner her eyes were full of tears. As if we had already decided upon some definite and injudicious arrangement, she suddenly changed her approach.

'You must be discreet,' she said.

'All right.'

'But really discreet.'

'I promise.'

'You will?'

'Yes.'

While talking, we had somehow come close together in a manner that made practical discussion difficult. I felt tired, and rather angry, and very much in love with her; on the edge of one of those outbursts of irritation so easily excited by love.

'I'll come to your flat on Friday,' she said abruptly.

4.

WHEN, in early spring, pale sunlight was flickering behind the mist above Piccadilly, the Isbister Memorial Exhibition opened on the upper floor of one of the galleries there. I was attending the private view, partly for business reasons, partly from a certain weakness for bad pictures, especially bad portraits. Such a taste is hard to justify. Perhaps the inclination is no more than a morbid curiosity to see how far the painter will give himself away. Pictures, apart from their æsthetic interest, can achieve the mysterious fascination of those enigmatic scrawls on walls, the expression of Heaven knows what psychological urge on the part of the executant; for example, the for ever anonymous drawing of Widmerpool in the *cabinet* at La Grenadière.

In Isbister's work there was something of that inner madness. The deliberate naïveté with which he accepted his business men, ecclesiastics and mayors, depicted by him with all the crudeness of his accustomed application of paint to canvas, conveyed an oddly sinister effect. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Isbister set out to paint what he supposed to be the fashionable view of such people at any given moment. Thus, in his early days, a general, or the chairman of some big concern, would be represented in the respectively appropriate terms of Victorian romantic success; the former, hero of the battlefield: the latter, the industrious apprentice who has achieved his worthy ambition. But as military authority and commercial achievement became increasingly subject to political and economic denigration, Isbister, keeping up with the times, introduced a certain amount of what he judged to be satirical comment. Emphasis would be laid on the general's red face and medals, or the industrialist's huge desk and cigar. There would be a suggestion that all was not well with such people about. Probably Isbister was right from a financial point of view to make this change, because certainly his sitters seemed to grow no fewer. Perhaps they too felt a compulsive need for representation in contemporary idiom, even though a tawdry one. It was a kind of insurance against the attacks of people like Quiggin: a form of public apology and penance. The result was certainly curious. Indeed, often, even when there hung near-by something far worthier of regard, I found myself stealing a glance at an Isbister, dominating, by its aggressive treatment, the other pictures hanging about.

If things had turned out as they should, *The Art of Horace Isbister* would have been on sale at the table near the door, over which a young woman with a pointed nose and black fringe presided. As things were, it was doubtful whether that volume would ever appear. The first person I saw in the gallery was Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson, who stood in the centre of the room, disregarding the pictures, but watching the crowd over the top of huge horn-rimmed spectacles, which he had pushed well forward on his nose. His shaggy homespun overcoat was swinging open, stuffed with long envelopes and periodicals which protruded from the pockets. He looked no older; perhaps a shade less sane. We had not met since the days when I used to dine with the Walpole-Wilsons for 'debutante dances'; a period now infinitely remote. Rather to my surprise he appeared to recognise me immediately, though it was unlikely that he knew my name. I enquired after Eleanor.

'Spends all her time in the country now,' said Sir Gavin. 'As you may remember, Eleanor was never really happy away from Hinton.'

He spoke rather sadly. I knew he was confessing his own and his wife's defeat. His daughter had won the long conflict with her parents. I wondered if Eleanor still wore her hair in a bun at the back and trained dogs with a whistle. It was unlikely that she would have changed much.

'I expect she finds plenty to do,' I offered.

'Her breeding keeps her quiet,' said Sir Gavin.

He spoke almost with distaste. However, perceiving that I felt uncertain as to the precise meaning of this explanation of Eleanor's existing state, he added curtly:

'Labradors.'

'Like Sultan?'

'After Sultan died she took to breeding them. And then she sees quite a lot of her friend, Norah Tolland.'

By common consent we abandoned the subject of Eleanor. Taking my arm, he led me across the floor of the gallery, until we stood in front of a three-quarter-length picture of a grey-moustached man in the uniform of the diplomatic corps; looking, if the truth be known, not unlike Sir Gavin himself.

'Isn't it terrible?'

'Awful.'

'It's Saltonstall,' said Sir Gavin, his voice suggesting that some just retribution had taken place. 'Saltonstall who always posed as *a Man of Taste.*'

'Isbister has made him look more like a Christmas Tree of Taste.'

'You see, my father-in-law's portrait is a different matter,' said Sir Gavin, as if unable to withdraw his eyes from this likeness of his former colleague. 'There is no parallel at all. My father-in-law was painted by Isbister, it is true. Isbister was what he liked. He possessed a large collection of thoroughly bad pictures which we had some difficulty in disposing of at his death. He bought them simply and solely because he liked the subjects. He knew about shipping and finance—not about painting. But he did not pose as a Man of Taste. Far from it.'

'Deacon's *Boyhood of Cyrus* in the hall at Eaton Square is from his collection, isn't it?'

I could not help mentioning this picture that had once meant so much to me; and to name the dead is always a kind of tribute to them: one I felt Mr. Deacon deserved.

'I believe so,' said Sir Gavin. 'It sounds his style. But Saltonstall, on the other hand, with his *vers de societé,* and all his talk about Foujita and Pruna and goodness knows who else—but when it comes to his own portrait, it's Isbister. Let's see how they have hung my father-in-law.'

We passed on to Lord Aberavon's portrait, removed from its usual place in the dining-room at Hinton Hoo, now flanked by Sir Horrocks Rusby, K.C., and Cardinal Whelan. Lady Walpole-Wilson's father had been painted in peer's robes over the uniform of a deputy-lieutenant, different tones of scarlet contrasted against a crimson velvet curtain: a pictorial experiment that could not be considered successful. Through french windows behind Lord Aberavon stretched a broad landscape—possibly the vale of Glamorgan—in which something had also gone seriously wrong with the colour values. Even Isbister himself, in his own lifetime, must have been aware of deficiency.

I glanced at the cardinal next door, notable as the only picture I had ever heard Widmerpool spontaneously praise. Here, too, the reds had been handled with some savagery. Sir Gavin shook his head and moved on to examine two of Isbister's genre pictures. 'Clergyman eating an apple' and 'The Old Humorists'. I found myself beside Clapham, a director of the firm that published St. John Clarke's books. He was talking to Smethyck, a museum official I had known slightly at the university.

'When is your book on Isbister appearing?' Clapham asked at once. 'You announced it some time ago. This would have been the moment—with the St. John Clarke introduction.'

Clapham had spoken accusingly, his voice implying the fretfulness of all publishers that one of their authors should betray them with a colleague, however lightly.

'I went to see St. John Clarke the other day,' Clapham continued. 'I was glad to find him making a good recovery after his illness. Found him reading one of the young Communist poets. We had an interesting talk.'

'Does anybody read St. John Clarke himself now?' asked Smethyck, languidly.

Like many of his profession, Smethyck was rather proud of his looks, which he had been carefully re-examining in the dark, mirror-like surface of Sir Horrocks Rusby, framed for some unaccountable reason under glass. Clapham was up in arms at once at such superciliousness.

'Of course people read St. John Clarke,' he said, snappishly. 'Though perhaps not in your ultra-sophisticated circles, where everything ordinary people understand is sneered at.'

'Personally, I don't hold any views about St. John Clarke,' said Smethyck, without looking round. 'I've never read any of them. All I wanted to know was whether people bought his books.'

He continued to ponder the cut of his suit in this adventitious looking-glass, deciding at last that his hair needed smoothing down on one side.

'I don't mind admitting to you both,' said Clapham, moving a step or two closer and speaking rather thickly, 'that when I finished *Fields of Amaranth* there were tears in my eyes.'

Smethyck made no reply to this; nor could I myself think of a suitable rejoinder.

'That was some years ago,' said Clapham.

This qualification left open the alternative of whether St. John Clarke still retained the power of exciting such strong feeling in a publisher, or whether Clapham himself had grown more capable of controlling his emotions.

'Why, there's Sillery,' said Smethyck, who seemed thoroughly bored by the subject of St. John Clarke. 'I believe he was to be painted by Isbister, if he had recovered. Let's go and talk to him.'

We left Clapham, still muttering about the extent of St. John Clarke's sales, and the beauty and delicacy of his early style. I had not seen Sillery since Mrs. Andriadis's party, three or four years before, though I had heard by chance that he had recently returned from America, where he had held some temporary academical post, or been on a lecture tour. His white hair and dark, Nietzschean moustache remained unchanged, but his clothes looked older than ever. He was carrying an unrolled umbrella in one hand; in the other a large black homburg, thick in grease. He began to grin widely as soon as he saw us.

'Hullo, Sillers,' said Smethyck, who had been one of Sillery's favourites among the undergraduates who constituted his *salon*. 'I did not know you were interested in art.'

'Not interested in art?' said Sillery, enjoying this accusation a great deal. 'What an idea. Still, I am, as it happens, here for semi-professional reasons, as you might say. I expect you are too, Michael. There is some nonsense about the College wanting a pitcher o' me ole mug. Can't think why they should need such a thing, but there it is. 'Course

Isbister can't do it 'cos 'e's tucked 'is toes in now, but I thought I'd just come an' take a look at the sorta thing that's expected.'

'And what do you think, Sillers?'

'Just as well he's passed away, perhaps,' sniggered Sillery, suddenly abandoning his character-acting. 'In any case I always think an artist is rather an embarrassment to his own work. But what Ninetyish things I am beginning to say. It must come from talking to so many Americans.'

'But you can't want to be painted by anyone even remotely like Isbister,' said Smethyck. 'Surely you can get a painter who is a little more modern than that. What about this man Barnby, for example?'

'Ah, we are very conservative about art at the older universities,' said Sillery, grinning delightedly. 'Wouldn't say myself that I want an Isbister exactly, though I heard the Warden comparing him with Antonio Moro the other night. 'Fraid the Warden doesn't know much about the graphic arts, though. But then *I* don't want the wretched picture painted at all. What do members of the College want to look at my old phiz for, I should like to know?'

We assured him that his portrait would be welcomed by all at the university.

'I don't know about Brightman,' said Sillery, showing his teeth for a second. 'I don't at all know about Brightman. I don't think Brightman would want a picture of me. But what have you been doing with yourself, Nicholas? Writing more books, I expect. I am afraid I haven't read the first one yet. Do you ever see Charles Stringham now?'

'Not for ages.'

'A pity about that divorce,' said Sillery. 'You young men will get married. It is so often a mistake. I hear he is drinking just a tiny bit too much nowadays. It was a mistake to leave Donners-Brebner, too.'

'I expect you've heard about J. G. Quiggin taking Mark Members's place with St. John Clarke?'

'Hilarious that, wasn't it?' agreed Sillery. 'That sort of thing always happens when two clever boys come from the same place. They can't help competing. Poor Mark seems quite upset about it. Can't think why. After all, there are plenty of other glittering prizes for those with stout hearts and sharp swords, just as Lord Birkenhead remarked. I shall be seeing Quiggin this afternoon, as it happens—a little political affair—Quiggin lives a very *mouvementé* life these days, it seems.'

Sillery chuckled to himself. There was evidently some secret he did not intend to reveal. In any case he had by then prolonged the conversation sufficiently for his own satisfaction.

'Saw you chatting to Gavin Walpole-Wilson,' he said. 'Ought to go and have a word with him myself about these continuous hostilities between Bolivia and Paraguay. Been going on too long. Want to get in touch with his sister about it. Get one of her organisations to work. Time for liberal-minded people to step in. Can't have them cutting each other's throats in this way. Got to be quick, or I shall be late for Quiggin.'

He shambled off. Smethyck smiled at me and shook his head, at the same time indicating that he had seen enough for one afternoon.

I strolled on round the gallery. I had noted in the catalogue a picture called 'The Countess of Ardglass with Faithful Girl' and, when I arrived before it, I found Lady Ardglass herself inspecting the portrait. She was leaning on the arm of one of the trim grey-haired men who had accompanied her in the Ritz: or perhaps another example of their category, so like as to be indistinguishable. Isbister had painted her in an open shirt and riding breeches, standing beside the mare, her arm slipped through the reins: with much attention to the high polish of the brown boots.

'Pity Jumbo could never raise the money for it,' Bijou Ardglass was saying. 'Why don't you make an offer, Jack, and give it me for my birthday? You'd probably get it dirt cheap.'

'I'm much too broke,' said the grey-haired man.

'You always say that. If you'd given me the car you promised me I should at least have saved the nine shillings I've already spent on taxis this morning.'

Jean never spoke of her husband, and I knew no details of the episode with Lady Ardglass that had finally separated them. At the same time, now that I saw Bijou, I could not help feeling that she and I were somehow connected by what had happened. I wondered what Duport had in common with me that linked us through Jean. Men who are close friends tend to like different female types; perhaps the contrary process also operated, and the fact that he had seemed so unsympathetic when we had met years before was due to some innate sense of rivalry. I was to see Jean that afternoon. She had borrowed a friend's flat for a week or so, while she looked about for somewhere more permanent to live. This had made things easier. Emotional crises always promote the urgent need for executive action, so that the times when we most hope to be free from the practical administration of life are always those when the need to cope with a concrete world is more than ever necessary.

Owing to domestic arrangements connected with getting a nurse for her child, she would not be at home until late in the afternoon. I wasted some time at the Isbister show, before walking across the park to the place where she was living. I had expected to see Quiggin at the gallery, but

Sillery's remarks indicated that he would not be there. The last time I had met him, soon after the Templer week-end, it had turned out that, in spite of the temporary reappearance of Members at St. John Clarke's sick bed, Quiggin was still firmly established in his new position. He now seemed scarcely aware that there had ever been a time when he had not acted as the novelist's secretary, referring to his employer's foibles with a weary though tolerant familiarity, as if he had done the job for years. He had quickly brushed aside enquiry regarding his journey to London with Mrs. Erdleigh and Jimmy Stripling.

'What a couple,' he commented.

I had to admit they were extraordinary enough. Quiggin had resumed his account of St. John Clarke, his state of health and his eccentricities, the last of which were represented by his new secretary in a decidedly different light from that in which they had been displayed by Members. St. John Clarke's every action was now expressed in Marxist terms, as if some political Circe had overnight turned the novelist into an entirely Left Wing animal. No doubt Quiggin judged it necessary to handle his new situation firmly on account of the widespread gossip regarding St. John Clarke's change of secretary; for in circles frequented by Members and Quiggin ceaseless argument had taken place as to which of them had 'behaved badly'.

Thinking it best from my firm's point of view to open diplomatic relations, as it were, with the new government, I had asked if there was any hope of our receiving the Isbister introduction in the near future. Quiggin's answer to this had been to make an affirmative gesture with his hands. I had seen Members employ the same movement, perhaps derived by both of them from St. John Clarke himself.

'That was exactly what I wanted to discuss when I came to the Ritz,' Quiggin had said. 'But you insisted on going out with your wealthy friends.'

'You must admit that I arranged for you to meet my wealthy friends, as you call them, at the first opportunity—within twenty-four hours, as a matter of fact.'

Quiggin smiled and inclined his head, as if assenting to my claim that some amends had been attempted.

'As I have tried to explain,' he said, 'St. J.'s views have changed a good deal lately. Indeed, he has entirely come round to my own opinion—that the present situation cannot last much longer. *We will not tolerate it.* All thinking men are agreed about that. St. J. *wants* to do the introduction when his health gets a bit better—and he has time to spare from his political interests—but he has decided to write the Isbister foreword from a Marxist point of view.'

'You ought to have obtained some first-hand information for him when Marx came through on Planchette.'

Quiggin frowned at this levity.

'What rot that was,' he said. 'I suppose Mark and his psychoanalyst friends would explain it by one of their dissertations on the subconscious. Perhaps in that particular respect they would be right. No doubt they would add a lot of irrelevant stuff about Surrealism. But to return to Isbister's pictures, I think they would not make a bad subject treated in that particular manner.'

'You could preach a whole Marxist sermon on the portrait of Peter Templer's father alone.'

'You could, indeed,' said Quiggin, who seemed not absolutely sure that the matter in hand was being negotiated with sufficient seriousness. 'But what a charming person Mrs. Templer is. She has changed a lot since her days as a model, or mannequin, or whatever she was. It is a great pity she never seems to see any intelligent people now. I can't think how she can stand that stockbroker husband of hers. How rich is he?'

'He took a bit of a knock in the slump.'

'How do they get on together?'

'All right, so far as I know.'

'St. J. always says there is "nothing sadder than a happy marriage".'

'Is that why he doesn't risk it himself?'

'I should think Mona will go off with somebody,' said Quiggin, decisively.

I considered this comment impertinent, though there was certainly no reason why Quiggin and Templer should be expected to like one another. Perhaps Quiggin's instinct was correct, I thought, however unwilling I might be to agree openly with him. There could be no doubt that the Templers' marriage was not going very well. At the same time, I did not intend to discuss them with Quiggin, to whom, in any case, there seemed no point in explaining Templer's merits. Quiggin would not appreciate these even if they were brought to his notice; while, if it suited him, he would always be ready to reverse his opinion about Templer or anyone else.

By then I had become sceptical of seeing the Isbister introduction, Marxist or otherwise. In itself, this latest suggestion did not strike me as specially surprising. Taking into account the fact that St. John Clarke had made the plunge into 'modernism', the project seemed neither more nor less extraordinary than tackling Isbister's pictures from the point of view of Psychoanalysis, Surrealism, Roman Catholicism, Social Credit, or any other specialised approach. In fact some such doctrinal method of attack was then becoming very much the mode; taking the place of the highly coloured critical flights of an earlier generation that still persisted in some quarters, or the severely technical criticism of the æsthetic puritans who had ruled the roost since the war.

The foreword would now, no doubt, speak of Isbister 'laughing up his sleeve' at the rich men and public notabilities he had painted; though Members, who, with St. John Clarke, had once visited Isbister's studio in St. John's Wood for some kind of a reception held there, had declared that nothing could have exceeded the painter's obsequiousness to his richer patrons. Members was not always reliable in such matters, but it was certainly true that Isbister's portraits seemed to combine as a rule an effort to flatter his client with apparent attempts to make some comment to be easily understood by the public. Perhaps it was this inward struggle that imparted to his pictures that peculiar fascination to which I have already referred. However, so far as my firm was concerned, the goal was merely to get the introduction written and the book published.

'What is Mark doing now?' I asked.

Quiggin looked surprised at the question; as if everyone must know by now that Members was doing very well for himself.

'With Boggis & Stone—you know they used to be the Vox Populi Press—we got him the job.'

'Who were "we"?'

'St. J. and myself. St. J. arranged most of it through Howard Craggs. As you know, Craggs used to be the managing director of the Vox Populi.'

'But I thought Mark wasn't much interested in politics. Aren't all Boggis & Stone's books about Lenin and Trotsky and Litvinov and the Days of October and all that?'

Quiggin agreed, with an air of rather forced gaiety.

'Well, haven't most of us been living in a fool's paradise far too long now?' he said, speaking as if to make an appeal to my better side. 'Isn't it time that Mark—and others too—took some notice of what is happening in the world?'

'Does he get a living wage at Boggis & Stone's?'

'With his journalism he can make do. A small firm like that can't afford to pay a very munificent salary, it's true. He still gets a retainer from St. J. for sorting out the books once a month.'

I did not imagine this last arrangement was very popular with Quiggin from the way he spoke of it.

'As a matter of fact,' he said, 'I persuaded St. J. to arrange for Mark to have some sort of a footing in a more politically alive world before he got rid of him. That is where the future lies for all of us.'

'Did Gypsy Jones transfer from the Vox Populi to Boggis & Stone?'

Quiggin laughed now with real amusement.

'Oh, no,' he said. 'I forgot you knew her. She left quite a time before the amalgamation took place. She has something better to do now.'

He paused and moistened his lips; adding rather mysteriously:

'They say Gypsy is well looked on by the Party.'

This remark did not convey much to me in those days. I was more interested to see how carefully Quiggin's plans must have been laid to have prepared a place for Members even before he had been ejected from his job. That certainly showed forethought.

'Are you writing another book?' said Quiggin.

'Trying to—and you?'

'I liked your first,' said Quiggin.

He conveyed by these words a note of warning that, in spite of his modified approval, things must not go too far where books were concerned.

'Personally, I am not too keen to rush into print,' he said.

'I am still collecting material for my survey, *Unburnt Boats*.'

I did not meet Members to hear his side of the story until much later, in fact on that same afternoon of the Isbister Memorial Exhibition. I ran into him on my way through Hyde Park, not far from the Achilles Statue. (As it happened, it was close to the spot where I had come on Barbara Goring and Eleanor Walpole-Wilson, the day we had visited the Albert Memorial together.)

The weather had turned colder again, and the park was dank, with a kind of sea mist veiling the trees. Members looked shabbier than was usual for him: shabby and rather worried. In our undergraduate days he had been a tall, willowy, gesticulating figure, freckled and beady-eyed; hurrying through the lanes and byways of the university, abstractedly alone, like the Scholar-Gypsy, or straggling along the shopfronts of the town in the company of acquaintances, seemingly chosen for their peculiar resemblance to himself. Now he had grown into a terse, emaciated, rather determined young man, with a neat profile and chilly manner: a person people were beginning to know by name. In fact the critics, as a whole, had spoken so highly of his latest volume of verse—the one through which an undercurrent of psychoanalytical phraseology had intermittently run—that even Quiggin (usually as sparing of praise as Uncle Giles himself) had, in one of his more unbending moments at a sherry party, gone so far as to admit publicly:

'Mark has arrived.'

As St. John Clarke's secretary, Members had been competent to deal at a moment's notice with most worldly problems. For example, he could cut short the beery protests of some broken-down crony of the novelist's past, arrived unexpectedly on the doorstep—or, to be more precise, on the landing of the block of flats where St. John Clarke lived—with a view to borrowing 'a fiver' on the strength of 'the old days'. Any such former boon companion, if strong-willed, might have got away with 'half a sovereign' (as St. John Clarke always called that sum) had he gained entry to the novelist himself. With Members as a buffer, he soon found himself escorted to the lift, having to plan, as he descended, both then and for the future, economic attack elsewhere.

Alternatively, the matter to be regulated might be the behaviour of some great lady, aware that St. John Clarke was a person of a certain limited eminence, but at the same time ignorant of his credentials to celebrity. Again, Members could put right a situation that had gone amiss. Lady Huntercombe must have been guilty of some such social dissonance at her own table (before a secretary had come into existence to adjust such matters by a subsequent word) because Members was fond of quoting a *mot* of his master's to the effect that dinner at the Huntercombes' possessed 'only two dramatic features—the wine was a farce and the food a tragedy'.

In fact to get rid of a secretary who performed his often difficult functions so effectively was a rash step on the part of a man who liked to be steered painlessly through the shoals and shallows of social life. Indeed, looking back afterwards, the dismissal of Members might almost be regarded as a landmark in the general disintegration of society in its traditional form. It was an act of individual folly on the part of St. John Clarke; a piece of recklessness that well illustrates the mixture of self-assurance and *ennui* which together contributed so much to form the state of mind of people like St. John Clarke at that time. Of course I did not recognise its broader aspects then. The duel between Members and Quiggin seemed merely an entertaining conflict to watch, rather than the significant crumbling of social foundations.

On that dank afternoon in the park Members had abandoned some of his accustomed coldness of manner. He seemed glad to talk to someone—probably to anyone—about his recent ejection. He began on the subject at once, drawing his tightly-waisted overcoat more closely round him, while he contracted his sharp, beady brown eyes. Separation from St. John Clarke, and association with the firm of Boggis & Stone, had for some reason renewed his former resemblance to an ingeniously constructed marionette or rag doll.

'There had been a slight sense of strain for some months between St. J. and myself,' he said. 'An absolutely trivial matter about taking a girl out to dinner. Perhaps rather foolishly, I had told St. J. I was going to a lecture on the Little Entente. Howard Craggs—whom I am now working with—happened to be introducing the lecturer, and so of course within twenty-four hours he had managed to mention to St. J. the fact that I had not been present. It was awkward, naturally, but I did not think St. J. really minded.

'But why did you want to know about the Little Entente?'

'St. J. had begun to be rather keen on what he called "the European Situation",' said Members, brushing aside my surprise as almost impertinent. 'I always liked to humour his whims.'

'But I thought his great thing was the Ivory Tower?'

'Of course, I found out later that Quiggin had put him up to "the European Situation",' admitted Members, grudgingly. 'But after all, an artist has certain responsibilities. I expect you are a supporter of the League yourself, my dear Nicholas.'

He smiled as he uttered the last part of the sentence, though speaking as if he intended to administer a slight, if well deserved, rebuke. In doing this he involuntarily adopted a more personal rendering of Quiggin's own nasal intonation, which rendered quite unnecessary the explanation that the idea had been Quiggin's. Probably the very words he used were Quiggin's, too.

'But politics were just what you used to complain of in Quiggin.'

'Perhaps Quiggin was right in that respect, if in no other,' said Members, giving his tinny, bitter laugh.

'And then?'

'It turned out that St. J.'s feelings *were* rather hurt.'

Members paused, as if he did not know how best to set about explaining the situation further. He shook his head once or twice in his old, abstracted Scholar-Gypsy manner. Then he began, as it were, at a new place in his narrative.

'As you probably know,' he continued, 'I can say without boasting that I have done a good deal to change—why should I not say it?—to improve St. J.'s attitude towards intellectual matters. Do you know, when I first came to him he thought Matisse was a *plage*—no, I mean it.'

He made no attempt to relax his features, nor join in audible amusement at such a state of affairs. Instead, he continued to record St. John Clarke's shortcomings.

'That much quoted remark of his: "Gorki is a Russian d'Annunzio"—he got it from me. I happened to say at tea one day that I thought if d'Annunzio had been born in Nijni Novgorod he would have had much the same career as Gorki. All St. J. did was to turn the words round and use them as his own.'

'But you still see him from time to time?'

Members shied away his rather distinguished profile like a high-bred but displeased horse.

'Yes—and no,' he conceded. 'It's rather awkward. I don't know how much Quiggin told you, nor if he spoke the truth.'

'He said you came in occasionally to look after the books.'

'Only once in a way. I've got to earn a living somehow. Besides, I am attached to St. J.—even after the way he has behaved. I need not tell you that he does not like parting with money. I scarcely get enough for my work on the books to cover my bus fares. It is a strain having to avoid that *âme de boue,* too, whenever I visit the flat. He is usually about somewhere, spying on everyone who crosses the threshold.'

'And what about St. John Clarke's conversion to Marxism?'

'When I first persuaded St. J. to look at the world in a contemporary manner,' said Members slowly, adopting the tone of one determined not to be hurried in his story by those whose interest in it was actuated only by vulgar curiosity—'When I first persuaded him to that, I took an early opportunity to show him Quiggin. After all, Quiggin was supposed to be my friend—and, whatever one may think of his behaviour as a friend, he has—or had—some talent.'

Members waited for my agreement before continuing, as if the thought of displacement by a talentless Quiggin would add additional horror to his own position. I concurred that Quiggin's talent was only too apparent.

'From the very beginning I feared the risk of things going wrong on account of St. J.'s squeamishness about people's personal appearance. For example, I insisted that Quiggin should put on a clean shirt when he came to see St. J. I told him to attend to his nails. I even gave him an orange stick with which to do so.'

'And these preparations were successful?'

'They met once or twice. Quiggin was even asked to the flat. They got on better than I had expected. I admit that. All the same, I never felt that the meetings were really *enjoyable*. I was sorry about that, because I thought Quiggin's ideas would be useful to St. J. I do not always agree with Quiggin's approach to such things as the arts, for example, but he is keenly aware of present-day tendencies. However, I decided in the end to explain to Quiggin that I feared St. J. was not very much taken with him.'

'Did Quiggin accept that?'

'He did,' said Members, again speaking with bitterness. 'He accepted it without a murmur. That, in itself, should have put me on my guard. I know now that almost as soon as I introduced them, they began to see each other when I was not present.'

Members checked himself at this point, perhaps feeling that to push his indictment to such lengths bordered on absurdity.

'Of course, there was no particular reason why they should not meet,' he allowed. 'It was just odd—and rather unfriendly—that neither of them should have mentioned their meetings to me. St. J. always loves new people. "Unmade friends are like unmade beds," he has often said. "They should be attended to early in the morning." '

Members drew a deep breath that was almost a sigh. There was a pause.

'But I thought you said he was so squeamish about people?'

'Not when he has once decided they are going to be successful.'

'That's what he thinks about Quiggin?'

Members nodded.

'Then I noticed St. J. was beginning to describe everything as "bourgeois",' he said. 'Wearing a hat was "bourgeois", eating pudding with a fork was "bourgeois", the Ritz was "bourgeois", Lady Huntercombe was "bourgeois"—he meant "bourgeoise", of course, but French is not one of St. J.'s long suits. Then one morning at breakfast he said Cézanne was "bourgeois". At first I thought he meant that only middle-class people put too much emphasis on such things—that a true aristocrat could afford to ignore them. It was a favourite theme of St. J.'s that "natural aristocrats" were the only true ones. He regarded himself as a "natural aristocrat". At the same time he felt that a "natural aristocrat" had a right to mix with the ordinary kind, and latterly he had spent more and more of his time in rather grand circles—and in fact had come almost to hate people who were not rather smart, or at least very rich. For example, I remember him describing—well, I won't say whom, but he is a novelist who sells very well and you can probably guess the name—as "the kind of man who knows about as much about *placement* as to send the wife of a younger son of a marquess in to dinner before the daughter of an earl married to a commoner". He thought a lot about such things. That was why I had been at first afraid of introducing him to Quiggin. And then—when we began discussing Cézanne—it turned out that he had been using the word "bourgeois" all the time in the Marxist sense. I didn't know he had even heard of Marx, much less was at all familiar with his theories.'

'I seem to remember an article he wrote describing himself as a "Gladstonian Liberal"—in fact a Liberal of the most old-fashioned kind.'

'You do, you do,' said Members, almost passionately. 'I wrote it for him, as a matter of fact. You couldn't have expressed it better. *A Liberal of the most old-fashioned kind.* Local Option—Proportional Representation—Welsh Disestablishment—the whole bag of tricks. That was just about as far as he got. But now everything is "bourgeois"—Liberalism, I have no doubt, most of all. As a matter of fact, his politics were the only liberal thing about him.'

'And it began as soon as he met Quiggin?'

'I first noticed the change when he persuaded me to join in what he called "collective action on the part of writers and artists"—going to meetings to protest against Manchuria and so on. I agreed, first of all, simply to humour him. It was just as well I did, as a matter of fact, because it led indirectly to another job when he turned his back on me. You know, what St. J. really wants is a son. He wants to be a father without having a wife.'

'I thought everyone always tried to avoid that.'

'In the Freudian sense,' said Members, impatiently, 'his nature requires a father-son relationship. Unfortunately, the situation becomes a little too life-like, and one is faced with a kind of artificially constructed Œdipus situation.'

'Can't you re-convert him from Marxism to psychoanalysis?'

Members looked at me fixedly.

'St. J. has always pooh-poohed the subconscious,' he said.

We were about to move off in our respective directions when my attention was caught by a disturbance coming from the road running within the railings of the park. It was a sound, harsh and grating, though at the same time shrill and suggesting complaint. These were human voices raised in protest. Turning, I saw through the mist that increasingly enveloped the park a column of persons entering beneath the arch. They trudged behind a mounted policeman, who led their procession about twenty yards ahead. Evidently a political 'demonstration' of some sort was on its way to the north side where such meetings were held. From time to time these persons raised a throaty cheer, or an individual voice from amongst them bawled out some form of exhortation. A strident shout, similar to that which had at first drawn my attention, now sounded again. We moved towards the road to obtain a better view.

The front rank consisted of two men in cloth caps, one with a beard, the other wearing dark glasses, who carried between them a banner upon which was inscribed the purpose and location of the gathering. Behind these came some half a dozen personages, marching almost doggedly out of step, as if to deprecate even such a minor element of militarism. At the same time there was a vaguely official air about them. Among these, I thought I recognised the face and figure of a female Member of Parliament whose photograph occasionally appeared in the papers. Next to this woman tramped Sillery. He had exchanged his black soft hat of earlier afternoon for a cloth cap similar to that worn by the bearers of the banner: his walrus moustache and thick strands of white hair blew furiously in the wind. From time to time he clawed at the arm of a gloomy-looking man next to him who walked with a limp. He was grinning all the while to himself, and seemed to be hugely enjoying his role in the procession.

In the throng that straggled several yards behind these more important figures I identified two young men who used to frequent Mr. Deacon's antique shop; one of whom, indeed, was believed to have accompanied Mr. Deacon himself on one of his holidays in Cornwall. I thought, immediately, that Mr. Deacon's other associate, Gypsy Jones, might also be of the party, but could see no sign of her. Probably, as Quiggin had suggested, she belonged by then to a more distinguished grade of her own hierarchy than that represented by this heterogeneous collection, nearly all apparently 'intellectuals' of one kind or another.

However, although interested to see Sillery in such circumstances, there was another far more striking aspect of the procession which a second later riveted my eyes. Members must have taken in this particular spectacle at the same instant as myself, because I heard him beside me give a gasp of irritation.

Three persons immediately followed the group of notables with whom Sillery marched. At first, moving closely together through the mist, this trio seemed like a single grotesque three-headed animal, forming the figure-head of an ornamental car on the roundabout of a fair. As they jolted along, however, their separate entities became revealed, manifesting themselves as a figure in a wheeled chair, jointly pushed by a man and a woman. At first I could not believe my eyes, perhaps even wished to disbelieve them, because I allowed my attention to be distracted for a moment by Sillery's voice shouting in high, almost jocular tones: 'Abolish the Means Test!' He had uttered this cry just as he came level with the place where Members and I stood; but he was too occupied with his own concerns to notice us there, although the park was almost empty.

Then I looked again at the three other people, thinking I might find myself mistaken in what I had at first supposed. On the contrary, the earlier impression was correct. The figure in the wheeled chair was St. John Clarke. He was being propelled along the road, in unison, by Quiggin and Mona Templer.

'My God!' said Members, quite quietly.

'Did you see Sillery?'

I asked this because I could think of no suitable comment regarding the more interesting group. Members took no notice of the question.

'I never thought they would go through with it,' he said.

Neither St. John Clarke, nor Quiggin, wore hats. The novelist's white hair, unenclosed in a cap such as Sillery wore, was lifted high, like an elderly Struwwelpeter's, in the stiff breeze that was beginning to blow through the branches. Quiggin was dressed in the black leather overcoat he had worn in the Ritz, a red woollen muffler riding up round his neck, his skull cropped like a convicts'. No doubt intentionally, he had managed to make himself look like a character from one of the novels of Dostoievski. Mona, too, was hatless, with dishevelled curls: her face very white above a high-necked polo jumper covered by a tweed overcoat of smart cut. She was looking remarkably pretty, and, like Sillery, seemed to be enjoying herself. On the other hand, the features of the two men with her expressed only inexorable sternness. Every few minutes, when the time came for a general shout to be raised, St. John Clarke would brandish in his hand a rolled-up copy of one of the 'weeklies', as he yelled the appropriate slogan in a high, excited voice.

'It's an absolute scandal,' said Members breathlessly. 'I heard rumours that something of the sort was on foot. The strain may easily kill St. J. He ought not to be up—much less taking part in an open-air meeting before the warmer weather comes.'

I was myself less surprised at the sight of Quiggin and St. John Clarke in such circumstances than to find Mona teamed up with the pair of them. For Quiggin, this kind of thing had become, after all, almost a matter of routine. It was 'the little political affair' Sillery had mentioned at the private view. St. John Clarke's collaboration in such an outing was equally predictable—apart from the state of his health—after what Members and Quiggin had both said about him. From his acceptance of Quiggin's domination he would henceforward join that group of authors, dons, and clergymen increasingly to be found at that period on political platforms of a 'Leftish' sort. To march in some public 'demonstration' was an almost unavoidable condition of his new commitments. As it happened he was fortunate enough on this, his first appearance, to find himself in a conveyance. In the wheeled chair, with his long white locks, he made an effective figure, no doubt popular with the organisers and legitimately gratifying to himself.

It was Mona's presence that was at first inexplicable to me. She could hardly have come up for the day to take part in all this. Perhaps the Templers were again in London for the week-end, and she had chosen to walk in the procession as an unusual experience; while Peter had gone off to amuse himself elsewhere. Then all at once the thing came to me in a flash, as such things do, requiring no further explanation. Mona had left Templer. She was now living with Quiggin. For some reason this was absolutely clear. Their relationship was made unmistakable by the manner in which they moved together side by side.

'Where are they going?' I asked.

'To meet some Hunger-Marchers arriving from the Midlands,' said Members, as if it were a foolish, irrelevant question. 'They are camping in the park, aren't they?'

'This crowd?'

'No, the Hunger-Marchers, of course.'

'Why is Mona there?'

'Who is Mona?'

'The girl walking with Quiggin and helping to push St. John Clarke. She was a model, you remember. I once saw you with her at a party years ago.'

'Oh, yes, it was her, wasn't it?' he said, indifferently. Mona's name seemed to mean nothing to him.

'But why is she helping to push the chair?'

'Probably because Quiggin is too bloody lazy to do all the work himself,' he said.

Evidently he was ignorant of Mona's subsequent career since the days when he had known her. The fact that she was helping to trundle St. John Clarke through the mists of Hyde Park was natural enough for the sort of girl she had been. In the eyes of Members she was just another 'arty' woman roped in by Quiggin to assist Left Wing activities. His own thoughts were entirely engrossed by St. John Clarke and Quiggin. I could not help being impressed by the extent to which the loss of his post as secretary had upset him. His feelings had undoubtedly been lacerated. He watched them pass by, his mouth clenched.

The procession wound up the road towards Marble Arch. Two policemen on foot brought up the rear, round whom, whistling shrilly, circled some boys on bicycles, apparently unconnected with the marchers. The intermittent shouting grew gradually fainter, until the column disappeared from sight into the still foggy upper reaches of the park.

Members looked round at me.

'Can you beat it?' he said.

'I thought St. John Clarke disliked girls near him?'

'I don't expect he cares any longer,' said Members, in a voice of despair. 'Quiggin will make him put up with anything by now.'

On this note we parted company. As I continued my way through the park I was conscious of having witnessed a spectacle that was distinctly strange. Jean had already told me more than once that the Templers were getting on badly. These troubles had begun, so it appeared, a few months after their marriage, Mona complaining of the dullness of life away from London. She was for ever making scenes, usually about nothing at all. Afterwards there would be tears and reconciliations; and some sort of a 'treat' would be arranged for her by Peter. Then the cycle would once more take its course. Jean liked Mona, but thought her 'impossible' as a wife.

'What is the real trouble?' I had asked.

'I don't think she likes men.'

'Ah.'

'But I don't think she likes women either. Just keen on herself.'

'How will it end?'

'They may settle down. If Peter doesn't lose interest. He is used to having his own way. He has been unexpectedly good so far.'

She was fond of Peter, though free from that obsessive interest that often entangles brother and sister. They were not alike in appearance, though her hair, too, grew down like his in a 'widow's peak' on her forehead. There was also something about the set of her neck that recalled her brother. That was all.

'They might have a lot of children.'

'They might.'

'Would that be a good thing?'

'Certainly.'

I was surprised that she was so decisive, because in those days children were rather out of fashion. It always seemed strange to me, and rather unreal, that so much of her own time should be occupied with Polly.

'You know, I believe Mona has taken quite a fancy for your friend J. G. Quiggin,' she had said, laughing.

'Not possible.'

'I'm not so sure.'

'Has he appeared at the house again?'

'No—but she keeps talking about him.'

'Perhaps I ought never to have introduced him into the household.'

'Perhaps not,' she had replied, quite seriously.

At the time, the suggestion had seemed laughable. To regard Quiggin as a competitor with Templer for a woman—far less his own wife—was ludicrous even to consider.

'But she took scarcely any notice of him.'

'Well, I thought *you* were rather wet the first time you came to the house. But I've made up for it later, haven't I?'

'I adored you from the start.'

'I'm sure you didn't.'

'Certainly at Stourwater.'

'Oh, at Stourwater I was very impressed too.'

'And I with you.'

'Then why didn't you write or ring up or something? *Why didn't you?*'

'I did—you were away.'

'You ought to have gone on trying.'

'I wasn't sure you weren't rather lesbian.'

'How ridiculous. Pretty rude of you, too.'

'I had a lot to put up with.'

'Nonsense.'

'But I had.'

'How absurd you are.'

When the colour came quickly into her face, the change used to fill me with excitement. Even when she sat in silence, scarcely answering if addressed, such moods seemed a necessary part of her: something not to be utterly regretted. Her forehead, high and white, gave a withdrawn look, like a great lady in a medieval triptych or carving; only her lips, and the elegantly long lashes under slanting eyes, gave a hint of latent sensuality. But descriptions of a woman's outward appearance can hardly do more than echo the terms of a fashion paper. Their nature can be caught only in a refractive beam, as with light passing through water: the rays of character focused through the person with whom they are intimately associated. Perhaps, therefore, I alone was responsible for what she seemed to me. To another man—Duport, for example—she no doubt appeared —indeed, actually was—a different woman.

'But why, when we first met, did you never talk about books and things?' I had asked her.

'I didn't think you'd understand.'

'How hopeless of you.'

'Now I see it was,' she had said, quite humbly.

She shared with her brother the conviction that she 'belonged' in no particular world. The other guests she had found collected round Sir Magnus Donners at Stourwater had been on the whole unsympathetic.

'I only went because I was a friend of Baby's,' she had said; 'I don't really like people of that sort.'

'But surely there were people of all sorts there?'

'Perhaps I don't much like people anyway. I am probably too lazy. They always want to sleep with one, or something.'

'But that is like me.'

'I know. It's intolerable.'

We laughed, but I had felt the chill of sudden jealousy; the fear that her remark had been made deliberately to tease.

'Of course Baby loves it all,' she went on. 'The men hum round her like bees. She is so funny with them.'

'What did she and Sir Magnus do?'

'Not even I know. Whatever it was, Bijou Ardglass refused to take him on.'

'She was offered the job?'

'So I was told. She preferred to go off with Bob.'

'Why did that stop?'

'Bob could no longer support her in the style to which she was accustomed—or rather the style to which she was unaccustomed, as Jumbo Ardglass never had much money.'

It was impossible, as ever, to tell from her tone what she felt about Duport. I wondered whether she would leave him and marry me. I had not asked her, and had no clear idea what the answer would be. Certainly, if she did, like Lady Ardglass, she would not be supported in the style to which she had been accustomed. Neither, for that matter, would Mona, if she had indeed gone off with Quiggin, for I felt sure that the final domestic upheaval at the Templers' had now taken place. Jean had been right. Something about the way Quiggin and Mona walked beside one another connected them inexorably together. 'Women can be immensely obtuse about all kinds of things,' Barnby was fond of saying, 'but where the emotions are concerned their opinion is always worthy of consideration.'

The mist was lifting now, and gleams of sunlight were once more coming through the clouds above the waters of the Serpentine. Not unwillingly dismissing the financial side of marriage from my mind, as I walked on through the melancholy park, I thought of love, which, from the very beginning perpetually changes its shape: sometimes in the ascendant, sometimes in decline. At present we sailed in comparatively calm seas because we lived from meeting to meeting, possessing no plan for the future. Her abandonment remained; the abandonment that had so much surprised me at that first embrace, as the car skimmed the muddy surfaces of the Great West Road.

But in love, like everything else—more than anything else—there must be bad as well as good; and by silence or some trivial remark she could inflict unexpected pain. Away from her, all activities seemed waste of time, yet sometimes just before seeing her I was aware of an odd sense of antagonism that had taken the place of the longing that had been in my heart for days before. This sense of being out of key with her sometimes survived the first minutes of our meeting. Then, all at once, tension would be relaxed; always, so it seemed to me, by some mysterious force emanating from her: intangible, invisible, yet at the same time part of a whole principle of behaviour: a deliberate act of the will by which she exercised power. At times it was almost as if she intended me to feel that unexpected accident, rather than a carefully arranged plan, had brought us together on some given occasion; or at least that I must always be prepared for such a mood. Perhaps these are inward irritations always produced by love: the acutely sensitive nerves of intimacy: the haunting fear that all may not go well.

Still thinking of such things, I rang the bell of the ground-floor flat. It was in an old-fashioned red-brick block of buildings, situated somewhere beyond Rutland Gate, concealed among obscure turnings that seemed to lead nowhere. For some time there was no answer to the ring. I waited, peering through the frosted glass of the front door, feeling every second an eternity. Then the door opened a few inches and Jean looked out. I saw her face only for a moment. She was laughing.

'Come in,' she said quickly. 'It's cold.'

As I entered the hall, closing the door behind me, she ran back along the passage. I saw that she wore nothing but a pair of slippers.

'There is a fire in here,' she called from the sitting-room.

I hung my hat on the grotesque piece of furniture, designed for that use, that stood by the door. Then I followed her down the passage and into the room. The furniture and decoration of the flat were of an appalling banality.

'Why are you wearing no clothes?'

'Are you shocked?'

'What do you think?'

'I think you are.'

'Surprised, rather than shocked.'

'To make up for the formality of our last meeting.'

'Aren't I showing my appreciation?'

'Yes, but you must not be so conventional.'

'But if it had been the postman?'

'I could have seen through the glass.'

'He, too, perhaps.'

'I had a dressing-gown handy.'

'It was a kind thought, anyway.'

'You like it?'

'Very much.'

'Tell me something nice.'

'This style suits you.'

'Not too *outré*?'

'On the contrary.'

'Is this how you like me?'

'Just like this.'

There is, after all, no pleasure like that given by a woman who really wants to see you. Here, at last, was some real escape from the world. The calculated anonymity of the surroundings somehow increased the sense of being alone with her. There was no sound except her sharp intake of breath. Yet love, for all the escape it offers, is closely linked with everyday things, even with the affairs of others. I knew Jean would burn with curiosity when I told her of the procession in the park. At the same time, because passion in its transcendence cannot be shared with any other element, I could not speak of what had happened until the time had come to decide where to dine.

She was pulling on her stockings when I told her. She gave a little cry, indicating disbelief.

'After all, you were the first to suggest something was "on" between them.'

'But she would be insane to leave Peter.'

We discussed this. The act of marching in a political demonstration did not, in itself, strike her as particularly unexpected in Mona. She said that Mona always longed to take part in anything that drew attention to herself. Jean was unwilling to believe that pushing St. John Clarke's chair was the outward sign of a decisive step in joining Quiggin.

'She must have done it because Peter is away. It is exactly the kind of thing that would appeal to her. Besides, it would annoy him just the right amount. A little, but not too much.'

'Where is Peter?'

'Spending the week-end with business friends. Mona thought them too boring to visit.'

'Perhaps she was just having a day out, then. Even so, it confirms your view that Quiggin made a hit with her.'

She pulled on the other stocking.

'True, they had a splitting row just before Peter left home,' she said. 'You know, I almost believe you are right.'

'Put a call through.'

'Just to see what the form is?'

'Why not?'

'Shall I?'

She was undecided.

'I think I will,' she said at last.

Still only partly dressed, she took up the telephone and lay on the sofa. At the other end of the line the bell rang for some little time before there was an answer. Then a voice spoke from the Templers' house. Jean made some trivial enquiry. A short conversation followed. I saw from her face that my guess had been somewhere near the mark. She hung up the receiver.

'Mona left the house yesterday, saying she did not know when she would be back. She took a fair amount of luggage and left no address. I think the Burdens believe something is up. Mrs. Burden told me Peter had rung up about something he had forgotten. She told him Mona had left unexpectedly.

'She may be taking a few days off.'

'I don't think so,' said Jean.

Barnby used to say: 'All women are stimulated by the news that any wife has left any husband.' Certainly I was aware that the emotional atmosphere in the room had changed. Perhaps I should have waited longer before telling her my story. Yet to postpone the information further was scarcely possible without appearing deliberately secretive. I have often pondered on the conversation that followed, without coming to any definite conclusion as to why things took the course they did.

We had gone on to talk of the week-end when Quiggin had been first invited to the Templers' house. I had remarked something to the effect that if Mona had really left for good, the subject would have been apt for one of Mrs. Erdleigh's prophecies. In saying this I had added some more or less derogatory remark about Jimmy Stripling. Suddenly I was aware that Jean was displeased with my words. Her face took on a look of vexation. I supposed that some out-of-the-way loyalty had for some reason made her take exception to the idea of laughing at her sister's ex-husband. I could not imagine why this should be, since Stripling was usually regarded in the Templer household as an object of almost perpetual derision.

'I know he isn't *intelligent,*' she said.

'Intelligence isn't everything,' I said, trying to pass the matter off lightly. 'Look at the people in the Cabinet.'

'You said the other day that you found it awfully difficult to get on with people who were not intelligent.'

'I only meant where writing was concerned.'

'It didn't sound like that.'

A woman's power of imitation and adaptation make her capable of confronting you with your own arguments after even the briefest acquaintance: how much more so if a state of intimacy exists. I saw that we were about to find ourselves in deep water. She pursed her lips and looked away. I thought she was going to cry. I could not imagine what had gone wrong and began to feel that terrible sense of exhaustion that descends, when, without cause or warning, an unavoidable, meaningless quarrel develops with someone you love. Now there seemed no way out. To lavish excessive praise on Jimmy Stripling's intellectual attainments would not be accepted, might even sound satirical; on the other hand, to remain silent would seem to confirm my undoubtedly low opinion of his capabilities in that direction. There was also, of course, the more general implication of her remark, the suggestion of protest against a state of mind in which intellectual qualities were automatically put first. Dissent from this principle was, after all, reasonable enough, though not exactly an equitable weapon in Jean's hands; for she, as much as anyone—so it seemed to me as her lover—was dependent, in the last resort, on people who were 'intelligent' in the sense in which she used the word.

Perhaps it was foolish to pursue the point of what was to all appearances only an irritable remark. But the circumstances were of a kind when irritating remarks are particularly to be avoided. Otherwise, it would have been easier to find an excuse.

Often enough, women love the arts and those who practice them; but they possess also a kind of jealousy of those activities. They like wit, but hate analysis. They are always prepared to fall back upon traditional rather than intellectual defensive positions. We never talked of Duport, as I have already recorded, and I scarcely knew, even then, why she had married him; but married they were. Accordingly, it seemed to me possible that what she had said possessed reference, in some oblique manner, to her husband; in the sense that adverse criticism of this kind cast a reflection upon him, and consequently upon herself. I had said nothing of Duport (who, as I was to discover years later, had a deep respect for 'intelligence'), but the possibility was something to be taken into account.

I was quite wrong in this surmise, and, even then, did not realise the seriousness of the situation; certainly was wholly unprepared for what happened next. A moment later, for no apparent reason, she told me she had had a love affair with Jimmy Stripling.

'When?'

'After Babs left him,' she said.

She went white, as if she might be about to faint. I was myself overcome with a horrible feeling of nausea, as if one had suddenly woken from sleep and found oneself chained to a corpse. A desire to separate myself physically from her and the place we were in was linked with an overwhelming sensation that, more than ever, I wanted her for myself. To think of her as wife of Bob Duport was bad enough, but that she should also have been mistress of Jimmy Stripling was barely endurable. Yet it was hard to know how to frame a complaint regarding that matter even to myself. She had not been 'unfaithful' to me. This odious thing had happened at a time when I myself had no claim whatsoever over her. I tried to tranquillise myself by considering whether a liaison with some man, otherwise possible to like or admire, would have been preferable. In the face of such an alternative, I decided Stripling was on the whole better as he was: with all the nightmarish fantasies implicit in the situation. The mystery remained why she should choose that particular moment to reveal this experience of hers, making of it a kind of defiance.

When you are in love with someone, their life, past, present and future, becomes in a curious way part of your life; and yet, at the same time, since two separate human entities in fact remain, you merely carry your own prejudices into another person's imagined existence; not even into their 'real' existence, because only they themselves can estimate what their 'real' existence has been. Indeed, the situation might be compared with that to be experienced in due course in the army where an officer is responsible for the conduct of troops stationed at a post too distant from him for the exercise of any effective control.

Not only was it painful enough to think of Jean giving herself to another man; the pain was intensified by supposing—what was, of course, not possible—that Stripling must appear to her in the same terms that he appeared to me. Yet clearly she had, once, at least, looked at Stripling with quite different eyes, or such a situation could never have arisen. Therefore, seeing Stripling as a man for whom it was evidently possible to feel at the very least a passing *tendresse*—perhaps even love—this incident, unforgettably horrible as it seemed to me at the time, would more rationally be regarded as a mere error of judgment. In love, however, there is no rationality. Besides, that she had seen him with other eyes than mine made things worse. In such ways one is bound, inescapably, to the actions of others.

We finished dressing in silence. By that time it was fairly late. I felt at once hungry, and without any true desire for food.

'Where shall we go?'

'Anywhere you like.'

'But where would you like to go?'

'I don't care.'

'We could have a sandwich at Foppa's.'

'The club?'

'Yes.'

'All right.'

In the street she slipped her arm through mine. I looked, and saw that she was crying a little, but I was no nearer understanding her earlier motives. The only thing clear was that some sharp change had taken place in the kaleidoscope of our connected emotions. In the pattern left by this transmutation of coloured crystals an increased intimacy had possibly emerged. Perhaps that was something she had intended.

'I suppose I should not have told you.'

'It would have come out sooner or later.'

'But not just then.'

'Perhaps not.'

Still, in spite of it all, as we drove through dingy Soho streets, her head resting on my shoulder, I felt glad she still seemed to belong to me. Foppa's was open. That was a relief, for there was sometimes an intermediate period when the restaurant was closed down and the club had not yet come into active being. We climbed the narrow staircase, over which brooded a peculiarly Italian smell: minestrone: salad oil: stale tobacco: perhaps a faint reminder of the lotion Foppa used on his hair.

Barnby had first introduced me to Foppa's club a long time before. One of the merits of the place was that no one either of us knew ever went there. It was a single room over Foppa's Restaurant. In theory the club opened only after the restaurant had shut for the night, but in practice Foppa himself, sometimes feeling understandably bored with his customers, would retire upstairs to read the paper, or practise billiard strokes. On such occasions he was glad of company at an earlier hour than was customary. Alternatively, he would sometimes go off with his friends to another haunt of theirs, leaving a notice on the door, written in indelible pencil, saying that Foppa's Club was temporarily closed for cleaning.

There was a narrow window at the far end of this small, smoky apartment; a bar in one corner, and a table for the game of Russian billiards in the other. The walls were white and bare, the vermouth bottles above the little bar shining out in bright stripes of colour that seemed to form a kind of spectrum in red, white and green. These patriotic colours linked the aperitifs and liqueurs with the portrait of Victor Emmanuel II which hung over the mantelpiece. Surrounded by a wreath of laurel, the King of Sardinia and United Italy wore a wasp-waisted military frock-coat swagged with coils of yellow aiguillette. The bold treatment of his costume by the artist almost suggested a Bakst design for one of the early Russian ballets.

If Foppa himself had grown his moustache to the same enormous length, and added an imperial to his chin, he would have looked remarkably like the *re galantuomo*; with just that same air of royal amusement that anyone could possibly take seriously—even for a moment—the preposterous world in which we are fated to have our being. Hanging over the elaborately gilded frame of this coloured print was the beautiful Miss Foppa's black fez-like cap, which she possessed by virtue of belonging to some local, parochial branch of the Fascist Party; though her father was believed to be at best only a lukewarm supporter of Mussolini's régime. Foppa had lived in London for many years. He had even served as a cook during the war with a British light infantry regiment; but he had never taken out papers of naturalisation.

'Look at me,' he used to say, when the subject arose, 'I am not an Englishman. You see.'

The truth of that assertion was undeniable. Foppa was not an Englishman. He did not usually express political opinions in the presence of his customers, but he had once, quite exceptionally, indicated to me a newspaper photograph of the Duce declaiming from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia. That was as near as he had ever gone to stating his view. It was sufficient. Merely by varying in no way his habitual expression of tolerant amusement, Foppa had managed to convey his total lack of anything that could possibly be accepted as Fascist enthusiasm. All the same, I think he had no objection to his daughter's association with that or any other party which might be in power at the moment.

Foppa was decidedly short, always exquisitely dressed in a neat blue, or brown, suit, his tiny feet encased in excruciatingly tight shoes of light tan shade. The shoes were sharply pointed and polished to form dazzling highlights. In summer he varied his footgear by sporting white brogues picked out in snakeskin. He was a great gambler, and sometimes spent his week-ends taking part in trotting races somewhere not far from London, perhaps at Greenford in Middlesex. Hanging behind the bar was a framed photograph of himself competing in one of these trotting events, armed with a long whip, wearing a jockey cap, his small person almost hidden between the tail of his horse and the giant wheels of the sulky. The snapshot recalled a design of Degas or Guys. That was the world, æsthetically speaking, to which Foppa belonged. He was a man of great good nature and independence, who could not curb his taste for gambling for high stakes; a passion that brought him finally, I believe, into difficulties.

Jean and I had already been to the club several times, because she liked playing Russian billiards, a game at which she was extremely proficient. Sixpence in the slot of the table brought to the surface the white balls and the red.

After a quarter of an hour the balls no longer reappeared for play, vanishing one by one, while scores were doubled. Foppa approved of Jean. Her skill at billiards was a perpetual surprise and delight to him.

'He probably tells all his friends I'm his mistress,' she used to say.

She may have been right in supposing that; though I suspect, if he told any such stories, that Foppa would probably have boasted of some enormous lady, at least twice his own size, conceived in the manner of Jordaens. His turn of humour always suggested something of that sort.

I thought the club might be a good place to recover some sort of composure. The room was never very full, though sometimes there would be a party of three or four playing cards gravely at one of the tables in the corner. On that particular evening Foppa himself was engrossed in a two-handed game, perhaps piquet. Sitting opposite him, his back to the room, was a man of whom nothing could be seen but a brown check suit and a smoothly brushed head, greying and a trifle bald at the crown. Foppa rose at once, poured out Chianti for us, and shouted down the service hatch for sandwiches to be cut. Although the cook was believed to be a Cypriot, the traditional phrase for attracting his attention was always formulated in French.

'Là bas!' Foppa would intone liturgically, as he leant forward into the abyss that reached down towards the kitchen, 'Là bas!'

Perhaps Miss Foppa herself attended to the provision of food in the evenings. If so, she never appeared in the club. Her quiet, melancholy beauty would have ornamented the place. I had, indeed, never seen any woman but Jean in that room. No doubt the clientèle would have objected to the presence there of any lady not entirely removed from their own daily life.

Two Soho Italians were standing by the bar. One, a tall, sallow, mournful character, resembling a former ambassador fallen on evil days, smoked a short, stinking cigar. The other, a nondescript ruffian, smaller in size than his companion, though also with a certain air of authority, displayed a suggestion of side-whisker under his faun velour hat. He was picking his teeth pensively with one of the toothpicks supplied in tissue paper at the bar. Both were probably neighbouring head-waiters. The two of them watched Jean slide the cue gently between finger and thumb before making her first shot. The ambassadorial one removed the cigar from his mouth and, turning his head a fraction, remarked sententiously through almost closed lips:

'Bella posizione.'

'E in gamba,' agreed the other. 'Una fuori classe davvero.'

The evening was happier now, though still something might easily go wrong. There was no certainty. People are differently equipped for withstanding emotional discomfort. On the whole women can bear a good deal of that kind of strain without apparently undue inconvenience. The game was won by Jean.

'What about another one?'

We asked the Italians if they were waiting for the billiard table, but they did not want to play. We had just arranged the balls again, and set up the pin, when the door of the club opened and two people came into the room. One of them was Barnby. The girl with him was known to me, though it was a second before I remembered that she was Lady Anne Stepney. We had not met for three years or more. Barnby seemed surprised, perhaps not altogether pleased, to find someone he knew at Foppa's.

Although it had turned out that Anne Stepney was the girl he had met on the train after his week-end with the

Manaschs', he had ceased to speak of her freely in conversation. At the same time I knew he was still seeing her. This was on account of a casual word dropped by him. I had never before run across them together in public. Some weeks after his first mention of her, I had asked whether he had finally established her identity. Barnby had replied brusquely:

'Of course her name is Stepney.'

I sometimes wondered how the two of them were getting along; even whether they had plans for marriage. A year was a long time for Barnby to be occupied with one woman. Like most men of his temperament, he held, on the whole, rather strict views regarding other people's morals. For that reason alone he would probably not have approved had I told him about Jean. In any case he was not greatly interested in such things unless himself involved. He only knew that something of the sort was in progress, and he would have had no desire, could it have been avoided, to come upon us unexpectedly in this manner.

The only change in Anne Stepney (last seen at Stringham's wedding) was her adoption of a style of dress implicitly suggesting an art student; nothing outrageous: just a general assertion that she was in some way closely connected with painting or sculpture. I think Mona had struggled against such an appearance; in Anne Stepney, it had no doubt been painfully acquired. Clothes of that sort certainly suited her large dark eyes and reddish hair, seeming also appropriate to a general air of untidiness, not to say grubbiness, that always possessed her. She had by then, I knew, passed almost completely from the world in which she had been brought up; that in which her sister, Peggy, still moved, or, at least, in that portion of it frequented by young married women.

The Bridgnorths had taken their younger daughter's behaviour philosophically. They had gone through all the normal processes of giving her a start in life, a ball for her 'coming out', and everything else to be reasonably expected of parents in the circumstances. In the end they had agreed that 'in these days' it was impossible to insist on the hopes or standards of their own generation. Anne had been allowed to go her own way, while Lady Bridgnorth had returned to her hospital committees and Lord Bridgnorth to his politics and racing. They had probably contented themselves with the thought that Peggy, having quietly divorced Stringham, had now settled down peacefully enough with her new husband in his haunted, Palladian Yorkshire home, which was said to have given St. John Clarke the background for a novel. Besides, their eldest son, Mountfichet, I had been told, was turning out well at the university, where he was a great favourite with Sillery.

When introductions took place, it seemed simpler to make no reference to the fact that we had met before. Anne Stepney stared round the room with severe approval. Indicating Foppa and his companion, she remarked:

'I always think people playing cards make such a good pattern.'

'Rather like a Chardin,' I suggested.

'Do you think so?' she replied, implying contradiction rather than agreement.

'The composition?'

'You know I am really only interested in Chardin's highlights,' she said.

Before we could pursue the intricacies of Chardin's technique further, Foppa rose to supply further drinks. He had already made a sign of apology at his delay in doing this, to be accounted for by the fact that his game was on the point of completion when Barnby arrived. He now noted the score on a piece of paper and came towards us.

He was followed this time to the bar by the man with whom he had been at cards. Foppa's companion could now be seen more clearly. His suit was better cut and general appearance more distinguished than was usual in the club. He had stood by the table for a moment, stretching himself and lighting a cigarette, while he regarded our group. A moment later, taking a step towards Anne Stepney, he said in a soft, purring, rather humorous voice, with something almost hypnotic about its tone:

'I heard your name when you were introduced. You must be Eddie Bridgnorth's daughter.'

Looking at him more closely as he said this, I was surprised that he had remained almost unobserved until that moment. He was no ordinary person. That was clear. Of medium height, even rather small when not compared with Foppa, he was slim, with that indefinably 'horsey' look that seems even to affect the texture of the skin. His age was hard to guess: probably he was in his forties. He was very trim in his clothes. They were old, neat, well preserved clothes, a little like those worn by Uncle Giles. This man gave the impression of having handled large sums of money in his time, although he did not convey any presumption of affluence at that particular moment. He was clean-shaven, and wore a hard collar and Brigade of Guards tie. I could not imagine what someone of that sort was doing at Foppa's. There was something about him of Buster Foxe, third husband of Stringham's mother: the same cool, tough, socially elegant personality, though far more genial than Buster's. He lacked, too, that carapace of professional egotism acquired in boyhood that envelops protectively even the most good-humoured naval officer. Perhaps the similarity to Buster was after all only the outer veneer acquired by all people of the same generation.

Anne Stepney replied rather stiffly to this enquiry, that

'Eddie Bridgnorth' was indeed her father. Having decided to throw in her lot so uncompromisingly with 'artists', she may have felt put out to find herself confronted in such a place by someone of this kind. Since he claimed acquaintance with Lord Bridgnorth, there was no knowing what information he might possess about herself; nor what he might report subsequently if he saw her father again. However, the man in the Guards tie seemed instinctively to understand what her feelings would be on learning that he knew her family.

'I am Dicky Umfraville,' he said. 'I don't expect you have ever heard of me, because I have been away from this country for so long. I used to see something of your father when he owned Yellow Jack. In fact I won a whole heap of money on that horse once. None of it left now, I regret to say.'

He smiled gently. By the confidence, and at the same time the modesty, of his manner he managed to impart an extraordinary sense of reassurance. Anne Stepney seemed hardly to know what to say in answer to this account of himself. I remembered hearing Sillery speak of Umfraville, when I was an undergraduate. Perhaps facetiously, he had told Stringham that Umfraville was a man to beware of. That had been apropos of Stringham's father, and life in Kenya. Stringham himself had met Umfraville in Kenya, and spoke of him as a well-known gentleman-rider. I also remembered Stringham complaining that Le Bas had once mistaken him for Umfraville, who had been at Le Bas's house at least fifteen years earlier. Now, in spite of the difference in age and appearance, I could see that Le Bas's error had been due to something more than the habitual vagueness of schoolmasters. The similarity between Stringham and Umfraville was of a moral rather than physical sort. The same dissatisfaction with life and basic melancholy gave a resemblance, though Umfraville's features and expression were more formalised and, in some manner, coarser—perhaps they could even be called more brutal—than Stringham's.

There was something else about Umfraville that struck me, a characteristic I had noticed in other people of his age. He seemed still young, a person like oneself; and yet at the same time his appearance and manner proclaimed that he had had time to live at least a few years of his grown-up life before the outbreak of war in 1914. Once I had thought of those who had known the epoch of my own childhood as 'older people'. Then I had found there existed people like Umfraville who seemed somehow to span the gap. They partook of both eras, specially forming the tone of the post-war years; much more so, indeed, than the younger people. Most of them, like Umfraville, were melancholy; perhaps from the strain of living simultaneously in two different historical periods. That was his category, certainly. He continued now to address himself to Anne Stepney.

'Do you ever go to trotting races?'

'No.'

She looked very surprised at the question.

'I thought not,' he said, laughing at her astonishment. 'I became interested when I was in the States. The Yanks are very keen on trotting races. So are the French. In this country no one much ever seems to go. However, I met Foppa, here, down at Greenford the other day and we got on so well that we arranged to go to Caversham together. The next thing is I find myself playing piquet with him in his own joint.'

Foppa laughed at this account of the birth of their friendship, and rubbed his hands together.

'You had all the luck tonight, Mr. Umfraville,' he said. 'Next time I have my revenge.'

'Certainly, Foppa, certainly.'

However, in spite of the way the cards had fallen, Foppa seemed pleased to have Umfraville in the club. Later, I found that one of Umfraville's most fortunate gifts was a capacity to take money off people without causing offence.

A moment or two of general conversation followed in which it turned out that Jean had met Barnby on one of his visits to Stourwater. She knew, of course, about his former connection with Baby Wentworth, but when we had talked of this together, she had been uncertain whether or not they had ever stayed with Sir Magnus Donners at the same time. They began to discuss the week-end during which they had both been in the same large house-party. Anne Stepney, possibly to avoid a further immediate impact with Umfraville before deciding on how best to treat him, crossed the room to examine Victor Emmanuel's picture. Umfraville and I were, accordingly, left together. I asked if he remembered Stringham in Kenya.

'Charles Stringham?' he said. 'Yes, of course I knew him. Boffles Stringham's son. A very nice boy. But wasn't he married to *her* sister?'

He lowered his voice, and jerked his head in Anne's direction.

'They are divorced now.'

'Of course they are. I forgot. As a matter of fact I heard Charles was in rather a bad way. Drinking enough to float a battleship. Of course, Boffles likes his liquor hard, too. Have you known Charles long?'

'We were at the same house at school—Le Bas's.'

'Not possible.'

'Why not?'

'Because I was at Le Bas's too. Not for very long. I started at Corderey's. Then Corderey's house was taken over by Le Bas. I was asked to leave quite soon after that—

not actually sacked, as is sometimes maliciously stated by my friends. I get invited to Old Boy dinners, for example. Not that I ever go. Usually out of England. As a matter of fact I might go this year. What about you?'

'I might. I haven't been myself for a year or two.'

'Do come. We'll make up a party and raise hell. Tear Claridge's in half. That's where they hold it, isn't it?'

'Or the Ritz.'

'You must come.'

There was a suggestion of madness in the way he shot out his sentences; not the kind of madness that was raving, nor even, in the ordinary sense, dangerous; but a warning that no proper mechanism existed for operating normal controls. At the same time there was also something impelling about his friendliness: this sudden decision that we must attend the Old Boy dinner together. Even though I knew fairly well—at least flattered myself I knew well—the type of man he was, I could not help being pleased by the invitation. Certainly, I made up my mind immediately that I would go to the Le Bas dinner, upon which I was far from decided before. In fact, it would be true to say that Umfraville had completely won me over; no doubt by the shock tactics against which Sillery had issued his original warning. In such matters, though he might often talk nonsense, Sillery possessed a strong foundation of shrewdness. People who disregarded his admonitions sometimes lived to regret it.

'Do you often come here?' Umfraville asked.

'Once in a way—to play Russian billiards.'

'Tell me the name of that other charming girl.'

'Jean Duport.'

'Anything to do with the fellow who keeps company with Bijou Ardglass?'

'Wife.'

'Dear me. How eccentric of him with something so nice at home. Anne, over there, is a dear little thing, too. Bit of a handful, I hear. Fancy her being grown up. Only seems the other day I read the announcement of her birth. Wouldn't mind taking her out to dinner one day, if I had the price of a dinner on me.'

'Do you live permanently in Kenya?'

'Did for a time. Got rather tired of it lately. Isn't what it was in the early days. But, you know, something seems to have gone badly wrong with this country too. It's quite different from when I was over here two or three years ago. Then there was a party every night—two or three, as a matter of fact. Now all that is changed. No parties, no gaiety, everyone talking in a dreadfully serious manner about economics or world disarmament or something of the sort. That was why I was glad to come here and take a hand with Foppa. No nonsense about economics or world disarmament with him. All the people I know have become so damned serious, what? Don't you find that yourself?'

'It's the slump.'

Umfraville's face had taken on a strained, worried expression while he was saying this, almost the countenance of a priest preaching a gospel of pleasure to a congregation now fallen away from the high standards of the past. There was a look of hopelessness in his eyes, as if he knew of the terrible odds against him, and the martyrdom that would be his final crown. At that moment he again reminded me, for some reason, of Buster Foxe. I had never heard Buster express such opinions, though in general they were at that time voiced commonly enough.

'Anyway, it's nice to find all of you here,' he said. 'Let's have another drink.'

Barnby and Anne Stepney now began to play billiards together. They seemed not on the best of terms, and had perhaps had some sort of a quarrel earlier in the evening. If Mrs. Erdleigh had been able to examine the astrological potentialities of that day she would perhaps have warned groups of lovers that the aspects were ominous. Jean came across to the bar. She took my arm, as if she wished to emphasise to Umfraville that we were on the closest terms. This was in spite of the fact that she herself was always advocating discretion. All the same, I felt delighted and warmed by her touch. Umfraville smiled, almost paternally, as if he felt that here at least he could detect on our part some hope of a pursuit of pleasure. He showed no disposition to return to his game with Foppa, now chatting with the two Italians.

'Charles Stringham was mixed up with Milly Andriadis at one moment, wasn't he?' Umfraville asked.

'About three years ago—just before his marriage.'

'I think it was just starting when I was last in London. Don't expect that really did him any good. Milly has got a way of exhausting chaps, no matter who they are. Even her Crowned Heads. They can't stand it after a bit. I remember one friend of mine had to take a voyage round the world to recover. He got D.T.s in Hongkong. Thought he was being hunted by naked women riding on unicorns. What's happened to Milly now?'

'I only met her once—at a party Charles took me to.'

'Why don't we all go and see her?'

'I don't think any of us really know her.'

'But *I* couldn't know her better.'

'Where does she live?'

'Where's the telephone book?' said Umfraville. 'Though I don't expect she will be in England at this time of year.'

He moved away, lost in thought, and disappeared through the door. It occurred to me that he was pretty drunk, but at the same time I was not sure. Equally possible was the supposition that this was his first drink of the evening. The mystery surrounded him that belongs especially to strong characters who have only pottered about in life. Jean slipped her hand in mine.

'Who is he?'

I tried to explain to her who Umfraville was.

'I am enjoying myself,' she said.

'Are you?'

I could not be quite sure whether I was enjoying myself or not. We watched the other two playing billiards. The game was evidently war to the knife. They were evenly matched. There could be no doubt now that there had been some sort of disagreement between them before their arrival at Foppa's. Perhaps all girls were in a difficult mood that night.

'I've often heard of Umfraville,' said Barnby, chalking his cue. 'Didn't he take two women to St. Moritz one year, and get fed up with them, and left them there to pay the hotel bill?'

'Who is he married to now?' Anne Stepney asked.

'Free as air at the moment, I believe,' said Barnby. 'He has had several wives—three at least. One of them poisoned herself. Another left him for a marquess—and almost immediately eloped again with a jockey. What happened to the third I can't remember. Your shot, my dear.'

Umfraville returned to the room. He watched the completion of the game in silence. It was won by Barnby. Then he spoke.

'I have a proposition to make,' he said. 'I got on to Milly Andriadis just now on the telephone and told her we were all coming round to see her.'

My first thought was that I could not make a habit of arriving with a gang of friends at Mrs. Andriadis's house as an uninvited guest; even at intervals of three or four years. A moment later I saw the absurdity of such diffidence, because, apart from any other consideration, she would not have the faintest remembrance of ever having met me before. At the same time, I could not inwardly disregard the pattern of life which caused Dicky Umfraville not only to resemble Stringham, but also, by this vicarious invitation, to re-enact Stringham's past behaviour.

'What is this suggestion?' enquired Anne Stepney.

She spoke coldly, but I think Umfraville had already thoroughly aroused her interest. At any rate her eyes reflected that rather puzzled look that in women is sometimes the prelude to an inclination for the man on whom it is directed.

'Someone called Mrs. Andriadis,' said Umfraville. 'She has been giving parties since you were so high. Rather a famous lady. A very old friend of mine. I thought we might go round and see her. I rang her up just now and she can't wait to welcome us.'

'Oh, do let's go,' said Anne Stepney, suddenly abandoning her bored, listless tone. 'I've always longed to meet Mrs. Andriadis. Wasn't she some king's mistress—was it——'

'It was,' said Umfraville.

'I've heard so many stories of the wonderful parties she gives.'

Umfraville stepped forward and took her hand. 'Your ladyship wishes to come,' he said softly, as if playing the part of a courtier in some ludicrously mannered ceremonial. 'We go, then. Yours to command.'

He bent his head over the tips of her fingers. I could not see whether his lips actually touched them, but the burlesque was for some reason extraordinarily funny, so that we all laughed. Yet, although absurd, Umfraville's gesture had also a kind of grace which clearly pleased and flattered Anne Stepney. She even blushed a little. Although he laughed with the rest of us, I saw that Barnby was a trifle put out, as indeed most men would have been in the circumstances. He had certainly recognised Umfraville as a rival with a technique entirely different from his own. I looked across to Jean to see if she wanted to join the expedition. She nodded quickly and smiled. All at once things were going all right again between us.

'I've only met Mrs. Andriadis a couple of times,' said Barnby. 'But we got on very well on both occasions—in fact she bought a drawing. I suppose she won't mind such a large crowd?'

'Mind?' said Umfraville. 'My dear old boy, Milly will be tickled to death. Come along. We can all squeeze into one taxi. Foppa, we shall meet again. You shall have your revenge.'

Mrs. Andriadis was, of course, no longer living in the Duports' house in Hill Street, where Stringham had taken me to the party. That house had been sold by Duport at the time of his financial disaster. She was now installed, so it appeared, in a large block of flats recently erected in Park Lane. I was curious to see how her circumstances would strike me on re-examination. Her party had seemed, at the time, to reveal a new and fascinating form of life, which one might never experience again. Such a world now was not only far less remarkable than formerly, but also its special characteristics appeared scarcely necessary to seek in an active manner. Its elements had, indeed, grown up all round one like strange tropical vegetation: more luxuriant, it was true, in some directions rather than others: attractive here, repellent there, but along every track that could be followed almost equally dense and imprisoning.

'She really said she would like to see us?' I asked, as, tightly packed, we ascended in the lift.

Umfraville's reply was less assuring than might have been hoped.

'She said, "Oh, God, you again, Dicky. Somebody told me you died of drink in 1929." I said, "Milly, I'm coming straight round with a few friends to give you that kiss I forgot when we were in Havana together." She said, "Well, I hope you'll bring along that pony you owe me, too, which you forgot at the same time." So saying, she snapped the receiver down.'

'So she has no idea how many we are?'

'Milly knows I have lots of friends.'

'All the same——'

'Don't worry, old boy. Milly will eat you all up. Especially as you are a friend of Charles.'

I was, on the contrary, not at all sure that it would be wise to mention Stringham's name to Mrs. Andriadis.

'We had to sue her after she took our house,' said Jean.

'Yes, I expect so,' said Umfraville.

The circumstances of our arrival did not seem specially favourable in the light of these remarks. We were admitted to what was evidently a large flat by an elderly lady's-maid, who had the anxious, authoritative demeanour of a nanny, or nursery governess, long established in the family.

'Well, Ethel,' said Umfraville. 'How are you keeping? Quite a long time since we met.'

Her face brightened at once when she recognised him.

'And how are *you,* Mr. Umfraville? Haven't set eyes on you since the days in Cuba. You look very well indeed, sir. Where did you get your sunburn?'

'Not too bad, Ethel. What a time it was in Cuba. And how is Mrs. A.?'

'She's been a bit poorly, sir, on and off. Not quite her own old self. She has her ups and downs.'

'Which of us doesn't, Ethel? Will she be glad to see me?'

It seemed rather late in the day to make this enquiry. Ethel's reply was not immediate. Her face contracted a trifle as she concentrated her attention upon an entirely truthful answer to this delicate question.

'She was pleased when you rang up,' she said. 'Very pleased. Called me in and told me, just as she would have done in the old days. But then Mr. Guggenbühl telephoned just after you did, and after that I don't know that she was so keen. She's changeable, you know. Always was.'

'Mr. Guggenbühl is the latest, is he?'

Ethel laughed, with the easy good manners of a trusted servant whose tact is infinite. She made no attempt to indicate the identity of Mr. Guggenbühl.

'What's he like?' Umfraville asked, wheedling in his manner.

'He's a German gentleman, sir.'

'Old, young? Rich, poor?'

'He's quite young, sir. Shouldn't say he was specially wealthy.'

'One of that kind, is he?' said Umfraville. 'Everybody seems to have a German boy these days. I feel quite out of fashion not to have one in tow myself. Does he live here?'

'Stays sometimes.'

'Well, we won't remain long,' said Umfraville. 'I quite understand.'

We followed him through a door, opened by Ethel, which led into a luxurious rather than comfortable room. There was an impression of heavy damask curtains and fringed chair-covers. Furniture and decoration had evidently been designed in one piece, little or nothing having been added to the original scheme by the present owner. A few books and magazines lying on a low table in Chinese Chippendale seemed strangely out of place; even more so, a model theatre, like a child's, which stood on a Louis XVI commode.

Mrs. Andriadis herself was lying in an armchair, her legs resting on a pouf. Her features had not changed at all from the time when I had last seen her. Her powder-grey hair remained beautifully trim; her dark eyebrows still arched over very bright brown eyes. She looked as pretty as before, and as full of energy. She wore no jewellery except a huge square cut diamond on one finger.

Her clothes, on the other hand, had undergone a strange alteration. Her small body was now enveloped in a black cloak, its velvet collar clipped together at the neck by a short chain of metal links. The garment suggested an Italian officer's uniform cloak, which it probably was. Beneath this military outer covering was a suit of grey flannel pyjamas, mean in design and much too big for her: in fact obviously intended for a man. One trouser leg was rucked up, showing her slim calf and ankle. She did not rise, but made a movement with her hand to show that she desired us all to find a place to sit.

'Well, Dicky,' she said, 'why the hell do you want to bring a crowd of people to see me at this time of night?'

She spoke dryly, though without bad temper, in that distinctly cockney drawl that I remembered.

'Milly, darling, they are all the most charming people imaginable. Let me tell you who they are.'

Mrs. Andriadis laughed.

'I know *him,*' she said, nodding in the direction of Barnby.

'Lady Anne Stepney,' said Umfraville. 'Do you remember when we went in her father's party to the St. Leger?'

'You'd better not say anything about *that,*' said Mrs. Andriadis. 'Eddie Bridgnorth has become a pillar of respectability. How is your sister, Anne? I'm not surprised she had to leave Charles Stringham. Such a charmer, but no woman could stay married to him for long.'

Anne Stepney looked rather taken aback at this peremptory approach.

'And Mrs. Duport,' said Umfraville.

'Was it your house I took in Hill Street?'

'Yes,' said Jean, 'it was.'

I wondered whether there would be an explosion at this disclosure. The trouble at the house had involved some question of a broken looking-glass and a burnt-out boiler. Perhaps there had been other items too. Certainly there had been a great deal of unpleasantness. However, in the unexpected manner of persons who live their lives at a furious rate, Mrs. Andriadis merely said in a subdued voice:

'You know, my dear, I want to apologise for all that happened in that wretched house. If I told you the whole story, you would agree that I was not altogether to blame. But it is all much too boring to go into now. At least you got your money. I hope it really paid for the damage.'

'We've got rid of the house now,' Jean said, laughing. 'I didn't ever like it much anyway.'

'And Mr. Jenkins,' Umfraville said. 'A friend of Charles's——'

She gave me a keen look.

'I believe I've seen you before, too,' she said.

I hoped she was not going to recall the scene Mr. Deacon had made at her party. However, she carried the matter no further.

'Ethel,' she shouted, 'bring some glasses. There is beer for those who can't drink whisky.'

She turned towards Umfraville.

'I'm quite glad to see you all,' she said; 'but you mustn't stay too long after Werner appears. He doesn't approve of people like you.'

'Your latest beau, Milly?'

'Werner Guggenbühl. Such a charming German boy. He will be terribly tired when he arrives. He has been walking in a procession all day.'

'To meet the Hunger-Marchers?' I asked.

It had suddenly struck me that in the extraordinary pattern life forms, this visit to Mrs. Andriadis was all part of the same diagram as that in which St. John Clarke, Quiggin and Mona had played their part that afternoon.

'I think so. Were you marching too?'

'No—but I knew some people who were.'

'What an extraordinary world we live in,' said Umfraville. 'All one's friends marching about in the park.'

'Rather sweet of Werner, don't you agree?' said Mrs. Andriadis. 'Considering this isn't his own country and all the awful things we did to Germany at the Versailles Treaty.'

Before she could say more about him, Guggenbühl himself arrived in the room. He was dark and not bad-looking in a very German style. His irritable expression recalled Quiggin's. He bowed slightly from the waist when introduced, but took no notice of any individual, not even Mrs. Andriadis herself, merely glancing round the room and then glaring straight ahead of him. There could be no doubt that he was the owner of the grey pyjamas. He reminded me of a friend of Mr. Deacon's called 'Willi': described by Mr. Deacon as having 'borne much of the heat of the day over against Verdun when nation rose against nation'. Guggenbühl was a bit younger than Willi, but in character they might easily have a good deal in common.

'What sort of a day did you have, Werner?' asked Mrs. Andriadis.

She used a coaxing voice, quite unlike the manner in which she had spoken up to that moment. The tone made me think of Templer trying to appease Mona. It was equally unavailing, for Guggenbühl made an angry gesture with his fist.

'What was it like, you ask,' he said. 'So it was like everything in this country. Social-Democratic antics. Of it let us not speak.'

He turned away in the direction of the model theatre. Taking no further notice of us, he began to manipulate the scenery, or play about in some other manner with the equipment at the back of the stage.

'Werner is writing a play,' explained Mrs. Andriadis, speaking now in a much more placatory manner. 'We sometimes run through the First Act in the evening. How is it going, Werner?'

'Oh, are you?' said Anne Stepney. 'I'm terribly interested in the Theatre. Do tell us what it is about.'

Guggenbühl turned his head at this.

'I think it would not interest you,' he said. 'We have done with old theatre of bourgeoisie and capitalists. Here is *Volksbühnen*—for actor that is worker like industrial worker—actor that is machine of machines.'

'Isn't it too thrilling?' said Mrs. Andriadis. 'You know the October Revolution was the real turning point in the history of the Theatre.'

'Oh, I'm sure it was,' said Anne Stepney. 'I've read a lot about the Moscow Art Theatre.'

Guggenbühl made a hissing sound with his lips, expressing considerable contempt.

'Moscow Art Theatre is just to tolerate,' he said, 'but what of biomechanics, of *Trümmer-Kunst,* has it? Then Shakespeare's *Ein Sommernachtstraum* or Toller's *Masse-Mensch* will you take? The modern ethico-social play I think you do not like. Hauptmann, Kaiser, plays to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, yes. The new corporate life. The socially conscious form. Drama as highest of arts we Germans know. No mere entertainment, please. *Lebensstimmung* it is. But it is workers untouched by middle class that will make spontaneous. Of Moscow Art Theatre you speak. So there was founded at Revolution both Theatre and Art Soviet, millions, billions of roubles set aside by Moscow Soviet of Soldier Deputies. Hundreds, thousands of persons. Actors, singers, clowns, dancers, musicians, craftsmen, designers, mechanics, electricians, scene-shifters, all kinds of manual workers, all trained, yes, and supplying themselves to make. Two years to have one perfect single production—if needed so, three, four, five, ten years. At other time, fifty plays on fifty successive nights. It is not be getting money, no.'

His cold, hard voice, offering instruction, stopped abruptly.

'Any ventriloquists?' Umfraville asked.

The remark passed unnoticed, because Anne Stepney broke in again.

'I can't think why we don't have a revolution here,' she said, 'and start something of that sort.'

'You would have a revolution here?' said Guggenbühl, smiling rather grimly. 'So? Then I am in agreement with you.'

'Werner thinks the time has come to act,' said Mrs. Andriadis, returning to her more decisive manner. 'He says we have been talking for too long.'

'Oh, I do agree,' said Anne Stepney.

I asked Guggenbühl if he had come across St. John Clarke that afternoon. At this question his manner at once changed.

'You know him? The writer.'

'I know the man and the girl who were pushing him.'

'Ach, so.'

He seemed uncertain what line to take about St. John Clarke. Perhaps he was displeased with himself for having made disparaging remarks about the procession in front of someone who knew two of the participants and might report his words.

'He is a famous author, I think.'

'Quite well known.'

'He ask me to visit him.'

'Are you going?'

'Of course.'

'Did you meet Quiggin—his secretary—my friend?'

'I think he goes away soon to get married.'

'To the girl he was with?'

'I think so. Mr. Clarke ask me to visit him when your friend is gone for some weeks. He says he will be lonely and would like to talk.'

Probably feeling that he had wasted enough time already with the company assembled in the room, and at the same time being unwilling to give too much away to someone he did not know, Guggenbühl returned, after saying this, to the model theatre. Ostentatiously, he continued to play about with its accessories. We drank our beer. Even Umfraville seemed a little put out of countenance by Guggenbühl, who had certainly brought an atmosphere of peculiar unfriendliness and disquiet into the room. Mrs. Andriadis herself perhaps took some pleasure in the general discomfiture for which he was responsible. The imposition of one kind of a guest upon another is a form of exercising power that appeals to most persons who have devoted a good deal of their life to entertaining. Mrs. Andriadis, as a hostess of long standing and varied experience, was probably no exception. In addition to that, she, like St. John Clarke, had evidently succumbed recently to a political conversion, using Guggenbühl as her vehicle. His uncompromising behaviour no doubt expressed to perfection the role to which he was assigned in her mind: the scourge of frivolous persons of the sort she knew so well.

However, one of the essential gifts of an accomplished hostess is an ability to dismiss, quietly and speedily, guests who have overstayed their welcome. Mrs. Andriadis must have possessed this ingenuity to an unusual degree. I can remember no details of how our party was shifted. Perhaps Umfraville made a movement to go that was quickly accepted. Brief good-byes were said. One way or another, in an unbelievably short space of time, we found ourselves once more in Park Lane.

'You see,' said Umfraville. 'Even Milly . . .'

Some sort of a discussion followed as to whether or not the evening should be brought to a close at this point. Umfraville and Anne Stepney were unwilling to go home; Barnby was uncertain what he wanted to do; Jean and I agreed that we had had enough. The end of it was that the other two decided to accompany Umfraville to a place where a 'last drink' could be obtained. Other people's behaviour seemed unimportant to me; for in some way the day had righted itself, and once more the two of us seemed close together.

5.

WHEN, in describing Widmerpool's new employment, Templer had spoken of 'the Acceptance World', I had been struck by the phrase. Even as a technical definition, it seemed to suggest what we are all doing; not only in business, but in love, art, religion, philosophy, politics, in fact all human activities. The Acceptance World was the world in which the essential element—happiness, for example—is drawn, as it were, from an engagement to meet a bill. Sometimes the goods are delivered, even a small profit made; sometimes the goods are not delivered, and disaster follows; sometimes the goods are delivered, but the value of the currency is changed. Besides, in another sense, the whole world is the Acceptance World as one approaches thirty; at least some illusions discarded. The mere fact of still existing as a human being proved that.

I did not see Templer himself until later in the summer, when I attended the Old Boy Dinner for members of Le Bas's house. That year the dinner was held at the Ritz. We met in one of the subterranean passages leading to the private room where we were to eat. It was a warm, rather stuffy July evening. Templer, like a Frenchman, wore a white waistcoat with his dinner-jacket, a fashion of the moment: perhaps by then already a little outmoded.

'We always seem to meet in these gorgeous halls,' he said.

'We do.'

'I expect you've heard that Mona bolted,' he went on quickly. 'Joined up with that friend of yours of the remarkable suit and strong political views.'

His voice was casual, but it had a note of obsession as if his nerves were on edge. His appearance was unchanged; possibly a little thinner.

Mona's elopement had certainly been discussed widely. In the break-up of a marriage the world inclines to take the side of the partner with most vitality, rather than the one apparently least to blame. In the Templers' case public opinion had turned out unexpectedly favourable to Mona; probably because Templer himself was unknown to most of the people who talked to me of the matter. Normal inaccuracies of gossip were increased by this ignorance. In one version, Mona was represented as immensely rich, ill treated by an elderly, unsuccessful stockbroker; another described Templer as unable to fulfil a husband's role from physical dislike of women. A third account included a twenty-minute hand-to-hand struggle between the two men, at the end of which Quiggin had gained the victory: a narrative sometimes varied to a form in which Templer beat Quiggin unconscious with a shooting-stick. In a different vein was yet another story describing Templer, infatuated with his secretary, paying Quiggin a large sum to take Mona off his hands.

On the whole people are unwilling to understand even comparatively simple situations where husband and wife are concerned; indeed, a simple explanation is the last thing ever acceptable. Here, certainly, was something complicated enough; a striking reversal of what might be thought the ordinary course of events. Templer, a man undoubtedly attractive to women, loses his wife to Quiggin, a man usually ill at ease in women's company: Mona, as Anna Karenin, directing her romantic feelings towards Karenin as a lover, rather than Vronsky as a husband. For me, the irony was emphasised by Templer being my first schoolboy friend to seem perfectly at home with the opposite sex; indeed, the first to have practical experience in that quarter. But conflict between the sexes might be compared with the engagement of boxers in which the best style is not always victorious.

'What will they live on?' Templer said. 'Mona is quite an expensive luxury in her way.'

I had wondered that, too, especially in the light of an experience of a few weeks before, when in the Café Royal with Barnby. In those days there was a female orchestra raised on a dais at one side of the huge room where you had drinks. They were playing *In a Persian Market,* and in that noisy, crowded, glaring, for some reason rather ominous atmosphere, which seemed specially designed to hear such confidences, Barnby had been telling me that matters were at an end between Anne Stepney and himself. That had not specially surprised me after the evening at Foppa's. Barnby had reached the climax of his story when Quiggin and Mark Members passed our table, side by side, on their way to the diners' end of the room. That was, to say the least, unexpected. They appeared to be on perfectly friendly terms with each other. When they saw us, Members had given a distant, evasive smile, but Quiggin stopped to speak. He seemed in an excellent humour.

'How are you, Nick?'

'All right.'

'Mark and I are going to celebrate the completion of *Unburnt Boats,*' he said. 'It is a wonderful thing to finish a book.'

'When is it to appear?'

'Autumn.'

I felt sure Quiggin had stopped like this in order to make some statement that would define more clearly his own position. That would certainly be a reasonable aim on his part. I was curious to know why the two of them were friends again; also to learn what was happening about Quiggin and Mona. Such information as I had then had been through Jean, who knew from her brother only that they had gone abroad together. At the same time, as a friend of Templer's, I did not want to appear too obviously willing to condone the fact that Quiggin had eloped with his wife.

'Mona and I are in Sussex now,' said Quiggin, in a voice that could almost be described as unctuous, so much did it avoid his usual harsh note. 'We have been lent a cottage. I am just up for the night to see Mark and make final arrangements with my publisher.'

He talked as if he had been married to Mona, or at least lived with her, for years; just as, a few months earlier, he had spoken as if he had always been St. John Clarke's secretary. It seemed hard to do anything but accept the relationship as a *fait accompli*. Such things have to be.

'Can you deal with St. John Clarke from so far away?'

'How do you mean?'

Quiggin's face clouded, taking on an expression suggesting he had heard the name of St. John Clarke, but was quite unable to place its associations.

'Aren't you still his secretary?'

'Oh, good gracious, no,' said Quiggin, unable to repress a laugh at the idea.

'I hadn't heard you'd left him.'

'But he has become a Trotskyist.'

'What form does it take?'

Quiggin laughed again. He evidently wished to show his complete agreement that the situation regarding St. John Clarke was so preposterous that only a certain degree of jocularity could carry it off. Laughter, his manner indicated, was a more civilised reaction than the savage rage that would have been the natural emotion of most right-minded persons on hearing the news for the first time.

'The chief form,' he said, 'is that he consequently now requires a secretary who is also a Trotskyist.'

'Who has he got?'

'You would not know him.'

'Someone beyond the pale?'

'He has found a young German to pander to him, as a matter of fact. One Guggenbühl.'

'I have met him as a matter of fact.'

'Have you?' said Quiggin, without interest. 'Then I should advise you to steer clear of Trotskyists in the future, if I were you.'

'Was this very sudden?'

'My own departure was not entirely involuntary,' said Quiggin. 'At first I thought the man would rise above the difficulties of my domestic situation. I—and Mona, too—did everything to assist and humour him. In the end it was no good.'

He had moved off then, at the same time gathering in Members, who had been chatting to a girl in dark glasses sitting at a neighbouring table.

'We shall stay in the country until the divorce comes through,' he had said over his shoulder.

The story going round was that Mona had been introduced by Quiggin to St. John Clarke as a political sympathiser. Only later had the novelist discovered the story of her close association with Quiggin. He had begun to make difficulties at once. Quiggin, seeing that circumstances prevented the continuance of his job, made a goodish bargain with St. John Clarke, and departed. Guggenbühl must have stepped into the vacuum. No one seemed to know the precise moment when he had taken Quiggin's place; nor how matters remained regarding Mrs. Andriadis.

Like Templer, I wondered how Quiggin and Mona would make two ends meet, but these details could hardly be gone into then and there in the Ritz.

'I suppose Quiggin keeps afloat,' I said. 'For one thing, he must have just had an advance for his book. Still, I don't expect that was anything colossal.'

'That aunt of Mona's died the other day,' said Templer. 'She left Mona her savings—a thousand or so, I think.'

'So they won't starve.'

'As a matter of fact I haven't cut her allowance yet,' he said, reddening slightly. 'I suppose one will have to in due course.'

He paused.

'I must say it was the hell of a surprise,' he said. 'We'd had plenty of rows, but I certainly never thought she would go off with a chap who looked quite so like something the cat had brought in.'

I could only laugh and agree. These things are capable of no real explanation. Mona's behaviour was perhaps to be examined in the light of her exalted feelings for Quiggin as a literary figure. Combined with this was, no doubt, a kind of envy of her husband's former successes with other women; for such successes with the opposite sex put him, as it were, in direct competition with herself. It is, after all, envy rather than jealousy that causes most of the trouble in married life.

'I've really come here tonight to see Widmerpool,' said Templer, as if he wished to change the subject. 'Bob Duport is in England again. I think I told you Widmerpool might help him land on his feet.'

I felt a sense of uneasiness that he found it natural to tell me this. Jean had always insisted that her brother knew nothing of the two of us. Probably she was right; though I could never be sure that someone with such highly developed instincts where relations between the sexes were concerned could remain entirely unaware that his sister was having a love affair. On the other hand he never saw us together. No doubt, so far as Jean was concerned, he would have regarded a lover as only natural in her situation. He was an exception to the general rule that made Barnby, for example, puritanically disapproving of an irregular life in others. In any case, he probably spoke of Duport in the way people so often do in such circumstances, ignorant of the facts, yet moved by some unconscious inner process to link significant names together. All the same, I was conscious of a feeling of foreboding. I was going to see Jean that night; after the dinner was at an end.

'I am rather hopeful things will be patched up with Jean, if Bob's business gets into running order again,' Templer said. 'The whole family can't be in a permanent state of being deserted by their husbands and wives. I gather Bob is no longer sleeping with Bijou Ardglass, which was the real cause of the trouble, I think.'

'Prince Theodoric's girl friend?'

'That's the one. Started life as a mannequin. Then married Ardglass as his second wife. When he died the title, and nearly all the money, went to a distant cousin, so she had to earn a living somehow. Still, it was inconvenient she should have picked on Bob.'

By this time we had reached the ante-room where Le Bas's Old Boys were assembling. Le Bas himself had not yet arrived, but Whitney, Maiden, Simson, Brandreth, Ghika, and Fettiplace-Jones were standing about, sipping drinks, and chatting uneasily. All of them, except Ghika, were already showing signs of the wear and tear of life. Whitney was all but unrecognisable with a moustache; Maiden had taken to spectacles; Simson was prematurely bald; Fettiplace-Jones, who was talking to Widmerpool without much show of enjoyment, although he still looked like a distinguished undergraduate, had developed that ingratiating, almost cringing manner that some politicians assume to avoid an appearance of thrusting themselves forward. Fettiplace-Jones had been Captain of the House when I had arrived there as a new boy and had left at the end of that term. He was now Member of Parliament for some northern constituency.

Several others came in behind Templer and myself. Soon the room became fairly crowded. Most of the new arrivals were older or younger than my own period, so that I knew them only by sight from previous dinners. As it happened, I had not attended a Le Bas dinner for some little time. I hardly knew why I was there that year, for it was exceptional for an old friend like Templer to turn up. I think I had a subdued curiosity to see if Dicky Umfraville would put in an appearance, and fulfil his promise to 'tear the place in half'. A chance meeting with Maiden, one of the organisers had settled it, and I came. Maiden now buttonholed Templer, and, at the same moment, Fettiplace-Jones moved away from Widmerpool to speak with Simson, who was said to be doing well at the Bar. I found Widmerpool beside me.

'Why, hullo—hullo—Nicholas——' he said.

He glared through his thick glasses, the side pieces of which were becoming increasingly embedded in wedges of fat below his temples. At the same time he transmitted one of those skull-like smiles of conventional friendliness to be generally associated with conviviality of a political sort. He was getting steadily fatter. His dinner-jacket no longer fitted him: perhaps had never done so with much success. Yet he carried this unhappy garment with more of an air than he would have achieved in the old days; certainly with more of an air than he had ever worn the famous overcoat for which he had been notorious at school.

We had met once or twice, always by chance, during the previous few years. On each occasion he had been going abroad for the Donners-Brebner Company. 'Doing pretty well,' he had always remarked, when asked how things were with him. His small eyes had glistened behind his spectacles when he had said this. There was no reason to disbelieve in his success, though I suspected at the time that his job might be more splendid in his own eyes than when regarded by some City figure like Templer. However, after Templer's more recent treatment of him, I supposed that I must be wrong in presuming exaggeration on Widmerpool's part. Although two or three years older than myself, he could still be little more than thirty. No doubt he was 'doing well'. With the self-confidence he had developed, he moved now with a kind of strut, a curious adaptation of that uneasy, rubber-shod tread, squeaking rhythmically down the interminable linoleum of our schooldays. I remembered how Barbara Goring (whom we had both been in love with, and now I had not thought of for years) had once poured sugar over his head at a dance. She would hardly do that today. Yet Widmerpool had never entirely overcome his innate oddness; one might almost say, his monstrosity. In that he resembled Quiggin. Perhaps it was the determination of each to live by the will alone. At any rate, you noticed Widmerpool immediately upon entering a room. That would have given him satisfaction.

'Do you know, I nearly forgot your Christian name,' he said, not without geniality. 'I have so many things to remember these days. I was just telling Fettiplace-Jones about North Africa. In my opinion we should hand back Gibraltar to Spain, taking Ceuta in exchange. Fettiplace-Jones was in general agreement. He belongs to a group in Parliament particularly interested in foreign affairs. I have just come back from those parts.'

'For Donners-Brebner?'

He nodded, puffing out his lips and assuming the appearance of a huge fish.

'But not in the future,' he said, breathing inward hard. 'I'm changing my trade.'

'I heard rumours.'

'Of what?'

'That you were joining the Acceptance World.'

'That's one way of putting it.'

Widmerpool sniggered.

'And you?' he asked.

'Nothing much.'

'Still producing your art books? It was art books, wasn't it?'

'Yes—and I wrote a book myself.'

'Indeed, Nicholas. What sort of a book?'

'A novel, Kenneth.'

'Has it been published?'

'A few months ago.'

'Oh.'

His ignorance of novels and what happened about them was evidently profound. That was, after all, reasonable enough. Perhaps it was just lack of interest on his part. Whatever the reason, he looked not altogether approving, and did not enquire the name of the book. However, probably feeling a moment later that his reply may have sounded a shade flat, he added: 'Good . . . good,' rather in the manner of Le Bas himself, when faced with an activity of which he was uninformed and suspicious, though at the same time unjustified in categorically forbidding.

'As a matter of fact I am making some notes for a book myself,' said Widmerpool. 'Quite a different sort of book from yours, of course. So we may be authors together. Do you always come to these dinners? I have been abroad, or otherwise prevented, on a number of occasions, and thought I would see what had happened to everybody. One sometimes makes useful contacts in such ways.'

Le Bas himself arrived in the room at that moment, bursting through the door tumultuously, exactly as if he were about to surprise the party assembled there at some improper activity. It was in this explosive way that he had moved about the house at school. For a second he made me feel as if I were back again under his surveillance; and one young man, with very fair hair, whose name I did not know, went scarlet in the face at his former housemaster's threatening impetuosity, just as if he himself had a guilty conscience.

However, Le Bas, as it turned out, was in an excellent humour. He went round the room shaking hands with everyone, making some comment to each of us, more often than not hopelessly inappropriate, showing that he had mistaken the Old Boy's name or generation. In spite of that I was aware of a feeling of warmth towards him that I had never felt when at school; perhaps because he seemed to represent, like a landscape or building, memories of a vanished time. He had become, if not history, at least part of one's own autobiography. In his infinitely ancient dinner-jacket and frayed tie he looked, as usual, wholly unchanged. His clothes were as old as Sillery's, though far better cut. Tall, curiously Teutonic in appearance, still rubbing his red, seemingly chronically sore eyes, as from time to time he removed his rimless glasses, he came at last to the end of the diners, who had raggedly formed up in line round the room, as if some vestige of school discipline was reborn in them at the appearance of their housemaster. After the final handshake, he took up one of those painful, almost tortured positions habitually affected by him, this particular one seeming to indicate that he had just landed on his heels in the sand after making the long jump.

Maiden, who, as I have said, was one of the organisers of the dinner, and was in the margarine business, now began fussing, as if he thought that by his personal exertions alone would anyone get anything to eat that night. He came up to me, muttering agitatedly.

'Another of your contemporaries accepted—Stringham,' he said. 'I suppose you don't know if he is turning up? We really ought to go into dinner soon. Should we wait for him? It is really too bad of people to be late for this sort of occasion.'

He spoke as if I, or at least all my generation, were responsible for the delay. The news that Stringham might be coming to the dinner surprised me. I asked Maiden about his acceptance of the invitation.

'He doesn't turn up as a rule,' Maiden explained, 'but I ran into him the other night at the Silver Slipper and he promised to come. He said he would attend if he were sober enough by Friday. He wrote down the time and place on a menu and put it in his pocket. What do you think?'

'I should think we had better go in.'

Maiden nodded, and screwed up his yellowish, worried face, which seemed to have taken on sympathetic colouring from the commodity he marketed. I remembered him as a small boy, perpetually preoccupied with the fear that he would be late for school or games: this tyranny of Time evidently pursuing him no less in later life. Finally, his efforts caused us to troop into the room where we were to dine. From what I had heard of Stringham recently, I thought his appearance at such a dinner extremely unlikely.

At the dinner table I found myself between Templer and a figure who always turned up at these dinners whose name I did not know: a middle-aged—even elderly, he then seemed—grey-moustached man. I had, rather half-heartedly, tried to keep a place next to me for Stringham, but gave up the idea when this person diffidently asked if he might occupy the chair. There were, in any case, some spare places at the end of the table, where Stringham could sit, if he arrived, as a certain amount of latitude always existed regarding the size of the party. It was to be presumed that the man with the grey moustache had been at Corderey's, in the days before Le Bas took over the house; if so, he was the sole survivor from that period who ever put in an appearance. I remembered Maiden had once commented to me on the fact that one of Corderey's Old Boys always turned up, although no one knew him. He had seemed perfectly happy before dinner, drinking a glass of sherry by himself. Hitherto, he had made no effort whatever to talk to any of the rest of the party. Le Bas had greeted him, rather unenthusiastically, with the words 'Hullo, Tolland'; but Le Bas was so notoriously vague regarding nomenclature that this name could be accepted only after corroboration. Something about his demeanour reminded me of Uncle Giles, though this man was, of course, considerably younger. There had been a Tolland at school with me, but I had known him only by sight. I asked Templer whether he had any news of Mrs. Erdleigh and Jimmy Stripling.

'I think she is fairly skinning Jimmy,' he said, laughing. 'They are still hard at it. I saw Jimmy the other day in Pimm's.'

The time having come round for another tea at the Ufford, I myself had visited Uncle Giles fairly recently. While there I had enquired, perhaps unwisely, about Mrs. Erdleigh. The question had been prompted partly by curiosity as to what his side of the story might be, partly from an inescapable though rather morbid interest in what happened to Stripling. I should have known better than to have been surprised by the look of complete incomprehension that came over Uncle Giles's face. It was similar technique, though put into more absolute execution, that Quiggin had used when asked about St. John Clarke. No doubt it would have been better to have left the matter of Mrs. Erdleigh alone. I should have known from the start that interrogation would be unproductive.

'Mrs. Erdleigh?'

He had spoken not only as if he had never heard of Mrs. Erdleigh but as if even the name itself could not possibly belong to anyone he had ever encountered.

'The lady who told our fortunes.'

'What fortunes?'

'When I was last here.'

'Can't understand what you're driving at.'

'I met her at tea when I last came here—Mrs. Erdleigh.'

'Believe there was someone of that name staying here.'

'She came in and you introduced me.'

'Rather an actressy woman, wasn't she? Didn't stay very long. Always talking about her troubles, so far as I can remember. Hadn't she been married to a Yangtze pilot, or was that another lady? There was a bit of a fuss about the bill, I believe. Interested in fortune-telling, was she? How did you discover that?'

'She put the cards out for us.'

'Never felt very keen about all that fortune-telling stuff,' said Uncle Giles, not unkindly. 'Doesn't do the nerves any good, in my opinion. Rotten lot of people, most of them, who take it up.'

Obviously the subject was to be carried no further. Perhaps Mrs. Erdleigh, to use a favourite phrase of my uncle's, had 'let him down'. Evidently she herself had been removed from his life as neatly as if by a surgical operation, and, by this mysterious process of voluntary oblivion, was excluded even from his very consciousness; all done, no doubt, by an effort of will. Possibly everyone could live equally untrammelled lives with the same determination. However, this mention of Uncle Giles is by the way.

'Jimmy is an extraordinary fellow,' said Templer, as if pondering my question. 'I can't imagine why Babs married him. All the same, he is more successful with the girls than you might think.'

Before he could elaborate this theme, his train of thought, rather to my relief, was interrupted. The cause of this was the sudden arrival of Stringham. He looked horribly pale, and, although showing no obvious sign of intoxication, I suspected that he had already had a lot to drink. His eyes were glazed, and, holding himself very erect, he walked with the slow dignity of one who is not absolutely sure what is going on round him. He went straight up to the head of the table where Le Bas was sitting and apologised for his lateness—the first course was being cleared—returning down the room to occupy the spare chair beside Ghika at the other end.

'Charles looks as if he has been hitting the martinis pretty hard,' said Templer.

I agreed. After a consultation with the wine waiter, Stringham ordered a bottle of champagne. Since Ghika had already provided himself with a whisky and soda there was evidently no question of splitting it with his next-door neighbour. Templer commented on this to me, and laughed. He seemed to have obtained relief from having discussed the collapse of his marriage with a friend who knew something of the circumstances. He was more cheerful now and spoke of his plans for selling the house near Maidenhead. We began to talk of things that had happened at school.

'Do you remember when Charles arranged for Le Bas to be arrested by the police?' said Templer. 'The Braddock alias Thorne affair.'

We were sitting too far away from Le Bas for this remark to be overheard by him. Templer looked across to where Stringham was sitting and caught his eye. He jerked his head in Le Bas's direction and held his own wrists together as if he wore handcuffs. Stringham seemed to understand his meaning at once. His face brightened, and he made as if to catch Ghika by the collar. This action had to be explained to Ghika, and, during the interlude, Parkinson, who was on Templer's far side, engaged him in conversation about the Test Match.

I turned to the man with the grey moustache. He seemed to be expecting an approach of some sort, because, before I had time to speak, he said:

'I'm Tolland.'

'You were at Corderey's, weren't you?'

'Yes, I was. Seems a long time ago now.'

'Did you stay on into Le Bas's time?'

'No. Just missed him.'

He was infinitely melancholy; gentle in manner, but with a suggestion of force behind this sad kindliness.

'Was Umfraville there in your time?'

'R. H. J. Umfraville?'

'I think so. He's called "Dicky".'

Tolland gave a slow smile.

'We overlapped,' he admitted.

There was a pause.

'Umfraville was my fag,' said Tolland, as if drawing the fact from somewhere very deep down within him. 'At least I believe he was. I was quite a bit higher up in the school, of course, so I don't remember him very well.'

A terrible depression seemed to seize him at the thought of this great seniority of his to Umfraville. There was a lack of serenity about Tolland at close quarters, quite different from the manner in which he had carried off his own loneliness in a crowd. I felt rather uneasy at the thought of having to deal with him, perhaps for the rest of dinner. Whitney was on the other side and there was absolutely no hope of his lending a hand in a case of that sort.

'Umfraville a friend of your?' asked Tolland.

He spoke almost as if he were condoling with me.

'I've just met him. He said he might be coming tonight.'

Tolland looked at me absently. I thought it might be better to abandon the subject of Umfraville. However, a moment or two later he himself returned to it.

'I don't think Umfraville will come tonight,' he said. 'I heard he'd just got married.'

It certainly seemed unlikely that even Umfraville would turn up for dinner at this late stage in the meal, though the reason given was unexpected, even scriptural. Tolland now seemed to regret having volunteered the information.

'Who did he marry?'

This question discomposed him even further. He cleared his throat several times and took a gulp of claret, nearly choking himself.

'As a matter of fact I believe she is a distant cousin of mine—perhaps not,' he said. 'I can never remember that sort of thing—yes, she is, though. Of course she is.'

'Yes?'

'One of the Bridgnorth girls—Anne, I think.'

'Anne Stepney?'

'Yes, yes. That's the one. You probably know her.'

'I do.'

'Thought you would.'

'But she is years younger.'

'She is a bit younger. Yes, she is a bit younger. Quite a bit younger. And he has been married before, of course.'

'It makes his fourth wife, doesn't it?'

'Yes, I believe it does. His fourth wife. Pretty sure it does make his fourth.'

Tolland looked at me in absolute despair, I think not so much at the predicament in which Anne Stepney had involved herself, as at the necessity for such enormities to emerge in conversation. The news was certainly unforeseen.

'What do the Bridgnorths think about it?'

It was perhaps heartless to press him on such a point, but, having been told something so extraordinary as this, I wanted to hear as much as possible about the circumstances. Rather unexpectedly, he seemed almost relieved to report on that aspect of the marriage.

'The fellow who told me in the Guards' Club said they were making the best of it.'

'There was no announcement?'

'They were married in Paris,' said Tolland. 'So this fellow in the Guards' Club—or was it Arthur's?—told me. My brother, Warminster, when he was alive, used to talk about Umfraville. I think he liked him. Perhaps he didn't. But I think he did.'

'I was at school with a Tolland.'

'My nephew. Did you know his brother, Erridge? Erridge has succeeded now. Funny boy.'

Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson had mentioned a 'Norah Tolland' as friend of his daughter, Eleanor. She turned out to be a niece.

'Warminster had ten children. Big family for these days.'

We rose at that moment to drink the King's health; and Le Bas's. Then Le Bas stood up, gripping the table with both hands as if he proposed to overturn it. This was in preparation for the delivery of his accustomed speech, which varied hardly at all year by year. His guttural, carefully enunciated consonants echoed through the room.

'. . . cannot fail to be gratifying to see so many of my former pupils here tonight . . . do not really know what to say to you all . . . certainly shall not make a long speech . . . these annual meetings have their importance . . . encourage a sense of continuity . . . give perhaps an opportunity of taking stock . . . friendship . . . I've said to some of you before . . . needs keeping up . . . probably remember, most of you, lines quoted by me on earlier occasions . . .

And I sat by the shelf till I lost myself,
  And roamed in a crowded mist,
And heard lost voices and saw lost looks,
  As I pored on an old School List.

. . . verses not, of course, in the modern manner . . . some of us do not find such appeals to sentiment very sympathetic . . . typically Victorian in their emphasis . . . all the . . . rather well describe what most of us—well—at least some of us—may—feel—experience—when we meet and talk over our . . .'

Here Le Bas, as usual, paused; probably from the conviction that the word 'schooldays' had accumulated various associations in the minds of his listeners to which he was unwilling to seem to appeal. The use of hackneyed words had always been one of his preoccupations. He was, I think, dimly aware that his own bearing was somewhat clerical, and was accordingly particularly anxious to avoid the appearance of preaching a sermon. He compromised at last with '. . . other times . . .' returning, almost immediately, to the poem; as if the increased asperity that the lines now assumed would purge him from the imputation of sentimentality to which he had referred. He cleared his throat harshly.

'. . . You will remember how it goes later . . .

There were several duffers and several bores,
Whose faces I've half forgot,
Whom I lived among, when the world was young
And who talked no end of rot;

. . . of course I do not mean to suggest that there was anyone like that at my house . . .'

This comment always caused a certain amount of mild laughter and applause. That evening Whitney uttered some sort of a cry reminiscent of the hunting field, and Widmerpool grinned and drummed on the tablecloth with his fork, slightly shaking his head at the same time to indicate that he did not concur with Le Bas in supposing his former pupils entirely free from such failings.

'. . . certainly nobody of that sort here tonight . . . but at the same time . . . no good pretending that all time spent at school was—entirely blissful . . . certainly not for a housemaster . . .'

There was more restrained laughter. Le Bas's voice tailed away. In his accustomed manner he had evidently tried to steer clear of any suggestion that schooldays were the happiest period of a man's life, but at the same time feared that by tacking too much he might become enmeshed in dangerous admissions from which escape could be difficult. This had always been one of his main anxieties as a schoolmaster. He would go some distance along a path indicated by common sense, but, overcome by caution, would stop half-way and behave in an unexpected, illogical manner. Most of the conflicts between himself and individual boys could be traced to these hesitations at the last moment. Now he paused, beginning again in more rapid sentences:

'. . . as I have already said . . . do not intend to make a long, prosy after-dinner speech . . . nothing more boring . . . in fact my intention is—as at previous dinners—to ask some of you to say a word or two about your own activities since we last met together . . . For example, perhaps Fettiplace-Jones might tell us something of what is going forward in the House of Commons . . .'

Fettiplace-Jones did not need much pressing to oblige in this request. He was on his feet almost before Le Bas had finished speaking. He was a tall, dark, rather good-looking fellow, with a lock of hair that fell from time to time over a high forehead, giving him the appearance of a Victorian statesman in early life. His maiden speech (tearing Ramsay MacDonald into shreds) had made some impression on the House, but since then there had been little if any brilliance about his subsequent parliamentary performances, though he was said to work hard in committee. India's eventual independence was the subject he chose to tell us about, and he continued for some little time. He was followed by Simson, a keen Territorial, who asked for recruits. Widmerpool broke into Simson's speech with more than one 'hear, hear'. I remembered that he had told me he too was a Territorial officer. Whitney had something to say of Tanganyika. Others followed with their appointed piece. At last they came to an end. It seemed that Le Bas had exhausted the number of his former pupils from whom he might hope to extract interesting or improving comment. Stringham was sitting well back in his chair. He had, I think, actually gone to sleep.

There was a low buzz of talking. I had begun to wonder how soon the party would break up, when there came the sound of someone rising to their feet. It was Widmerpool. He was standing up in his place, looking down towards the table, as he fiddled with his glass. He gave a kind of introductory grunt.

'You have heard something of politics and India,' he said, speaking quickly, and not very intelligibly, in that thick, irritable voice which I remembered so well. 'You have been asked to join the Territorial Army, an invitation I most heartily endorse. Something has been said of county cricket. We have been taken as far afield as the Congo Basin, and as near home as this very hotel, where one of us here tonight worked as a waiter while acquiring his managerial training. Now I—I myself—would like to say a word or two about my experiences in the City.'

Widmerpool stopped speaking for a moment, and took a sip of water. During dinner he had shared a bottle of Graves with Maiden. There could be no question that he was absolutely sober. Le Bas—indeed everyone present—was obviously taken aback by this sudden, uncomfortable diversion. Le Bas had never liked Widmerpool, and, since the party was given for Le Bas, and Le Bas had not asked Widmerpool to speak, this behaviour was certainly uncalled for. In fact it was unprecedented. There was, of course, no cogent reason, apart from that, why Widmerpool should not get up and talk about the life he was leading. Just as other speakers had done. Indeed, it could be argued that the general invitation to speak put forward by Le Bas required acceptance as a matter of good manners. Perhaps that was how Widmerpool looked at it, assuming that Le Bas had only led off with several individual names as an encouragement for others to take the initiative in describing their lives. All that was true. Yet, in some mysterious manner, school rules, rather than those of the outer world, governed that particular assembly. However successful Widmerpool might have become in his own eyes, he was not yet important in the eyes of those present. He remained a nonentity, perhaps even an oddity, remembered only because he had once worn the wrong sort of overcoat. His behaviour seemed all the more outrageous on account of the ease with which, at that moment on account of the special circumstances, he could force us to listen to him without protest.

'This is terrific,' Templer muttered.

I looked across at Stringham, who had now woken up, and, having finished his bottle, was drinking brandy. He did not smile back at me, instead twisting his face into one of those extraordinary resemblances to Widmerpool at which he had always excelled. Almost immediately he resumed his natural expression, still without smiling. The effect of the grimace was so startling that I nearly laughed aloud. At the same time, something set, rather horrifying, about Stringham's own features, put an abrupt end to this sudden spasm of amusement. This look of his even made me feel apprehension as to what Stringham himself might do next. Obviously he was intensely, if quietly, drunk.

Meanwhile, Widmerpool was getting into his stride:

'. . . tell you something of the inner workings of the Donners-Brebner Company,' he was saying in a somewhat steadier voice than that in which he had begun his address. 'There is not a man of you, I can safely say, who would not be in a stronger position to face the world if he had some past experience of employment in a big concern of that sort. However, several of you already know that I am turning my attention to rather different spheres. Indeed, I have spoken to some of you of these changes in my life when we have met in the City . . .'

He looked round the room and allowed his eyes to rest for a moment on Templer, smiling again that skull-like grin with which he had greeted us.

'This is getting embarrassing,' said Templer.

I think Templer had begun to feel he had too easily allowed himself to accept Widmerpool as a serious person. It was impossible to guess what Widmerpool was going to say next. He was drunk with his own self-importance.

'. . . at one time these financial activities were devoted to the satisfaction of man's greed. Now we have a rather different end in view. We have been suffering—it is true to say that we are still suffering and shall suffer for no little time—from the most devastating trade depression in our recorded history. We have been forced from the Gold Standard, so it seems to me, and others not unworthy of a public hearing, because of the insufficiency of money in the hands of consumers. Very well. I suggest to you that our contemporary anxieties are not entirely vested in the question of balance of payment, that is at least so far as current account may be concerned, and I put it to you that certain persons, who should perhaps have known better, have been responsible for unhappy, indeed catastrophic capital movements through a reckless and inadmissible lending policy.'

I had a sudden memory of Monsieur Dubuisson talking like this when Widmerpool and I had been at La Grenadière together.

'. . . where our troubles began,' said Widmerpool. 'Now if we have a curve drawn on a piece of paper representing an average ratio of persistence, you will agree that authentic development must be demonstrated by a register alternately ascending and descending the level of our original curve of homogeneous development. Such an image, or, if you prefer it, such a geometrical figure, is dialectically implied precisely by the notion, in itself, of an average ratio of progress. No one would deny that. Now if a governmental policy of regulating domestic prices is to be arrived at in this or any other country, the moment assigned to the compilation of the index number which will establish the par of interest and prices must obviously be that at which internal economic conditions are in a condition of relative equilibrium. So far so good. I need not remind you that the universally accepted process in connexion with everyday commodities is for their production to be systematised by the relation between their market value and the practicability of producing them, a steep ascent in value in contrast with the decreased practicability of production proportionately stimulating, and a parallel descent correspondingly depressing production. All that is clear enough. The fact that the index number remains at par regardless of alterations in the comparative prices of marketable commodities included in it, necessarily expresses the unavoidable truth that ascent or descent of a specific commodity is compensated by analogous adjustments in the opposite direction in prices of residual commodities . . .'

How long Widmerpool would have continued to speak on these subjects, it is impossible to say. I think he had settled down in his own mind to make a lengthy speech, whether anyone else present liked it or not. Why he had decided to address the table in this manner was not clear to me. Possibly, he merely desired to rehearse aloud certain economic views of his own, expressing them before an indifferent, even comparatively hostile audience, so that he might judge what minor adjustments ought to be made when the speech was delivered on some far more important occasion. Such an action would not be out of keeping with the eccentric, dogged manner in which he ran his life. At the same time, it was also likely enough that he wanted to impress Le Bas's Old Boys—those former schoolfellows who had so greatly disregarded him—with the fact that he was getting on in the world in spite of them; that he had already become a person to be reckoned with.

Widmerpool may not even have been conscious of this motive, feeling it only instinctively; for there could be no doubt that he now thought of his schooldays in very different terms from any that his contemporaries would have used. Indeed, such references as he had ever made to his time at school, for example when we had been in France together, always suggested that he saw himself as a boy rather above the average at work and games. That justice had never been done to his energies in either direction was on account of the unsatisfactory manner in which both these sides of life were administered by those in authority; the same view, in fact, as that held by Uncle Giles. Widmerpool had once said this to me in so many words.

The effect of his discourse on those sitting round the table had been mixed. Fettiplace-Jones's long, handsome, pasty face assumed a serious, even worried expression, implying neither agreement nor disagreement with what was being said: merely a public indication that, as a Member of Parliament, he was missing nothing. It was as if he were waiting for the Whip's notification of which way he should vote. Parkinson gave a kind of groan of boredom, which I heard distinctly, although he was separated from me by Templer. Tolland, on the other hand, leant forward as if he feared to miss a syllable. Simson looked very stern. Whitney and Brandreth had begun a whispered conversation together. Maiden, who was next to Widmerpool, was throwing anxious, almost distracted glances about him. Ghika, like Tolland, leant forward. He fixed his huge black eyes on Widmerpool, concentrating absolutely on his words, but whether with interest, or boredom of an intensity that might lead even to physical assault, it was impossible to say. Templer had sat back in his chair, clearly enjoying every phrase to the full. Stringham also expressed his appreciation, though only by the faintest smile, as if he saw all through a cloud. Then, suddenly, the scene was brought abruptly to a close.

'Look at Le Bas,' said Templer.

'It's a stroke,' said Tolland.

Afterwards—I mean weeks or months afterwards, when I happened upon any of the party then present, or heard the incident discussed—there was facetious comment suggesting that Le Bas's disabling attack had been directly brought about by Widmerpool's speech. Certainly no one was in a position categorically to deny that there was no connection whatever between Widmerpool's conduct and Le Bas's case. Knowing Le Bas, I have no doubt that he was sitting in his chair, bitterly regretting that he was no longer in a position to order Widmerpool to sit down at once. That would have been natural enough. A sudden pang of impotent rage may even have contributed to other elements in bringing on his seizure. But that was to take rather a melodramatic view. More probably, the atmosphere of the room, full of cigar smoke and fumes of food and wine, had been too much for him. Besides, the weather had grown distinctly hotter as the night wore on. Le Bas himself had always been a great opener of windows. He would insist on plenty of fresh air on the coldest winter day at early school in any room in which he was teaching. His ordinary life had not accustomed him to gatherings of this sort, which he only had to face once a year. No doubt he had always been an abstemious man, in spite of Templer's theory, held at school, that our housemaster was a secret drinker. That night he had possibly taken more wine than he was accustomed. He was by then getting on in years, though no more than in his sixties. The precise cause of his collapse was never known to me. These various elements probably all played a part.

Lying back in his chair, his cheeks flushed and eyes closed, one side of Le Bas's face was slightly contorted. Fettiplace-Jones and Maiden must have taken in the situation at once, because I had scarcely turned in Le Bas's direction before these two had picked him up and carried him into the next room. Widmerpool followed close behind them. There was some confusion when people rose from the table. I followed the rest through the door to the anteroom, where Le Bas was placed full-length on the settee. Somebody had removed his collar.

This had probably been done by Brandreth, who now took charge. Brandreth, whose father had acquired a baronetcy as an ear-specialist, was himself a doctor. He began immediately to assure everyone that Le Bas's condition was not serious.

'The best thing you fellows can do is to clear off home and leave the room as empty as possible,' Brandreth said. 'I don't want all of you crowding round.'

Like most successful medical men in such circumstances, he spoke as if the matter had now automatically passed from the sphere of Le Bas's indisposition to the far more important one of Brandreth's own professional convenience. Clearly there was something to be said for following his recommendation. Brandreth seemed to be handling the matter competently, and, after a while, all but the more determined began to disappear from the room. Tolland made a final offer to help before leaving, but Brandreth snapped at him savagely and he made off; no doubt to appear again the following year. I wondered how he filled in the time between Old Boy dinners.

'I shall have to be going, Nick,' said Templer. 'I have to get back to the country tonight.'

'This dinner seems to have been rather a fiasco.'

'Probably my fault,' said Templer. 'Le Bas never liked me. However, I think it was really Widmerpool this time. What's happened to him, by the way? I never had my chat about Bob.'

Widmerpool was no longer in the room. Maiden said he had gone off to ring up the place where Le Bas was staying, and warn them what had happened. By then Le Bas was sitting up and drinking a glass of water.

'Well, fixing old Bob up will have to wait,' said Templer. 'I want to do it for Jean's sake. I'm afraid you had to listen to a lot of stuff about my matrimonial affairs tonight.'

'What are your plans?'

'Haven't got any. I'll ring up some time.'

Templer went off. I looked round for Stringham, thinking I would like a word with him before leaving. It was a long time since we had met, and I was not due to arrive at Jean's until late. Stringham was not in the small group that remained. I supposed he had left; probably making his way to some other entertainment. There was nothing surprising in that. In any case, it was unlikely that we should have done more than exchange a few conventional sentences, even had he remained to talk for a minute or two. I knew little or nothing of how he lived since his divorce. His mother's picture still appeared from time to time in the illustrated papers. No doubt her house in the country provided some sort of permanent background into which he could retire when desirable.

On the way out, I glanced by chance through the door leading to the room where we had dined. Stringham was still sitting in his place at the table, smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee. The dining-room was otherwise deserted. I went through the door and took the chair beside him.

'Hullo, Nick.'

'Are you going to sit here all night?'

'Precisely the idea that occurred to me.'

'Won't it be rather gloomy?'

'Not as bad as when they were all here. Shall we order another bottle?'

'Let's have a drink at my club.'

'Or my flat. I don't want to look at any more people.'

'Where is your flat?'

'West Halkin Street.'

'All right. I shan't be able to stay long.'

'Up to no good?'

'That's it.'

'I haven't seen you for ages, Nick.'

'Not for ages.'

'You know my wife, Peggy, couldn't take it. I expect you heard. Not surprising, perhaps. She has married an awfully nice chap now. Peggy is a really lucky girl now. A really charming chap. Not the most amusing man you ever met, but a really *nice chap.*'

'A relation of hers, isn't he?'

'Quite so. A relation of hers, too. He will be already familiar with all those lovely family jokes of the Stepney family, those very amusing jokes. He will not have to have the points explained to him. When he stays at Mountfichet, he will know where all the lavatories are—if there is, indeed, more than one, a matter upon which I cannot speak with certainty. Anyway, he will not always have to be bothering the butler to direct him to where that one is—and losing his way in that awful no-man's-land between the servants' hall and the gun-room. What a house! Coronets on the table napkins, but no kind hearts between the sheets. He will be able to discuss important historical events with my ex-father-in-law, such as the fact that Red Eyes and Cypria dead-heated for the Cesarewitch in 1893—or was it 1894? I shall forget my own name next. He will be able to talk to my ex-mother-in-law about the time Queen Alexandra made that *double entendre* to her uncle. The only thing he won't be able to do is to talk about Braque and Dufy with my ex-sister-in-law, Anne. Still, that's a small matter. Plenty of people about to talk to girls of Braque and Dufy these days. I heard, by the way, that Anne had got a painter of her own by now, so perhaps even Braque and Dufy are things of the past. Anyway, he's a jolly nice chap and Peggy is a very lucky girl.'

'Anne has married Dicky Umfraville.'

'Not *the* Dicky Umfraville?'

'Yes.'

'Well I never.'

Even that did not make much impression on him. The fact that he had not already heard of Anne Stepney's marriage suggested that Stringham must pass weeks at a time in a state in which he took in little or nothing of what was going on round him. That could be the only explanation of ignorance of an event with which he had such close connexions.

'Shall we make a move?'

'Where is Peter Templer? I saw his face—sometimes two or three of them—during that awful dinner. We might bring him along as well. Always feel a bit guilty about Peter.'

'He has gone home.'

'I bet he hasn't. He's gone after some girl. Always chasing the girls. Let's follow him.'

'He lives near Maidenhead.'

'Too far. He must be mad. Is he married?'

'His wife has just left him.'

'There you are. Women are all the same. My wife left me. Has your wife left you, Nick?'

'I'm not married.'

'Lucky man. Who *was* Peter's wife, as they say?'

'A model called Mona.'

'Sounds like the beginning of a poem. Well, I should have thought better of her. One of those long-haired painter fellows must have got her into bad habits. Leaving her husband, indeed. She oughtn't to have left Peter. I was always very fond of Peter. It was his friends I couldn't stand.'

'Let's go.'

'Look here, do let's have another drink. What happened to Le Bas?'

'He is going to be taken home in an ambulance.'

'Is he too tight to walk?'

'He had a stroke.'

'Is he dead?'

'No—Brandreth is looking after him.'

'What an awful fate. Why Brandreth?'

'Brandreth is a doctor.'

'Hope I'm never ill when Brandreth is about, or he might look after me. I'm not feeling too good at the moment as a matter of fact. Perhaps we'd better go, or Brandreth will start treating me too. It was Widmerpool's speech, of course. Knocked Le Bas out. Knocked him out cold. Nearly knocked me out too. Do you remember when we got Le Bas arrested?'

'Let's go to your flat.'

'West Halkin Street. Where I used to live before I was married. Surely you've been there.'

'No.'

'Ought to have asked you, Nick. Ought to have asked you. Been very remiss about things like that.'

He was extremely drunk, but his legs seemed fairly steady beneath him. We went upstairs and out into the street.

'Taxi?'

'No,' said Stringham. 'Let's walk for a bit. I want to cool off. It was bloody hot in there. I don't wonder Le Bas had a stroke.'

There was a rich blue sky over Piccadilly. The night was stiflingly hot. Stringham walked with almost exaggerated sobriety. It was remarkable considering the amount he had drunk.

'Why did you have so many drinks tonight?'

'Oh, I don't know,' he said. 'I do sometimes. Rather often nowadays, as a matter of fact. I felt I couldn't face Le Bas and his Old Boys without an alcoholic basis of some sort. Yet for some inexplicable reason I wanted to go. That was why I had a few before I arrived.'

He put out his hand and touched the railings of the Green Park as we passed them.

'You said you were not married, didn't you, Nick?'

'Yes.'

'Got a nice girl?'

'Yes.'

'Take my advice and don't get married.'

'All right.'

'What about Widmerpool. Is he married?'

'Not that I know of.'

'I'm surprised at that. Widmerpool is the kind of man to attract a woman. A good, sensible man with no nonsense about him. In that overcoat he used to wear he would be irresistible. Quite irresistible. Do you remember that overcoat?'

'It was before my time.'

'It's a frightful shame,' said Stringham. 'A frightful shame, the way these women go on. They are all the same. They leave me. They leave Peter. They will probably leave you. . . . I say, Nick, I am feeling extraordinarily odd. I think I will just sit down here for a minute or two.'

I thought he was going to collapse and took his arm. However, he settled down in a sitting position on the edge of the stone coping from which the railings rose.

'Long, deep breaths,' he said. 'Those are the things.'

'Come on, let's try and get a cab.'

'Can't, old boy. I just feel too, too sleepy to get a cab.'

As it happened, there seemed to be no taxis about at that moment. In spite of what must have been the intense discomfort of where he sat, Stringham showed signs of dropping off to sleep, closing his eyes and leaning his head back against the railings. It was difficult to know what to do. In this state he could hardly reach his flat on foot. If a taxi appeared, he might easily refuse to enter it. I remembered how once at school he had sat down on a staircase and refused to move, on the grounds that so many annoying things had happened that afternoon that further struggle against life was useless. This was just such another occasion. Even when sober, he possessed that complete recklessness of behaviour that belongs to certain highly strung persons. I was still looking down at him, trying to decide on the next step, when someone spoke just behind me.

'Why is Stringham sitting there like that?'

It was Widmerpool's thick, accusing voice. He asked the question with a note of authority that suggested his personal responsibility to see that people did not sit about in Piccadilly at night.

'I stayed to make sure everything was done about Le Bas that should be done,' he said. 'I think Brandreth knows his job. I gave him my address in case of difficulties. It was a disagreeable thing to happen. The heat, I suppose. It ruined the few words I was about to say. A pity. I thought I would have a breath of fresh air after what we had been through, but the night is very warm even here in the open.'

He said all this with his usual air of immense importance.

'The present problem is how to get Stringham to his flat.'

'What is wrong with him? I wonder if it is the same as Le Bas. Perhaps something in the food——'

Widmerpool was always ready to feel disturbed regarding any question of health. In France he had been a great consumer of patent medicines. He looked nervously at Stringham. I saw that he feared the attack of some mysterious sickness that might soon infect himself.

'Stringham has had about a gallon to drink.'

'How foolish of him.'

I was about to make some reply to the effect that the speeches had needed something to wash them down with, but checked any such comment since Widmerpool's help was obviously needed to get Stringham home, and I thought it better not to risk offending him. I therefore muttered something that implied agreement.

'Where does he live?'

'West Halkin Street.'

Widmerpool acted quickly. He strolled to the kerb. A cab seemed to rise out of the earth at that moment. Perhaps all action, even summoning a taxi when none is there, is basically a matter of the will. Certainly there had been no sign of a conveyance a second before. Widmerpool made a curious, pumping movement, using the whole of his arm, as if dragging down the taxi by a rope. It drew up in front of us. Widmerpool turned towards Stringham, whose eyes were still closed.

'Take the other arm,' he said, peremptorily.

Although he made no resistance, this intervention aroused Stringham. He began to speak very quietly:

> 'Ah, with the Grape my fading Life provide,
> And wash my Body whence the Life has died . . .'

We shoved him on to the back seat, where he sat between us, still murmuring to himself:

> '. . . And lay me shrouded in the living leaf
> By some not unfrequented garden-side . . .

I think that's quite a good description of the Green Park, Nick, don't you. . . . "Some not unfrequented garden-side" . . . Wish I sat here more often . . . Jolly nice. . . .'

'Does he habitually get in this state?' Widmerpool asked.

'I don't know. I haven't seen him for years.'

'I thought you were a close friend of his. You used to be—at school.'

'That's a long time ago.'

Widmerpool seemed aggrieved at the news that Stringham and I no longer saw each other regularly. Once decided in his mind on a given picture of what some aspect of life was like, he objected to any modification of the design. He possessed an absolutely rigid view of human relationships. Into this, imagination scarcely entered, and whatever was lost in grasping the niceties of character was amply offset by a simplification of practical affairs. Occasionally, it was true. I had known Widmerpool involved in situations which were extraordinary chiefly because they were entirely misunderstood, but on the whole he probably gained more than he lost by these limitations; at least in the spheres that attracted him. Stringham now lay between us, as if fast asleep.

'Where is he working at present?'

'I don't know.'

'It was a good thing he left Donners-Brebner,' said Widmerpool. 'He was doing neither himself nor the company any good.'

'Bill Truscott has gone, too, hasn't he?'

'Yes,' said Widmerpool, looking straight ahead of him. 'Truscott had become very interested in the by-products of coal and found it advantageous to make a change.'

We got Stringham out of the taxi on arrival without much difficulty and found his latchkey in a waistcoat pocket. Inside the flat, I was immediately reminded of his room at school. There were the eighteenth-century prints of the racehorses, Trimalchio and The Pharisee; the same large, rather florid photograph of his mother: a snapshot of his father still stuck in the corner of its frame. However, the picture of 'Boffles' Stringham—as I now thought of him after meeting Dicky Umfraville—showed a decidedly older man than the pipe-smoking, open-shirted figure I remembered from the earlier snapshot. The elder Stringham, looking a bit haggard and wearing a tie, sat on a seat beside a small, energetic, rather brassy lady, presumably his French wife. He had evidently aged considerably. I wondered if friendship with Dicky Umfraville had had anything to do with this. Opposite these photographs was a drawing by Modigliani, and an engraving of a seventeenth-century mansion done in the style of Wenceslaus Hollar. This was Glimber, the Warringtons' house, left to Stringham's mother during her lifetime by her first husband. On another wall was a set of coloured prints illustrating a steeplechase ridden by monkeys mounted on dogs.

'What are we going to do with him?'

'Put him to bed,' said Widmerpool, speaking as if any other action were inconceivable.

Widmerpool and I, therefore, set out to remove Stringham's clothes, get him into some pyjamas, and place him between the sheets. This was a more difficult job than might be supposed. His stiff shirt seemed riveted to him. However, we managed to get it off at last, though not without tearing it. In these final stages, Stringham himself returned to consciousness.

'Look here,' he said, suddenly sitting up on the bed, 'what is happening? People seem to be treating me roughly. Am I being thrown out of somewhere? If so, where? And what have I done to deserve such treatment? I am perfectly prepared to listen to reason and admit that I was in the wrong, and pay for anything I have broken. That is provided, of course, that I was in the wrong. Nick, why are you letting this man hustle me? I seem for some reason to be in bed in the middle of the afternoon. Really, my habits get worse and worse. I am even now full of good resolutions for getting up at half-past seven every morning. But who is this man? I know his face.'

'It's Widmerpool. You remember Widmerpool?'

'Remember Widmerpool . . .' said Stringham. 'Remember Widmerpool. . . . Do I remember Widmerpool? . . . How could I ever forget Widmerpool? . . . How could anybody forget Widmerpool? . . .'

'We thought you needed help, Stringham,' said Widmerpool, in a very matter-of-fact voice. 'So we put you to bed.'

'You did, did you?'

Stringham lay back in the bed, looking fixedly before him. His manner was certainly odd, but his utterance was no longer confused.

'You needed a bit of looking after,' said Widmerpool.

'That time is past,' said Stringham.

He began to get out of bed.

'No. . . .'

Widmerpool took a step forward. He made as if to restrain Stringham from leaving the bed, holding both his stubby hands in front of him, as if warming them before a fire.

'Look here,' said Stringham, 'I must be allowed to get in and out of my own bed. That is a fundamental human right. Other people's beds may be another matter. In them, another party is concerned. But ingress and egress of one's own bed is unassailable.'

'Much better stay where you are,' said Widmerpool, in a voice intended to be soothing.

'Nick, are you a party to this?'

'Why not call it a day?'

'Take my advice,' said Widmerpool. 'We know what is best for you.'

'Rubbish.'

'For your own good.'

'I haven't got my own good at heart.'

'We will get you anything you want.'

'Curse your charity.'

Once more Stringham attempted to get out of the bed. He had pushed the clothes back, when Widmerpool threw himself on top of him, holding Stringham bodily there. While they struggled together, Stringham began to yell at the top of his voice.

'So these are the famous Widmerpool good manners, are they?' he shouted. 'This is the celebrated Widmerpool courtesy, of which we have always heard so much. Here is the man who posed as another Lord Chesterfield. Let me go, you whited sepulchre, you serpent, you small-time Judas, coming to another man's house in the guise of paying a social call, and then holding him down in his own bed.'

The scene was so grotesque that I began to laugh; not altogether happily, it was true, but at least as some form of nervous relief. The two of them wrestling together were pouring with sweat, especially Widmerpool, who was the stronger. He must have been quite powerful, for Stringham was fighting like a maniac. The bed creaked and rocked as if it would break beneath them. And then, quite suddenly, Stringham began laughing too. He laughed and laughed, until he could struggle no more. The combat ceased. Widmerpool stepped back. Stringham lay gasping on the pillows.

'All right,' he said, still shaking with laughter, 'I'll stay. To tell the truth, I am beginning to feel the need for a little rest myself.'

Widmerpool, whose tie had become twisted in the struggle, straightened his clothes. His dinner-jacket looked more extraordinary than ever. He was panting hard.

'Is there anything you would like?' he asked in a formal voice.

'Yes,' said Stringham, whose mood was now completely changed. 'A couple of those little pills in the box on the left of the dressing-table. They will knock me out finally. I do dislike waking at four and thinking things over. Perhaps three of the pills would be wiser, on second thoughts. Half measures are never any good.'

He was getting sleepy again, and spoke in a flat, mechanical tone. All his excitement was over. We gave him the sleeping tablets. He took them, turned away from us, and rolled over on his side.

'Good-night, all,' he said.

'Good-night, Charles.'

'Good-night, Stringham,' said Widmerpool, rather severely.

We perfunctorily tidied some of the mess in the immediate neighbourhood of the bed. Stringham's clothes were piled on a chair. Then we made our way down into the street.

'Great pity for a man to drink like that,' said Widmerpool.

I did not answer, largely because I was thinking of other matters: chiefly of how strange a thing it was that I myself should have been engaged in a physical conflict designed to restrict Stringham's movements: a conflict in which the moving spirit had been Widmerpool. That suggested a whole social upheaval: a positively cosmic change in life's system. Widmerpool, once so derided by all of us, had become in some mysterious manner a person of authority. Now, in a sense, it was he who derided us; or at least his disapproval had become something far more powerful than the merely defensive weapon it had once seemed.

I remembered that we were not far from the place where formerly Widmerpool had run into Mr. Deacon and Gypsy Jones on the night of the Huntercombes' dance. Then he had been on his way to a flat in Victoria. I asked if he still lived there with his mother.

'Still there,' he said. 'Though we are always talking of moving. It has great advantages, you know. You must come and see us. You have been there in the past, haven't you?'

'I dined with you and your mother once.'

'Of course. Miss Walpole-Wilson was at dinner, wasn't she? I remember her saying afterwards that you did not seem a very serious young man.'

'I saw her brother the other day at the Isbister Retrospective Exhibition.'

'I do not greatly care for the company of Sir Gavin,' said Widmerpool. 'I dislike failure, especially failure in one holding an official position. It is letting all of us down. But—as I was saying—we shall be rather occupied with my new job for a time, so that I expect we shall not be doing much entertaining. When we have settled down, you must come and see us again.'

I was not sure if his 'we' was the first person plural of royalty and editors, or whether he spoke to include his mother; as if Mrs. Widmerpool were already a partner with him in his bill-broking. We said good-night, and I wished him luck in the Acceptance World. It was time to make for Jean's. She was arriving in London by a late train that evening, again lodged in the flat at the back of Rutland Gate.

On the way there I took from my pocket the postcard she had sent telling me when to arrive. I read it over, as I had already done so many times that day. There was no mistake. I should be there at the time she asked. The events of the evening seemed already fading into unreality at the prospect of seeing her once more.

The card she had sent was of French origin, in colour, showing a man and woman seated literally one on top of the other in an armchair upholstered with crimson plush. These two exchanged ardent glances. They were evidently on the best of terms, because the young man, fair, though at the same time rather semitic of feature, was squeezing the girl's arm just above the elbow. Wearing a suit of rich brown material, a tartan tie and a diamond ring on the third finger of his right hand, his face, as he displayed a row of dazzling teeth, reminded me of Prince Theodoric's profile—as the Prince might have been painted by Isbister. The girl smiled back approvingly as she balanced on his knee.

'Doesn't she look like Mona?' Jean had written on the back. Dark, with corkscrew curls, the girl was undeniably pretty, dressed in a pink frock, its short sleeves frilled with white, the whole garment, including the frills, covered with a pattern of small black spots. The limits of the photograph caused her legs to fade suddenly from the picture, an unexpected subordination of design created either to conceal an impression of squatness, or possibly a purely visual effect —the result of foreshortening—rather than because these lower limbs failed in the eyes of the photographer to attain a required standard of elegance. For whichever reason, the remaining free space at the foot of the postcard was sufficient to allow the title of the caption below to be printed in long, flourishing capitals:

Sex Appeal
Ton regard et ta voix ont un je ne sais quoi . . .
D'étrange et de troublant qui me met en émoi.

Although in other respects a certain emptiness of background suggested a passage or hall, dim reflections of looking-glass set above a shelf painted white seemed to belong to a dressing-table: a piece of furniture hinting, consequently, of bedrooms. To the left, sprays of artificial flowers, red and yellow, drooped from the mouth of a large vase of which the base was invisible. This gigantic vessel assumed at first sight the proportions of a wine vat or sepulchral urn, even one of those legendary jars into which Morgiana, in the Arabian Nights, poured boiling oil severally on the Forty Thieves: a public rather than private ornament, it might be thought, decorating presumably the bedroom, if bedroom it was, of a hotel. Indeed, the style of furnishing was reminiscent of the Ufford.

Contemplating the blended tones of pink and brown framed within the postcard's scalloped edge of gold, one could not help thinking how extraordinarily unlike 'the real thing' was this particular representation of a pair of lovers; indeed, how indifferently, at almost every level except the highest, the ecstasies and bitterness of love are at once conveyed in art. So much of the truth remains finally unnegotiable; in spite of the fact that most persons in love go through remarkably similar experiences. Here, in the picture, for example, implications were misleading, if not positively inaccurate. The matter was presented as all too easy, the twin flames of dual egotism reduced almost to nothing, so that there was no pain; and, for that matter, almost no pleasure. A sense of anxiety, without which the condition could scarcely be held to exist, was altogether absent.

Yet, after all, even the crude image of the postcard depicted with at least a degree of truth one side of love's outward appearance. That had to be admitted. Some of love was like the picture. I had enacted such scenes with

Jean: Templer with Mona: now Mona was enacting them with Quiggin: Barnby and Umfraville with Anne Stepney: Stringham with her sister Peggy: Peggy now in the arms of her cousin: Uncle Giles, very probably, with Mrs. Erdleigh: Mrs. Erdleigh with Jimmy Stripling: Jimmy Stripling, if it came to that, with Jean: and Duport, too.

The behaviour of the lovers in the plush armchair beside the sparse heads of those sad flowers was perfectly normal; nor could the wording of the couplet be blamed as specially far-fetched, or in some other manner indefensible. 'D'étrange et de troublant' were epithets, so far as they went, perfectly appropriate in their indication of those indefinable, mysterious emotions that love arouses. In themselves there was nothing incongruous in such descriptive labels. They might, indeed, be regarded as rather apt. I could hardly deny that I was at that moment experiencing something of the sort.

The mere act of a woman sitting on a man's knee, rather than a chair, certainly suggested the Templer *milieu*. A memorial to Templer himself, in marble or bronze, were public demand ever to arise for so unlikely a cenotaph, might suitably take the form of a couple so grouped. For some reason—perhaps a confused memory of *Le Baiser*—the style of Rodin came to mind. Templer's own point of view seemed to approximate to that earlier period of the plastic arts. Unrestrained emotion was the vogue then, treatment more in his line than some of the bleakly intellectual statuary of our own generation.

Even allowing a fairly limited concession to its character as a kind of folk perception—an eternal girl sitting on an eternal young man's knee—the fact remained that an infinity of relevant material had been deliberately omitted from this vignette of love in action. These two supposedly good-looking persons were, in effect, going through the motions of love in such a manner as to convince others, perhaps less well equipped for the struggle than themselves, that they, too, the spectators, could be easily identified with some comparable tableau. They, too, could sit embracing on crimson chairs. Although hard to define with precision the exact point at which a breach of honesty had occurred, there could be no doubt that this performance included an element of the confidence-trick.

The night was a shade cooler now. Jean was wearing a white blouse, or sports shirt, open at the neck. Beneath it, her body trembled a little.

'What was your dinner like?' she asked.

'Peter turned up.'

'He said he would probably go there.'

I told her about Le Bas; and also about Stringham.

'That is why I am a bit late.'

'Did Peter mention that Bob is back in England?'

'Yes.'

'And that his prospects are not too bad?'

'Yes.'

'That may make difficulties.'

'I know.'

'Don't let's talk of them.'

'No.'

'Darling Nick.'

Outside, a clock struck the hour. Though ominous, things still had their enchantment. After all, as St. John Clarke was reported to have said at the Huntercombes', 'All blessings are mixed blessings.' Perhaps, in spite of everything, the couple of the postcard could not be dismissed so easily. It was in their world that I seemed now to find myself.

Praise for the novels
in the Second Movement
of A Dance to the Music of Time:

"What makes Powell's work so exciting . . . is the ability to create truth, emotional, evocative, revealing . . . so that reading Powell is like living someone else's life for an hour or two, inextricably entangled with one's own."
– **Elizabeth Janeway, *New York Times Book Review***

"*At Lady Molly's* contains two of Mr. Powell's most brilliant comic portraits . . . done with a blend of tight, almost naturalistic control and a Dickensian exaggeration staying just this side of farce."
– ***Times Literary Supplement***

"This fourth volume is the most amusing and most completely successful novel in the series. Comparisons with Proust underrate his originality. . . . The novel is both entertaining and as disquieting as *The Waste Land.*"
– ***Punch***

"The book deserves to be read clamorously by everyone of heart, taste, and intelligence."
– **John Raymond, *Listener***

"*Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* has some marvelously funny scenes, for it reflects life's insensitive habit of scrambling the terrible and the ridiculous. . . . One feels and delights in, before one can comprehend, the novel's perfection."
– ***New Yorker***

"As soon as Powell introduces the [Furies], he consolidates his position as a tragi-comic writer of the first rank, for he catches the terrible sadness that lies beneath frivolity. . . . He may well emerge as the most substantial and subtle comic writer of his generation."
– **F. R. Karl, *New Republic***

Phoenix Fiction titles from Chicago

The Bridge on the Drina by Ivo Andrić
Concrete by Thomas Bernhard
Correction by Thomas Bernhard
Gargoyles by Thomas Bernhard
The Lime Works by Thomas Bernhard
Old Masters by Thomas Bernhard
Wittgenstein's Nephew by Thomas Bernhard
Woodcutters by Thomas Bernhard
Yes by Thomas Bernhard
The Last, Long Journey by Roger Cleeve
Acts of Theft by Arthur A. Cohen
A Hero in His Time by Arthur A. Cohen
In the Days of Simon Stern by Arthur A. Cohen
Solomon's Folly by Leslie Croxford
The Old Man and the Bureaucrats by Mircea Eliade
In the Time of Greenbloom by Gabriel Fielding
Through Streets Broad and Narrow by Gabriel Fielding
Convergence by Jack Fuller
Concluding by Henry Green
Pictures from an Institution by Randall Jarrell
The Survival of the Fittest by Pamela Hansford Johnson
A Bird in the House by Margaret Laurence
The Diviners by Margaret Laurence
The Fire-Dwellers by Margaret Laurence
A Jest of God by Margaret Laurence
The Stone Angel by Margaret Laurence
Fiela's Child by Dalene Matthee
The Conquerors by André Malraux
The Walnut Trees of Altenberg by André Malraux
The Bachelor of Arts by R. K. Narayan
The Dark Room by R. K. Narayan
The English Teacher by R. K. Narayan
Swami and Friends by R. K. Narayan
A Dance to the Music of Time (in four *Movements*) by Anthony Powell
A Father's Words by Richard Stern
Golk by Richard Stern
An Innocent Millionaire by Stephen Vizinczey
In Praise of Older Women by Stephen Vizinczey
Lord Byron's Doctor by Paul West
The Painted Canoe by Anthony Winkler
A Coin in Nine Hands by Marguerite Yourcenar
Fires by Marguerite Yourcenar
Two Lives and a Dream by Marguerite Yourcenar

MARYGROVE COLLEGE
3 1927 00096334 5

DATE DUE

Demco, Inc. 38-293

MARYGROVE COLLEGE
LIBRARY
DETROIT, MI

FICTION

Includes these novels:

A Question of Upbringing ◆ *A Buyer's Market* ◆ *The Acceptance World*

Four very different young men on the threshold of manhood dominate this opening volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time.* The narrator, Jenkins—a budding writer—shares a room with Templer, already a passionate womanizer, and Stringham, aristocratic and reckless. Widmerpool, as hopelessly awkward as he is intensely ambitious, lurks on the periphery of their world. Amid the fever of the 1920s and the first chill of the 1930s, these four gain their initiations into sex, society, business, and art. Considered a masterpiece of modern fiction, Powell's epic creates a rich panorama of life in England between the wars.

"A book which creates a world and explores it in depth, which creates brilliantly living and diverse characters and then watches them grow and change in their milieu. . . . Powell's world is as large and as complex as Proust's."—Elizabeth Janeway, *New York Times*

"A comic masterpiece, and the major achievement in post-war English fiction."—Bernard Bergonzi, *Guardian*

"Dry, cool, humorous, elaborately and accurately constructed and quintessentially English. It is more realistic than *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu,* to which it is often compared, and much funnier."—Evelyn Waugh

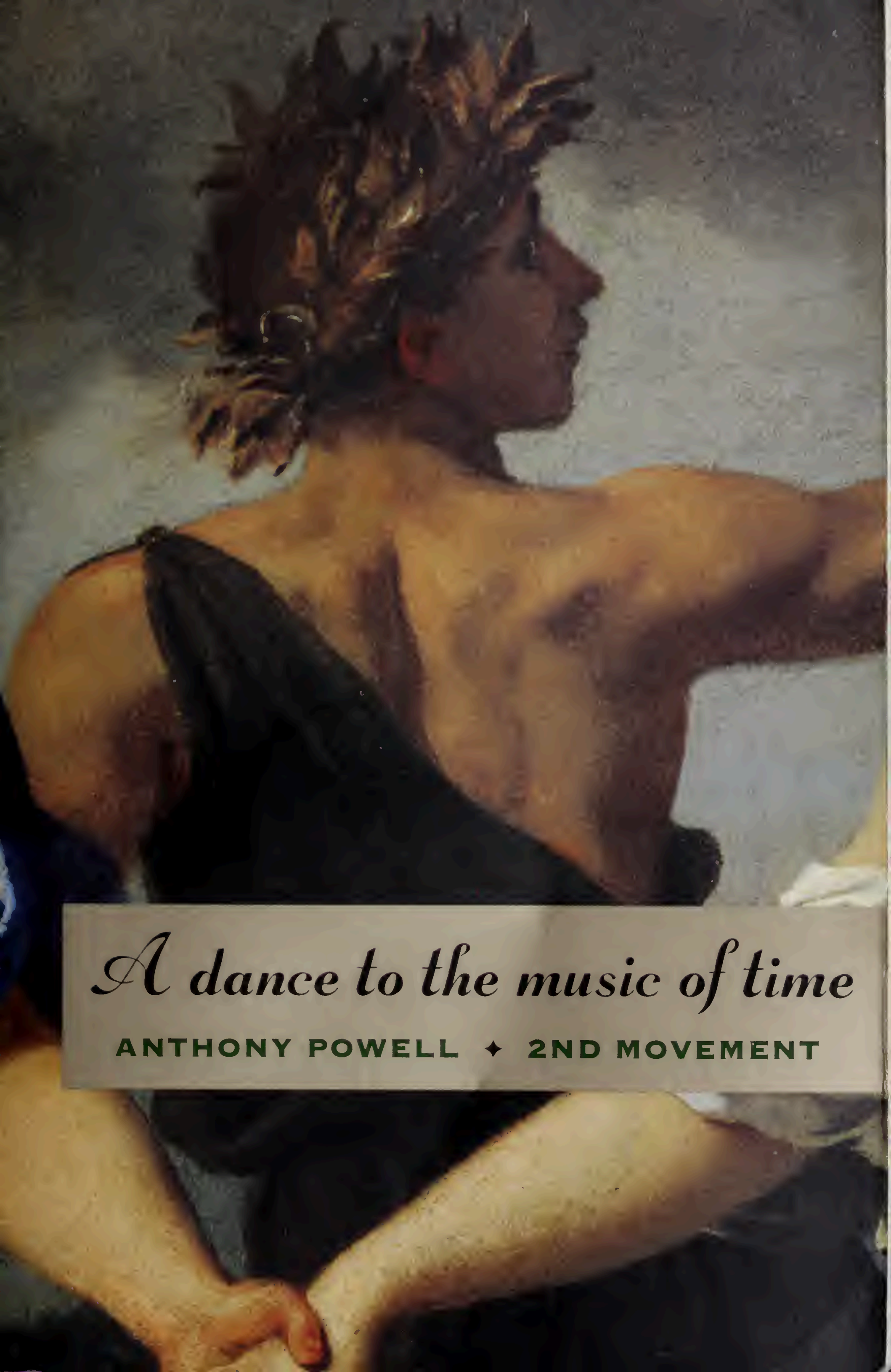
ANTHONY POWELL'S recent works include *Miscellaneous Verdicts* and *Under Review,* both available from the University of Chicago Press.

Cover illustration: Nicholas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (detail). c. 1639–40
The Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.

Cover design: Toni Ellis.

ISBN 0-226-67714-1
90000>
9 780226 677149

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS



A dance to the music of time

ANTHONY POWELL ◆ 2ND MOVEMENT

Praise for the novels in the Second Movement *of Anthony Powell's comic masterpiece:*

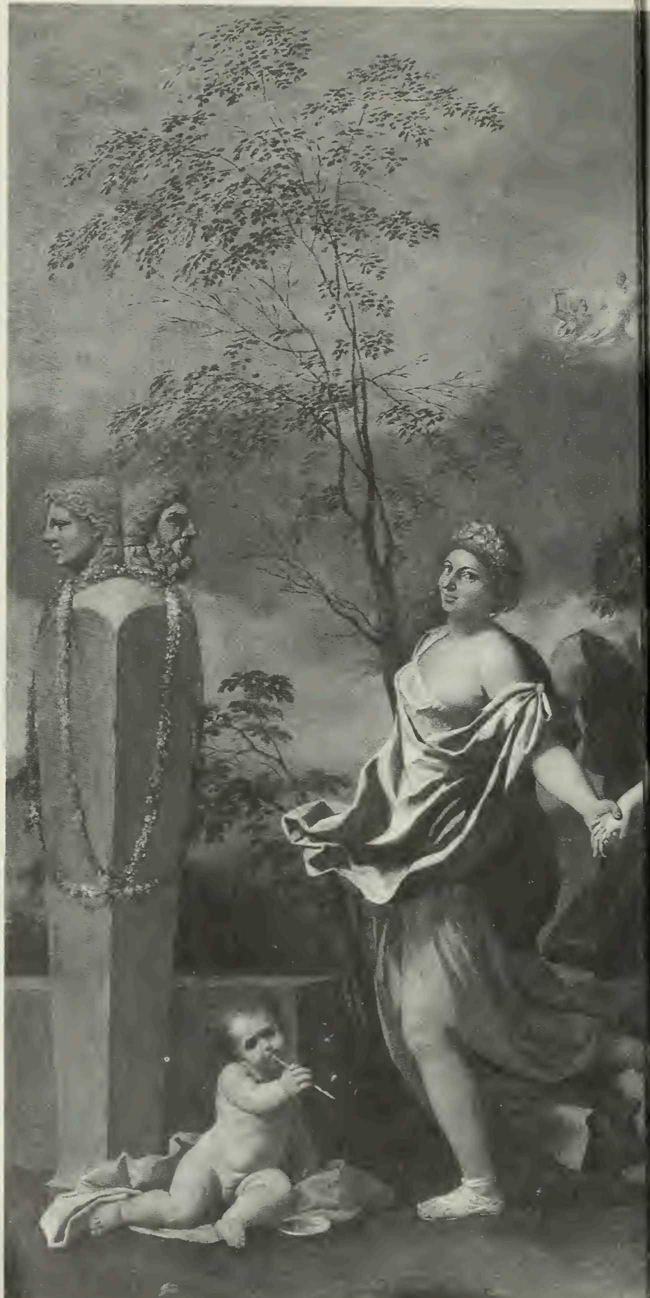
"*The Kindly Ones*' opening section contains some of Mr. Powell's finest comic writing. His capacity for delicately extracting the maximum amount of absurdity from a situation, his infallible ear for dialogue, and his deft presentation of character have never been so wonderfully employed. . . . *The Music of Time* is continuing to develop, to reveal fresh aspects. It leaves me more than ever convinced that Mr. Powell is writing a comic masterpiece, and the major achievement in post-war English fiction."
– Bernard Bergonzi, *Guardian*

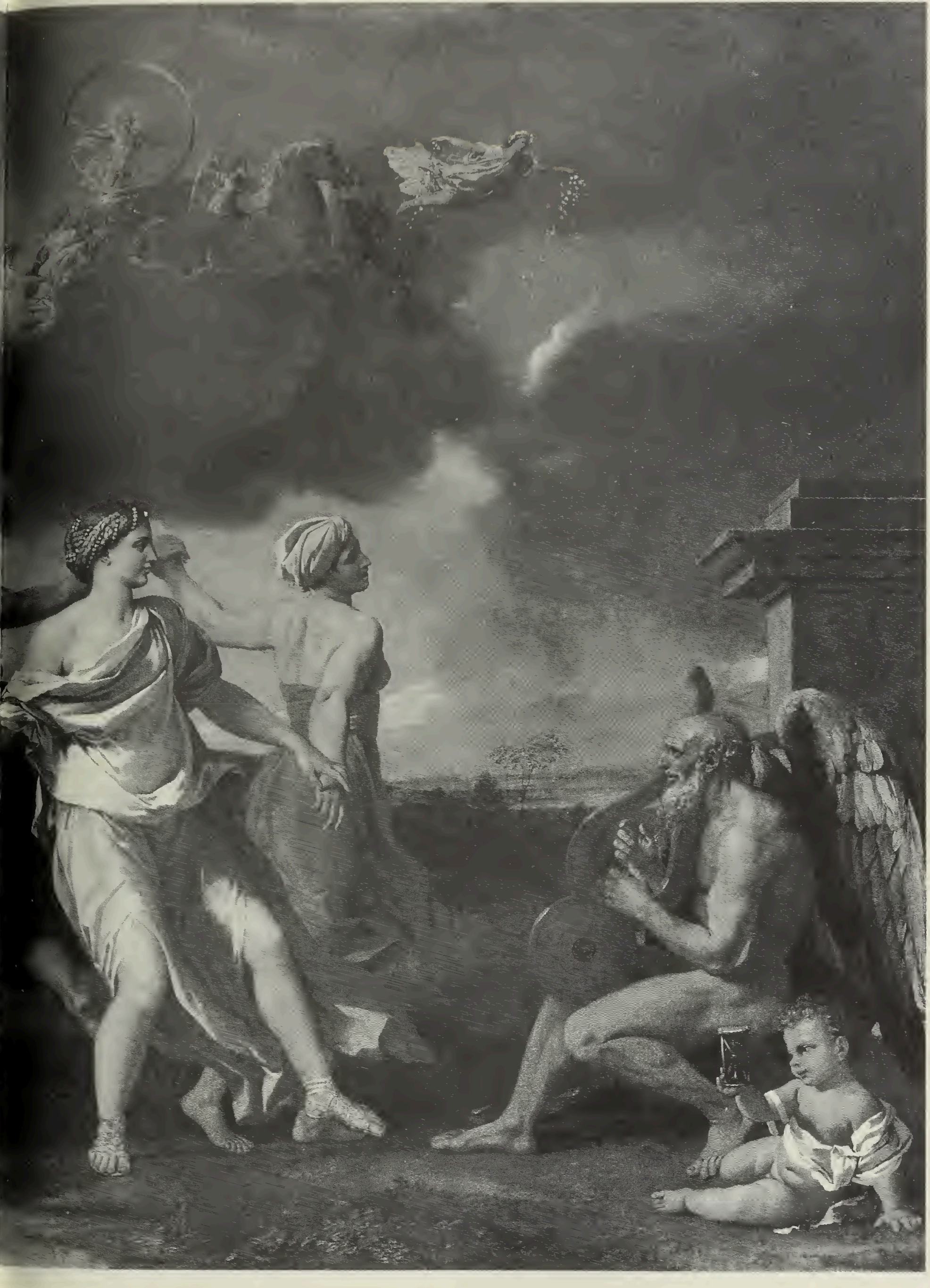
"*Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* has some marvellously funny scenes, for it reflects life's insensitive habit of scrambling the terrible and the ridiculous. . . . One feels and delights in, before one can comprehend, the novel's perfection."
– New Yorker

"There is no other living British novelist whose sense of social nuance is so delicate or so subtle, or whose comic range is so wide. . . . And there is certainly no other novelist whose work gives so much or such consistent pleasure."
– Times Literary Supplement

"The book deserves to be read clamorously by everyone of heart, taste, and intelligence."
– Listener

"Brilliant literary comedy as well as a brilliant sketch of the times."
– Time





Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time,* c. 1639–40. The Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.

A Dance to the Music of Time

Second Movement

Books by
Anthony Powell

A Dance to the Music of Time, First Movement
(including the following three novels)
A Question of Upbringing
A Buyer's Market
The Acceptance World

A Dance to the Music of Time, Second Movement
(including the following three novels)
At Lady Molly's
Casanova's Chinese Restaurant
The Kindly Ones

A Dance to the Movement of Time, Third Movement
(including the following three novels)
The Valley of Bones
The Soldier's Art
The Military Philosophers

A Dance to the Music of Time, Fourth Movement
(including the following three novels)
Books Do Furnish a Room
Temporary Kings
Hearing Secret Harmonies

OTHER NOVELS

Afternoon Men
Venusberg
From a View to a Death
Agents and Patients
Fisher King
O, How the Wheel Becomes It!
What's Become of Waring

OTHER WORKS

To Keep the Ball Rolling: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell
Volume I: *Infants of the Spring*
Volume II: *Messengers of Day*
Volume III: *Faces in My Time*
Volume IV: *The Strangers Are All Gone*
John Aubrey and His Friends
Brief Lives: And Other Selected Writings of John Aubrey
Miscellaneous Verdicts: Writings on Writers
Under Review: Further Writings on Writers, 1946–1990

PLAYS

The Garden God
The Rest I'll Whistle

A Dance to the Music of Time

Second Movement

AT LADY MOLLY'S
CASANOVA'S CHINESE RESTAURANT
THE KINDLY ONES

BY

Anthony Powell

★ ★

The University of Chicago Press

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
Copyright © 1957, 1960, 1962 by Anthony Powell
Copyright renewed 1985, 1988, 1990 by Anthony Powell
All rights reserved.
Originally published 1964
University of Chicago Press Edition 1995
Printed in the United States of America

01 00 99 98 97 96 6 5 4 3

ISBN 0-226-67716-8 (pbk.); 0-226-67719-2 (4 volumes, pbk.)

The *Second Movement* of *A Dance to the Music of Time* includes the fourth, fifth, and sixth of twelve novels that make up the entire opus. *At Lady Molly's* was first published in 1957. *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* was first published in 1960. *The Kindly Ones* was first published in 1962. The three novels were first published in one volume in the United States in 1964.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Powell, Anthony, 1905–
A dance to the music of time / by Anthony Powell.
p. cm.
Contents: 1st movement. A question of upbringing ; A buyer's market ; The acceptance world — 2nd movement. At Lady Molly's ; Casanova's Chinese restaurant ; The kindly ones — 3rd movement. The valley of bones ; The soldier's art ; The military philosophers — 4th movement. Books do furnish a room ; Temporary kings ; Hearing secret harmonies.
1. England—Social life and customs—20th century—Fiction.
2. Autobiographical fiction, English. I. Title.
PR6031.074D33 1995
823'.912—dc20 94-47228
CIP

Cover image credit: Bridgeman/Art Resource, NY

♾ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

At Lady Molly's

For

J. M. A. P.

1.

WE had known General Conyers immemorially not because my father had ever served under him but through some long-forgotten connexion with my mother's parents, to one or other of whom he may even have been distantly related. In any case, he was on record as having frequented their house in an era so remote and legendary that, if commission was no longer by purchase, regiments of the line were still designated by a number instead of the name of a county. In spite of belonging to this dim, archaic period, traces of which were sometimes revealed in his dress and speech—he was, for example, one of the last to my knowledge to speak of the Household Cavalry as 'the Plungers'—his place in family myth was established not only as a soldier with interests beyond his profession, but even as a man of the world always 'abreast of the times'. This taste for being in the fashion and giving his opinion on every subject was held against him by some people, notably Uncle Giles, no friend of up-to-date thought, and on principle suspicious of worldly success, however mild.

'Aylmer Conyers had a flair for getting on,' he used to say, 'No harm in that, I suppose. Somebody has got to give the orders. Personally I never cared for the limelight. Plenty of others to push themselves forward. Inclined to think a good deal of himself, Conyers was. Fine figure of a man, people used to say, a bit too fond of dressing himself up to the nines. Not entirely friendless in high places either. Quite the contrary. Peacetime or war, Conyers always knew the right people.'

I had once inquired about the General's campaigns.

'Afghanistan, Burma—as a subaltern. I've heard him talk big about Zululand. In the Soudan for a bit when the Khalifa was making trouble there. Went in for jobs abroad. Supposed to have saved the life of some native ruler in a local rumpus. Armed the palace eunuchs with rook rifles. Fellow gave him a jewelled scimitar—semi-precious stones, of course.'

'I've seen the scimitar. I never knew the story.'

Ignoring interruptions, Uncle Giles began to explain how South Africa, grave of so much military reputation, had been by Aylmer Conyers turned to good account. Having himself, as a result of his own indiscretions, retired from the army shortly before outbreak of war in the Transvaal, and possessing in addition those 'pro-Boer' sentiments appropriate to 'a bit of a radical', my uncle spoke always with severity, no doubt largely justified, of the manner in which the operations of the campaign had been conducted.

'After French moved over the Modder River, the whole Cavalry Division was ordered to charge. Unheard of thing. Like a gymkhana.'

'Yes?'

For a minute or two he lost the thread, contemplating the dusty squadrons wheeling from column into line across the veldt, or more probably assailed by memories of his own, less dramatic, if more bitter.

'What happened?'

'What?'

'What happened when they charged?'

'Cronje made an error of judgment for once. Only sent out detachments. Went through to Kimberley, more by luck than looking to.'

'But what about General Conyers?'

'Got himself into the charge somehow. Hadn't any business with the cavalry brigades. Put up some excuse. Then, day or two later, went back to where he ought to have been in the first place. Made himself most officious among the transport wagons. Line of march was like Hyde Park at the height of the Season, so a fellow who was in the advance told me—carriages end to end in Albert Gate—and Conyers running about cursing and swearing as if he owned the place.'

'Didn't Lord Roberts say something about his staff work?'

'Bobs?'

'Yes.'

'Who said that, your father?'

'I think so.'

Uncle Giles shook his head.

'Bobs may have said something. Wouldn't be the first time a general got hold of the wrong end of the stick. They say Conyers used to chase the women a bit, too. Some people thought he was going to propose to your Great-aunt Harriet.'

Other memories, on the whole more reliable, gainsay any such surmise regarding this last matter. In fact, Conyers remained a bachelor until he was approaching fifty. He was by then a brigadier-general, expected to go much further, when—much to the surprise of his friends—he married a woman nearly twenty years younger than himself; sending in his papers about eighteen months later. Perhaps he was tired of waiting for the war with Germany he had so often prophesied, in which, had it come sooner, he would certainly have been offered high command. Possibly his wife did not enjoy following the drum, even as a general's lady. She is unlikely to have had much taste for army life. The General, for his own part, may have felt at last tired of military routine. Like many soldiers of ability he possessed his eccentric side. Although no great performer, he had always loved playing the 'cello, and on retirement occupied much of his time with music; also experimenting with a favourite theory that poodles, owing to their keen natural intelligence, could profitably be trained as gun dogs. He began to live rather a social life, too, and was appointed a member of the Bodyguard; the rôle in which, from early association of ideas, I always think of him.

'Funny that a fellow should want to be a kind of court flunkey,' Uncle Giles used to say. 'Can't imagine myself rigged out in a lot of scarlet and gold, hanging about royal palaces and herding in and out a crowd of young ladies in ostrich feathers. Did it to please his wife, I suppose.'

Mrs. Conyers, it is true, might have played some indirect part in this appointment. Eldest daughter of King Edward VII's friend, Lord Vowchurch, she had passed her thirtieth birthday at the time of marriage. Endless stories, not always edifying, are—or used to be—told of her father, one of those men oddly prevalent in Victorian times who sought personal power through buffoonery. His most enduring memorial (to be found, with other notabilities of the 'seventies, hanging in the damp, deserted billiard-room at Thrubworth) is Spy's caricature in the *Vanity Fair* series, depicting this high-spirited peer in frock-coat and top hat, both grey: the bad temper for which he was as notorious at home as for his sparkle in Society, neatly suggested under the side whiskers by the lines of the mouth. In later years Lord Vowchurch grew quieter, particularly after a rather serious accident as a pioneer in the early days of motoring. This mishap left him with a limp and injuries which seem to have stimulated that habitual banter, rarely good-natured, for which he had often been in trouble with King Edward, when Prince of Wales; and, equally often, forgiven. His daughters had lived their early life in permanent disgrace for having, none of them, been born a boy.

My parents never saw much of the General and his wife. They knew them about as well as they knew the Walpole-Wilsons; though the Conyers relationship, with its foundations laid in a distant, fabled past, if never more intimate, was in some way deeper and more satisfying.

Like all marriages, the Conyers union presented elements of mystery. It was widely assumed that the General had remained a bachelor so long through conviction that a career is best made alone. He may have believed (like de Gaulle, whom he lived to see leading the Free French) in a celibate corps of officers dedicated like priests to their military calling. He wrote something of the sort in the *United Service Magazine*. This theory rested upon no objection to the opposite sex as such. On the contrary, as a young officer in India and elsewhere he was judged, as Uncle Giles had indicated, to have enjoyed a considerable degree of quiet womanising. Some thought that ambition of rather a different sort—a feeling that he had never fully experienced some of the good things of life—had finally persuaded him to marry and retire. A few of the incurably romantic even supposed him simply to have 'fallen in love' for the first time on the brink of fifty.

General and Mrs. Conyers seemed to 'get on' as well, if not better, than many married couples of a similar sort united at an earlier age. They moved, on the whole, in a circle connected, it might be said unpretentiously (because nothing could have been less 'smart', for example in Chips Lovell's use of the term, than the Conyers ménage) with the Court: families like the Budds and Udneys. In the limited but intense—and at times ornamental—preoccupations of these professional courtiers, the General seems to have found an adequate alternative to a life of command.

They had an only daughter called Charlotte, a rather colourless girl, who married a lieutenant-commander in the Navy. I used sometimes to have tea with her when we were both children.

In 1916, towards Christmas, at a time when Mrs. Conyers was assembling 'comforts' for troops overseas (still at this period in more amateur hands than the organisation that employed Uncle Giles after America came into the war) I was taken—passing through London on the way home from school—to her flat near Sloane Square. My mother paid the call either to add some knitted contribution to the pile of socks, scarves and Balaclava helmets lying about on chairs and sofas, or to help in some matter of their distribution. In the corner of the room in which all these bundles were stacked stood the 'cello in a case. Beside it, I at once noticed a large photograph of the General, carrying a halberd and wearing the plumed helmet, swallow-tailed coat and heavy gold epaulettes of a Gentleman-at-Arms. That is why I always think of him as a statuesque figure at leveés and court balls, rather than the man of action he must for the greater part of his life have been. Retired from the army too long for any re-employment of the first importance, he had acquired soon after the outbreak of war some job, far from momentous, though respectably graded in the rank of major-general.

We had finished tea, and I was being shown the jewelled scimitar to which Uncle Giles had referred, which was kept for some reason in the London flat instead of the small house in Hampshire where the poodles were trained. This display was made by Mrs. Conyers as some amends for the fact that Charlotte was in the country; although no apology was necessary as it seemed to me more amusing without her. I was admiring the velvet-covered scabbard, wondering whether to draw the steel from its sheath would be permissible, when the maid showed someone into the room. This new arrival was a young woman wearing V.A.D. uniform, who strode in like a grenadier. She turned out to be Mildred Blaides, youngest sister to Mrs. Conyers.

Difference of age between the two of them must have been at least that of Mrs. Conyers and her husband. This Miss Blaides, indeed, represented her parents' final, unsuccessful effort to achieve an heir, before Lord Vowchurch's motor accident and total resignation to the title passing to a cousin. She was tall, with a long nose, no more handsome than her sister, but in my eyes infinitely more dashing than Mrs. Conyers. Her face was lively, not unlike the mask of a fox. Almost immediately she took from her pocket an ornamental cigarette-case made of some lacquer-like substance and lit a cigarette. Such an act, especially in one so young, was still in those days a sign of conscious female emancipation. I suppose she was then about twenty. 'Mildred is at Dogdene now,' explained Mrs. Conyers, 'You know the Sleafords offered their house as an officers' hospital when the war broke out. They themselves live in the east wing. There are huts all over the park too.'

'It's absolute hell having all those blighters in huts,' said Miss Blaides. 'Some of the tommies got tight the other night and pushed one of the stone urns off the Italian bridge into the lake. It was too bad of them. They are a putrid unit anyway. All the officers wear "gorblimeys".'

'What on earth are those, Mildred?' asked Mrs. Conyers, nervously.

I think she feared, after asking the question, that they might be something unsuitable to mention in front of a small boy, because she raised her hand as if to prevent the exposure of any too fearful revelation.

'Oh, those floppy army caps,' said Miss Blaides, carelessly. 'They take the stiffening out, you know. Of course they have to do that when they are up at the Front, to prevent bits of wire getting blown into their cocoanuts, but they might try and look properly turned out when they are over here.'

She puffed away at her cigarette.

'I really must check all these gaspers,' she said, flicking ash on to the carpet. 'By now it's got up to about thirty a day. It just won't do. By the way, Molly Sleaford wants to come and see you, Bertha. Something about the distribution of "comforts". I told her to look you up on Wednesday, when she is next going to be in London.'

For some reason this announcement threw Mrs. Conyers into a state of great discomposure.

'But I can't possibly see Lady Sleaford on Wednesday,' she said, 'I've got three committee meetings on that day and Aylmer wants me to have five Serbian officers to tea. Besides, dear, Lady Sleaford is Red Cross, like you—and you remember how I am rather wedded, through Lady Bridgnorth, to St. John's. You see I really hardly know Lady Sleaford, who always keeps very much to herself, and I don't want to seem disloyal to Mary Bridgnorth. I——'

Her sister cut her short.

'Oh, I say, what a bally nuisance,' she remarked. 'I quite forgot about beastly old St. John's. They are always cropping up, aren't they? I really think they do more than the Germans to hold up winning the war.'

After voicing this alarming conjecture, she paced up and down the room, emitting from each nostril a long eddy of smoke like the trail of a ship briskly cutting the horizon. Throughout the room I was increasingly aware of the hardening of disapproval, just perceptible at first even on the immediate arrival of Miss Blaides: now not by any means to be denied. In fact a sense of positive disquiet swept through the small drawing-room so powerfully that mute condemnation seemed to rise in a thick cloud above the 'comforts', until its disturbing odour reached the ceiling and hung about the whole flat in vexed, compelling waves. This disapproval was on the part not only of Mrs. Conyers, but also—I felt sure—of my mother as well, who now began to make preparations to leave.

'A blinking bore,' said Miss Blaides, casting away her cigarette-end into the grate, where it lay smouldering on the tiles. 'That's what it is. So I suppose I shall have to tell Molly it's a wash-out. Give me another cup of tea, Bertha. I mustn't stay too long. I've got plans to scramble into some glad rags and beetle off to a show tonight.'

After that, we said good-bye; on my own part with deep regret. Later, when we were in the train, my mother said: 'I think it a pity for a girl like Miss Blaides to put on such a lot of make-up and talk so much slang. I was rather interested to see her, though. I had heard so much about her from different people.'

I did not mention the fact in reply, but, to tell the truth, Miss Blaides had seemed to me a figure of decided romance, combining with her nursing capacity of a young Florence Nightingale, something far more exciting and perhaps also a shade sinister. Nor did I realise at that time the implications contained in the phrase to 'hear a lot about' someone of Miss Blaides's age and kind. However, the episode as a whole—the Conyers' flat, the General's photograph, the jewelled scimitar, the 'comforts' stacked round the room, Miss Blaides in her V.A.D. uniform—all made a vivid impression on my mind; although, naturally enough, these things became soon stored away, apparently forgotten, in the distant background of memory. Only subsequent events revived them in strong colours.

That afternoon was also the first time I ever heard Dogdene mentioned. Later, of course, I knew it as the name of a 'great house' about which people talked. It came into volumes of memoirs like those of Lady Amesbury, which I read (with some disappointment) at an early age after hearing some grown-up person describe the book as 'scurrilous'. I also knew Constable's picture in the National Gallery, which shows the mansion itself lying away in the middle distance, a faery place set among giant trees, beyond the misty water-meadows of the foreground in which the impastoed cattle browse: quite unlike any imaginable military hospital. I knew this picture well before learning that the house was Dogdene. By then the place was no longer consciously associated in my mind with Miss Blaides. I was aware only vaguely that the owners were called Sleaford.

Then one day, years and years later, a chance reference to Dogdene made me think again of Miss Blaides in her original incarnation as a V.A.D., a status become, as it were, concealed and forgotten, like relics of an early civilisation covered by an ever-increasing pile of later architectural accretion. This was in spite of the fact that the name of Mildred Blaides would sometimes crop up in conversation after the occasional meetings between my parents and General or Mrs. Conyers. When she figured in such talk I always pictured a person somehow different from the girl chattering war-time slang on that winter afternoon. In fact the original memory of Miss Blaides returned to me one morning when I was sitting in my cream distempered, strip-lighted, bare, sanitary, glaring, forlorn little cell at the Studio. In that place it was possible to know deep despondency. Work, sometimes organised at artificially high pressure, would alternate with stretches of time in which a chaotic nothingness reigned: periods when, surrounded by the inanities and misconceptions of the film world, some book conceived in terms of comparative reality would to some extent alleviate despair.

During one of these interims of leisure, reading a volume of his Diary, I found Pepys had visited Dogdene. A note explained that his patron, Lord Sandwich, was connected by marriage with the then Countess of Sleaford: the marquisate dating only from the coronation of William IV.

'So about noon we came to Dogdene, and I was fain to see the house, and that part newly builded whereof Dr. Wren did formerly hold converse with me, telling me here was one of the first mansion houses of England contrived as a nobleman's seat rather than a keep moated for warfare. My Lord Sleaford is yet in town, where 'tis said he doth pay court to my Lady Castlemaine, at which the King is not a little displeased, 'tho 'twas thought she had long since lost her place. The Housekeeper was mighty civil, and showed us the Great Hall and stately Galleries, and the picture by P. Veronese that my Lord's grandfather did bring with him out of Italy, a most rare and noble thing. Then to the Gardens and Green Houses, where I did marvel to see the quickening of the Sensitive Plant. And so to the Still Room, where a great black maid offered a brave glass of metheglin, and I did have some merry talk with her begging her to show me a painted closet whereof the Housekeeper had spoken, yet had we not seen. Thither the bold wench took me readily enough, where I did kiss her twice or thrice and toyed wantonly with her. I perceive that she would not have denied me *que je voudray*, yet was I afeared and time was lacking. At which afterwards I was troubled, lest she should speak of what I had done, and her fellows make game of me when we were gone on our road.'

Everyone knows the manner in which some specific name will recur several times in quick succession from different quarters; part of that inexplicable magic throughout life that makes us suddenly think of someone before turning a street corner and meeting him, or her, face to face. In the same way, you may be struck, reading a book, by some obscure passage or lines of verse, quoted again, quite unexpectedly, twenty-four hours later. It so happens that soon after I read Pepys's account of Dogdene, I found myself teamed up as a fellow script-writer with Chips Lovell. The question arose of some country house to appear in a scenario.

'Do you mean a place like Dogdene?' I asked.

'That sort of thing,' said Lovell.

He went on to explain, not without some justifiable satisfaction, that his mother, the current Lord Sleaford's sister, had been brought up there.

I was then at the time of life when one has written a couple of novels, and moved from a firm that published art books to a company that produced second-feature films. To be 'an author' was, of course, a recognised path of approach to this means of livelihood; so much so, indeed, at that period, that to serve a term as a script-writer was almost a routine stage in literary life. On the other hand, Lovell's arrival in the Studio had been more devious. His chief stock in trade, after an excellent personal appearance and plenty of cheek, was expert manipulation of a vast horde of relations. Much more interested in daily journalism than in writing scenarios, he coveted employment on the gossip column of a newspaper. I knew Sheldon slightly, one of the editorial staff of the evening paper at which Lovell aimed, and had promised to arrange, if possible, a meeting between them.

Lovell delighted in talking about his relations. His parents had eloped on account of family opposition to their marriage. There had not been enough money. The elder Lovell, who was what Uncle Giles used to call 'not entirely friendless in high places', was a painter. His insipid, Barbizonish little landscapes, not wholly devoid of merit, never sold beyond his own circle of friends. The elopement was in due course forgiven, but the younger Lovell was determined that no such grass should grow under his own feet. He was going to get on in life, he said, and in a few years make a 'good marriage'. Meanwhile, he was looking round, enjoying himself as much as business permitted. Since there were few enough jobs going about for young men at that time, his energies, which were considerable, had brought him temporarily into the film business; for which every one, including himself, agreed he had no particular vocation. Something better would turn up. The mystery remained how, in the first place, he had been accepted into an overcrowded profession. Our colleague, Feingold, hinted that the American bosses of the company dreamed of some intoxicating social advantage to be reaped by themselves, personally, through employing an eligible young man of that sort. Feingold may have been right; on the other hand, he was not wholly free from a strain of Jewish romanticism. Certainly it would have been hard to think of any fantasy too extraordinary for the thoughts of these higher executives to indulge.

One night, not long after we had talked of Dogdene, I had, together with Lovell, Feingold and Hegarty, unwillingly remained later than usual at the Studio in an effort to complete one of those 'treatments' of a film story, the tedium of which is known only to those who have experienced their concoction. On that particular evening, Feingold, in his mauve suit and crimson tie, was suffering from an unaccustomed bout of depression. He had graduated fairly recently from the cutting-room, at first full of enthusiasm for this new aspect of his craft. The pink skin of his plump, round face had begun to sag, making pockets around his bluish chin, as he lay back in a chair with an enormous pile of foolscap scribblings in front of him. He looked like a highly-coloured poster designed to excite compassion for the sufferings of his race. Hegarty was also in poor form that day. He had been a script-writer most of his grown-up life—burdened by then with three, if not four, wives, to all of whom he was paying alimony—and he possessed, when reasonably sober, an extraordinary facility for constructing film scenarios. That day, he could not have been described as reasonably sober. Groaning, he had sat all the afternoon in the corner of the room facing the wall. We were working on a stage play that had enjoyed a three-weeks West End run twenty or thirty years before, the banality of which had persuaded some director that it would 'make a picture.' This was the ninth treatment we had produced between us. At last, for the third time in an hour, Hegarty broke out in a cold sweat. He began taking aspirins by the handful. It was agreed to abandon work for the day.

Lovell and I used to alternate in which of us brought a car (both vehicles of modest appearance) to the Studio. That night it was Lovell's turn to give me a lift. We said good night to Feingold, who was moving Hegarty off to the pub at the end of the road. Lovell had paid twelve pounds ten for his machine; he started it up, though not without effort. I climbed in beside him. We drove towards London through the mist, blue-grey pockets of cloud drifting up ominously from the river.

'Shall we dine together?'

'All right. Let it be somewhere cheap.'

'Of that I am strongly in favour,' said Lovell. 'Do you know a place called Foppa's?'

'Yes—but don't let's go there.'

Although things had been 'over' with Jean for some time by then, Foppa's was still for some reason too reminiscent of her to be altogether comfortable; and I was firmly of the opinion that even the smallest trace of nostalgia for the immediate past was better avoided. A bracing future was required, rather than vain regrets. I congratulated myself on being able to consider the matter in such brisk terms. Lovell and I settled on some restaurant, and returned to the question whether Sheldon would be able to arrange for the job to be offered at just the right moment: the moment when Lovell's contract with the film company terminated, not before, nor too long after.

'I'm going to look in on an aunt of mine after making a meal,' Lovell said, tired at last of discussing his own prospects, 'Why not come too? There are always people there. At worst, it's a free drink. If some lovely girls are in evidence, we can dance to the gramophone.'

'What makes you think there will be lovely girls?'

'You may find anything at Aunt Molly's—even lovely girls. Are you coming?'

'I'd like to very much.'

'It's in South Kensington, I'm afraid.'

'Never mind. Tell me about your aunt.'

'She is called Molly Jeavons. She used to be called Molly Sleaford, you know."

'I didn't know.'

Confident that Lovell would enjoy giving further information, I questioned him. He had that deep appreciation of family relationships and their ramifications that is a gift of its own, like being musical, or having an instinct for the value of horses or jewels. In Lovell's own case, he made good practical use of this grasp, although such a talent not uncommonly falls to individuals more than usually free from any desire for personal advancement: while equally often lacking in persons rightly regarded by the world as snobbish. Lovell, almost as interested in everyone else's family as his own, could describe how the most various people were in fact quite closely related.

'When my first Sleaford uncle died,' said Lovell, 'his widow, Molly, married a fellow called Jeavons. Not a bad chap at all, though of rather unglamorous background. He couldn't be described as particularly bright either, in spite of playing quite a good game of snooker. No live wire, in fact. Molly, on the other hand, is full of go.'

'What about her?'

'She was an Ardglass.'

'Any relation of Bijou Ardglass?'

'Sister-in-law, before Jumbo Ardglass divorced Bijou—who was his second wife, of course. Do you know her—probably slept with her? Most of one's friends have.'

'I've only seen her about the place. No other privileges.'

'Of course, you wouldn't be rich enough for Bijou,' said Lovell, not unkindly. 'But, as I was saying, Bijou got through what remained of the Ardglass money, which wasn't much, and left Jumbo, who'd really had enough himself by that time. Since then, she has been keeping company with a whole string of people—Prince Theodoric—God knows who. However, I believe she still comes to see Molly. Molly is like that. She will put up with anyone.'

'But why do you call him your "first" Sleaford uncle?'

'Because he died, and I still have an uncle of that name—the present one is Geoffrey—the first, John. Uncle Geoffrey was too poor to marry until he succeeded. He could only just rub along in one of the cheaper cavalry regiments. There were two other brothers between him and the title. One was killed in the war, and the other knocked down by a bus.'

'They don't seem much good at staying alive.'

'The thing about the Sleafords,' said Lovell, 'is that they've always been absolutely mad on primogeniture. That's all very well in a way, but they've been so bloody mean to their widows and younger children that they are going to die out. They are a splendid example of upper-class stinginess. Geoffrey got married at once, as people do when they come into a peerage, however dim. Of course, in this case—with Dogdene thrown in—it was something worth having. Unfortunately they've never managed to knock up an heir.'

Lovell went on to describe his 'first Sleaford uncle', who seems to have been a chilly, serious-minded, competent peer, a great organiser of charitable institutions, who would have done well for himself in any walk of life. For a time he had been taken up with politics and held office under Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith.

'He resigned at the time of the Marconi scandal,' said Lovell. 'He hadn't been making anything on the side himself, but he thought some of his Liberal colleagues had been a bit too liberal in the ethics of their own financial dealings. He was a selfish old man, but had what is called an exaggerated sense of honour.'

'I think I've seen Isbister's portrait of him.'

'Wearing the robes of the Garter. He took himself pretty seriously. Molly married him from the ballroom. She was only eighteen. Never seen a man before.'

'When did he die?'

'Spanish 'flu in 1919,' said Lovell. 'Molly first met Jeavons when Dogdene was a military hospital in the war. He was rather badly wounded, you know. The extraordinary thing was they didn't start a love affair or anything. If Uncle John hadn't died, she would still be—in the words of an Edwardian song my father hums whenever her name is mentioned—"Molly the Marchioness." '

'Where did she meet her second husband?'

'At the Motor Show. Went to Olympia in her widow's weeds and saw Jeavons again. He was acting as a polisher on one of the stalls. I can't remember which make, but not a car anyone would be proud to own. That represented just about the height of what he could rise to in civil life. They were married about six months later.'

'How does it go?'

'Very well. Molly never seems to regret the Dogdene days in the least. I can't think what they use for money, because, if I know the Sleafords, she didn't get much in the way of a jointure—and I doubt if she has a hundred a year of her own. The Ardglass family have been hopelessly insolvent since the Land Act. However, she manages to support herself—and Jeavons—somehow. And also get some fun out of life.'

'Doesn't Jeavons bring in anything?'

'Not a cent. I think he feels pretty ill most of the time. He often looks like death itself. Besides, he is quite unemployable. As a matter of fact, it isn't true to say he does nothing. Once in a way he has some appliance he is marketing—an automatic bootjack or new cure for the common cold. Something he gets a commission on, or perhaps some firm is paying him a trifle to recommend the thing.'

The description reminded me a little of Uncle Giles. The picture of Jeavons took on a more positive shape: not a particularly attractive one. 'Realism goes with good birth,' Lovell used to say, and he himself certainly showed this quality where his own relations were concerned. The statement might be hard to substantiate universally, but, by recognising laws of behaviour operating within the microcosm of a large, consanguineous network of families, however loosely connected, individuals born into such a world often gain an unsentimental grasp of human conduct: a grasp sometimes superior to that of apparently more perceptive persons whose minds are unattuned by early association to the constant give and take of an ancient and tenacious social organism. Of course, it does not always work that way, but Lovell, with his many limitations, was himself a good example of the principle.

'The chief reason I want to visit Aunt Molly,' he said, 'is to take another look at Priscilla Tolland, who is quite often there.'

'A sister of Blanche Tolland?'

'Yes. Do you know Blanche?'

'Only by sight, and years ago. She is rather dotty, isn't she?'

'Quite dotty,' said Lovell. 'Lives in a complete world of her own. Fairly happy about it though, I think.'

'Then there is one called Norah, isn't there, who set up house with a rather strange girl I used to know called Eleanor Walpole-Wilson.'

'That's it. She is rather dotty too, but in a different way. That couple are said to be a *ménage*. Then there is Isobel. She is rather different. Priscilla is the youngest. She isn't really "out" yet.'

I was about twenty-eight or twenty-nine at that period, to Lovell's twenty-three or twenty-four, and through him had become aware for the first time that a younger generation was close on my heels. I told him I felt much too old and passé to take an interest in such small fry as young ladies who were not yet 'out'.

'Oh, I quite realise that,' said Lovell indulgently. 'There will certainly be elder persons there too for chaps like you who prefer serious conversation. You might like Isobel. I believe she is a bit of a highbrow when she isn't going to night clubs.'

We drove precariously down Gloucester Road, the car emitting a series of frightening crepitations and an evil fume, while Lovell artlessly outlined his long-term plans for the seduction of Priscilla Tolland. We turned off somewhere by the Underground station. I liked the idea of going to this unknown place for an hour or so, surroundings where the cheerless Studio atmosphere might be purged away. Lovell stopped in front of a fairly large house of dark red brick, the architecture of which sounded a distant, and not particularly encouraging, echo of the High Renaissance. After waiting on the doorstep for some time, the door was opened by a man of indeterminate age in shirt-sleeves and carpet slippers. He might have passed for a butler. Pale and unhealthy looking, he had the air of having lived for months at a time underground in unventilated, overheated rooms. He brought with him the odours of beer and cheese. Closer examination of this unkempt, moody fellow revealed him as older than he had appeared at first sight.

'Good evening, Smith,' said Lovell, rather grandly.

' 'Evening,' said Smith, speaking without the smallest suggestion of warmth.

'How are you, Smith?'

Smith looked Lovell up and down as if he considered the enquiry not merely silly, but downright insulting. He did not answer.

'Is her Ladyship upstairs?'

'Where do you think she'd be—in the basement?'

The tone of Smith's voice made no concession whatever towards alleviating the asperity of this answer. Lovell showed no sign of surprise at being received so caustically, passing off the retort with a hearty laugh. Smith shambled off down the stairs, muttering to himself. He seemed thoroughly fed up, not only with Lovell, but also with his own job.

'Smith is wonderful, isn't he?' said Lovell, as we mounted the staircase. 'Aunt Molly sometimes borrows him from Erridge, when, for one reason or another, Thrubworth is closed down. I should warn you there is never an electric light bulb in the downstairs lavatory here and sometimes no bromo.'

I followed him to the first floor; and into a double drawing-room in which eight or nine persons were standing or sitting. A general though never precisely defined suggestion of chinoiserie, sustained by a profusion of Oriental bowls and jars, pervaded the decoration. Some of the furniture was obviously rather valuable: the rest, gimcrack to a degree. Pictures showed a similar variation of standard, a Richard Wilson and a Greuze (these I noted later) hanging among pastels of Moroccan native types. A dark, handsome woman, now getting a trifle plump by the emaciated standards of the period, came towards us.

'Why, Chips,' she said. 'Here you are at last. We thought you would be earlier.'

'Couldn't get away, Aunt Molly,' said Lovell. 'This is Mr. Jenkins. He and I slave away writing films together.'

'What will you drink?' she asked. 'Teddy, get them something to drink quickly. They must be in dire need.'

She smiled at me as if she were rather proud of that last phrase. Jeavons now appeared before us and began to make some rather hopeless gestures in the direction of several bottles and decanters standing on a table at the far end of the room. It was at once apparent that he was something left over from the war. I found it almost impossible to believe that he would so much resemble the mental picture conjured up by Lovell's earlier description of him. Like one of those mammoths—or, in Jeavons's case, somewhat less gigantic form of primeval life—caught in a glacier and physically preserved into an age when his very kind was known only from fossilised bones, or drawings on the walls of subterranean caves, he somehow managed to look just as he must have looked in 1917: hardly a day older. Perhaps a better simile to indicate the effect of remoteness he gave, standing there with a vacant expression and both hands in his pockets, would be that of some rare insect enclosed in amber. He wore a minute Charlie Chaplin moustache, his dark, shiny hair, in which there was a touch of red, rolling away from his forehead like the stone locks of a sculpted head of Caracalla.

At this point I became suddenly aware that at least one of the guests present was already well known to me. This was my family's old friend, Mrs. Conyers. Although I had not seen her at all recently, we had met from time to time—usually at intervals of several years—since the distant day when I had been taken to her flat and shown the scimitar. The last occasion had been the wedding of her daughter, Charlotte, to the lieutenant-commander. Evidently Mrs. Conyers had been dining with the Jeavonses. However, it appeared that she did not know them well, and, perhaps not greatly at ease in their society, she was clearly much relieved at finding, in myself, someone she knew of old. I was not sure that I myself was equally pleased, for, although I like Mrs. Conyers well enough, I thought it preferable to explore new ground like the Jeavons house unobserved by old friends of my parents. However, nothing could have been less admonitory than Mrs. Conyers's manner towards myself; if admonition properly defines the attitude threatened, when one is young, by the presence of old family friends.

In appearance Mrs. Conyers retained, no doubt from her childhood, the harassed, uncertain expression of those who have for many years had to endure close association with persons addicted to practical joking. Like the rest of her sisters, she must have suffered in no small degree from her father's love of horse-play. One of six daughters, she had been regarded as 'on the shelf' by her parents when the General proposed to her. She herself had probably abandoned thought of marriage, because she was by then devoting most of her time to attending an elderly, intractable relation, Sybil, Lady Amesbury, whose memoirs I mentioned earlier. One of her father's exploits had been recorded in this book, the occasion when Lord Vowchurch, in his younger days, had loosed half a dozen monkeys wearing tail-coats and white ties at an ambassadorial ball: a casual relic of innumerable similar anecdotes that have passed into oblivion.

Although never exactly handsome, Mrs. Conyers was not without a look of sad distinction. In public she deferred to her husband, but she was known to possess a will of her own, displayed in that foxy, almost rodent-like cast of feature, which, resembling her sister's in its keenness, was not disagreeable. It was said that she had entirely reorganised the General's life after he had left the army; and much for the better. When I went across the room to speak with her, she raised her eyebrows slightly to indicate, if not precise disapproval, at least a secret signal that she felt herself not altogether at home. The message read that she required any support she could get.

Lovell had made for a red-faced, grey-moustached, elderly man, who seemed, like Mrs. Conyers, to have been a member of the dinner-party. This person possessed a curiously old-world air, suggesting an epoch considerably more remote than the war-time span conveyed by his host's outward appearance. Although not so old, he seemed to belong more, at least in spirit, to the vintage of General Conyers. I caught the words 'Uncle Alfred'. Lovell called so many men uncle that one could not be sure how closely related to him, if at all, any of them might be. This uncle acknowledged Lovell's greeting fairly curtly. There was something familiar about that red face, white moustache and muffled, uneasy manner. Then I realised that he was Tolland, that lonely, derelict character accustomed to frequent the annual Old Boy dinner of Le Bas's house. In fact, I had myself once sat next to Tolland at one of those functions: an occasion when I had made up my mind never to attend another.

It was a surprise to find Mrs. Conyers and Tolland here, but there was no reason why they should not both be friends of Lady Molly Jeavons. Mrs. Conyers was now engaged by her hostess, and led up to a swarthy young man, also wearing a dinner-jacket, who was standing by the gramophone turning over the pages of a book of records. They all began to talk French together. At that moment my eye caught Tolland's. He stared back, not without a certain apprehension in his look. Then he cleared his throat and advanced towards me.

'I didn't see you at the Le Bas dinner this year,' he said.

He spoke with reproach, as if to mention such a breach of faith was an embarrassing duty his conscience laid upon him. In these surroundings, evidently his own ground, I felt less ability to cope with his peculiarities than at the Le Bas dinners. It seemed better to conceal the decision never to attend another one.

'I didn't manage to get there.'

'It went off all right,' said Tolland slowly, as if ghastly failure had been a matter of touch and go. 'I always accept when the card comes round. It makes a pleasant evening. Got to keep in touch. Of course Le Bas always says that in his speech.'

Molly Jeavons, after talking for a minute or two with

Mrs. Conyers and the young man with the black moustache, now rejoined Tolland and myself.

'I couldn't keep it up any longer,' she said. 'French is too exhausting. My governess said I was the worst pupil she'd ever had at the irregular verbs. All the same, I wanted to hear if there was anything new about Theodoric.'

She pointed her finger at me.

'Is he another of your relations, Alfred?' she asked.

Her tone suggested that potential relationship with Tolland might explain everything: why I had come to the house: why I looked as I did: why we were talking together. I attempted to reduce my appearance to something as negative as possible, so that no one might be unduly committed by the enquiry, which had thrown Tolland into an appalling access of embarrassment.

'Really, I believe you have more relations than I have myself,' she went on. 'My grandfather had ninety-seven first cousins, and he was only three up on my grandmother on my mother's side.'

'No—no—no,' said Tolland, hurriedly. 'At least I don't think we are, are we? Never know—perhaps I oughtn't to have been so definite—quite on the cards, I suppose, as a matter of fact. Shouldn't speak hastily about such things. Certainly got a lot of 'em. Some people might think too many, as you say, Molly. No—no—no. Perhaps you can tell better than me. Are we related? No? Thought not. Always try to keep track of 'em. Hard to manage sometimes. Go abroad and get married and get divorced and into debt, glad to see the back of 'em sometimes. But where you and I meet is at the Le Bas dinner. That's where *we* meet.'

He gasped a bit after all this, as if not only breathless from speaking at such length, but also overcome with confusion at the predicament into which he had been thrown by the question. Yet, even in spite of this floundering, he seemed to feel himself on much surer ground in this house than at our previous meetings. He might be temporarily at a disadvantage here with his hostess, even on guard against attack from her (a minute or two later I found he had good reason to fear that), but at least his credentials were known and freely accepted in the Jeavons drawing-room. I was by no means sure that I felt myself equally at ease. The atmosphere of the house was not exactly restful. The other persons who made up the party were nondescript enough, but there was also the feeling that one had penetrated the outskirts of a secret society. Mrs. Conyers had seemed as subject as myself to this sense of disquiet. Perhaps it was merely that she had passed on to me her own agitation; for I was sure she was agitated about something. Lovell had certainly tried to prepare me for an unusual household, but to absorb such antecedent descriptions is never easy. Molly Jeavons's noisy, absolutely unrestrained directness of manner was of a kind that suggested both simplicity of nature and certainty of her own position: both characteristics that can stimulate that streak of social cruelty that few lack. There could be no doubt that Tolland was showing signs of preparing himself for some onslaught. The reason for his fears soon became apparent.

'I didn't know you ever met anyone but your own relations, Alfred,' she said, evidently determined to pursue that subject. 'You always pretend to me that you never go anywhere. I only got you here tonight because you wanted to hear from her own lips Mrs. Conyers's story about the Empress Frederick. I believe your quiet evenings at home are all make-believe and that you live a disgracefully fast life—the gayest of gay bachelors.'

Tolland denied this imputation emphatically. He did not seem in the least flattered at the suggestion that he might be, so far as social life was concerned, a dark horse. He was patently without the smallest personal vanity, open or secret, on the matter of cutting a dash in life. He came at last to the end of his protests.

'Alfred was talking about his family all through dinner,' said Molly Jeavons, turning once more to me. 'You know they are all in trouble—every blessed one of them.'

'It's too bad of you to say that, Molly. I only asked for your advice about some of my nephews and nieces.'

Now he sounded thoroughly aggrieved, although at the same time unwilling to withdraw voluntarily from a conversation devoted to his relations.

'What's the matter with the Tollands this time, Aunt Molly?' asked Lovell.

He had been making a tour of the room, ending with our group.

'Oh, it's Erridge again,' she said.

She spoke as if the question were hardly worth asking.

'What's Erridge's latest?'

Lovell, for his part, spoke as one expecting to hear an enjoyable piece of gossip about a character always to be relied upon to provide a good story.

'Living as a tramp,' said Molly Jeavons. 'So I'm told at least. Somewhere in the Midlands. Grew a beard. He has still got it, they say. I don't think he actually slept in casual wards. The other tramps must have had an awful time if he did. As a child he used to talk in his sleep and bawl the house down with night terrors.'

'Is he doing that now?' asked Lovell. 'Being a tramp, I mean, not bawling the house down—though I shouldn't wonder if he doesn't have night terrors still.'

'He is back at Thrubworth. Getting cleaned up after his adventures—as much as Erry ever gets cleaned up. Smith goes back tomorrow. I am more and more coming to think that Smith is more trouble than he is worth. It's convenient to have a manservant in the house, but I found this morning we were completely out of gin, and I know at least two inches remained in the bottle left when we went to bed last night.'

Lovell was obviously disappointed that nothing more sensational about Erridge was to be revealed.

'Feingold had some story about "a lord" who was doing "social research",' he said. 'I thought it might be Erridge. I don't expect the dumps he stopped at were any more uncomfortable than he has made Thrubworth by now. The whole place has been under dust-sheets since he succeeded, hasn't it? Do you know Erridge, Nick? He must be about a contemporary of yours.'

'He is a year or two older. I used to know him by sight. His brother, George Tolland, was nearer my age, though I didn't know him either. But he isn't "Erridge" any longer, is he?'

'No, no, he is "Warminster" now, of course,' said Molly Jeavons, impatiently. 'But Alfred's family always call their eldest son by the second title. I don't even know what Erry's Christian name is. Perhaps he hasn't got one.'

'Nonsense, of course he has,' said Tolland, quite angrily. 'His name is Alfred, like my own. You know that perfectly well, Molly. Besides, to call him "Erridge" is perfectly usual, isn't it? In fact, off-hand, I can't think of a single family that does differently.'

'We always used to think it rather pompous,' said Molly Jeavons. 'I can't imagine myself ever addressing Jumbo as "Kilkeel" when he was alive. It would sound like a racehorse.'

'Well, "Jumbo" sounds like an elephant to me,' said Tolland.

This retort must have struck him as one of unusual subtlety, since he looked round at Lovell and myself in an appeal for applause; or at least for sympathy.

'That's just it,' said Molly Jeavons, now speaking almost at the top of her voice. 'My poor brother did look like an elephant. Nobody denied that, not even himself. But he did not look like a race-horse. Not one I would have put my money on, anyway.'

'Bijou put her shirt on him,' said Lovell.

'Rubbish, she didn't,' said Molly Jeavons, beginning to laugh. 'He put his shirt on her, you idiot—and lost it, too.'

I remembered, then, that Tolland had spoken of 'my nephew, Warminster', at the Le Bas dinner where we had met; at the same time mentioning that this young man had succeeded his father some years before. Tolland had added that his nephew was 'a funny boy'. Erridge (as it seems simplest—like his parents—to continue to call him, anyway for the time being) remained in my mind as a gloomy, cadaverous schoolboy, trudging along the road close to the wall, his hands in his pockets and a pile of books slipping from under his arm. Angular, sallow and spotty, he was usually frowning angrily to himself, weighed down with anxiety, as if all the troubles of the world rested on his shoulders. The only time I could recall seeing him in later life was, years before, at a dance given by the Huntercombes. On that occasion, Erridge had looked so hot, cross and untidy that only the fact that he was wearing a tail-coat and white tie—neither in their first freshness—prevented him from resembling, even then, a harassed young tramp. His appearance that night had certainly borne out this recent account of him. The ball at the Huntercombes' remained always with peculiar clarity in my mind as the night Barbara Goring had poured sugar over Widmerpool's head.

'Does Erridge often do this sort of thing?' I asked. 'Go off on "social research", I mean?'

'Oh yes,' said Molly Jeavons. 'He has the oddest ideas. All your family have, haven't they, Alfred? The whole blessed lot of them.'

Tolland made a nervous movement with his head, as if attempting to deny the principle of the accusation while at the same time regretfully having to admit, anyway in part, some of its immediate justice.

'Warminster was not like that,' he said. 'I'm not like that. Not in the least. Nor are Frederica and George. And I trust the younger ones will turn out different from Erridge. They all seemed all right when they were children. Ran about and made a lot of noise. Just can't tell, I suppose. Just—can't—tell.'

If he expected this exhibition of philosophic resignation in some manner to appease Molly Jeavons, he was mistaken.

'Certainly Frederica is not strange,' she said, laughing uproariously at the idea. 'Frederica is ordinary enough for anyone. Got to be in her job. Frederica is as ordinary as you like.'

This agreement with his conclusion—the complete, the absolute ordinariness of his niece, Frederica—seemed to bring some temporary alleviation to Tolland's feelings. He nodded several times with satisfaction. I had some vague idea as to Frederica's identity. She had married one of the Budds, brother or cousin of a 'beauty' called Margaret Budd, and her husband had been killed in a hunting accident only a few years later. People had talked about his death in the days when I used to dine with the Walpole-Wilsons. I remembered Anne Stepney talking about the accident.

As I was by then committed to this conversation about a lot of people regarding whom I knew little or nothing, I decided to take an active part by seeking further information. I asked what Frederica Budd's job might be that required such extreme correctness of behaviour.

'She is Lady-in-Waiting,' said Molly Jeavons. 'Or she may be an Extra Woman of the Bedchamber. Something like that. Anyway, she has to behave herself jolly well. I'm surprised you haven't met her, if you are an old friend of Mrs. Conyers. She and Frederica are great cronies.'

At that period, as I have said, I knew little of the Tollands, although increasingly during the past few years I had been hearing scraps of information about one or other of them, as happens when a large family, close to each other in age, begin in quick succession to appear in the world. Lovell had given some account of them at dinner. Molly Jeavons's sister, Katherine, a childless widow, had married the late Lord Warminster as his second wife. 'As a result,' Lovell had said, 'she possesses a dozen step-children.' It turned out, in fact, that Erridge had only nine brothers and sisters. Even that number seemed preposterously large to an only child like myself. There is something overpowering, even a trifle sinister about very large families, the individual members of which often possess in excess the characteristics commonly attributed to 'only' children: misanthropy: neurasthenia: an inability to adapt themselves: all the traits held to be the result of a lonely upbringing. The corporate life of large families can be lived with severity, even barbarity, of a kind unknown in smaller related communities: these savageries and distillations of egoism often rendered even less tolerable if sentimentalised outside the family circle. The Tollands, from what Lovell reported of them, sounded no exception to this prejudiced judgment.

'Of course it was hard for them losing their mother—being left orphans, in fact,' said Tolland. 'Though of course Katherine has always done her best—been splendid, really.'

By introducing the name of the second Lady Warminster into the conversation, he may have hoped to carry the war into the enemy's country. By then his face was more flushed than ever. His hostess was determined to let him off nothing. I had the impression that she was teasing him, not precisely for my especial benefit, but, at the same time, that my presence as a newcomer to the house afforded a particularly favourable opportunity for the application of torments of this sort. I found later that she was indeed what is called 'a tease', perhaps the only outward indication that her inner life was not altogether happy; since there is no greater sign of innate misery than a love of teasing. Later, too, I understood how much that night Alfred Tolland must have been torn between a pride that made him hesitate to discuss his relations in front of a stranger, and a taste for talking about his family, too rarely satisfied in his lonely life. It was a treat to visit someone who understood the niceties of family gossip, even if Molly Jeavons required her pound of flesh by ragging him. His face, completely masculine in cast, had at the same time that air of being quite untouched by sexual passion: a look noticeable sometimes among men of his generation. Lovell explained to me later that Tolland had always had a taste for good works and had been much used by the late Lord Sleaford in connexion with his charities. He was a good example of my friend Barnby's observation that 'melancholy is the curse of the upper classes'.

'And what about Norah?' said Molly Jeavons.

She had to repeat the question twice, for the first time Tolland made no attempt to reply. He seemed completely knocked out. The challenge was apparently unanswerable. He could only nod his head. There was no spirit left in him. To bridge the silence, I asked if it were not true that Norah Tolland shared a flat with Eleanor Walpole-Wilson.

'She does, she does,' cried Molly Jeavons, laughing loudly again at my question, as if I had shown myself to have missed the whole point of what was being said. 'Do you know them? I didn't think they ever saw any young men. I'm jolly glad to hear they do. Tell me about them. Is it true that Eleanor has been seen in a green pork-pie hat and a bow tie?'

Mrs. Conyers, escaped from the man to whom French must be talked, now joining our group, nodded her head and pursed her lips, as if to emphasise the depths to which Eleanor had fallen.

'As a matter of fact, I haven't seen Eleanor for years,' I said. 'I used to dine with them once in a way. I saw Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson at the Isbister Retrospective Exhibition when it was on, and he said something about Norah Tolland. I've never met her.'

'They look like a couple of stable-boys,' said Molly Jeavons. 'And talk like stable-boys, too. I hear they swear like troopers.'

From the way she spoke, I suspected she knew very little about these two young women, and was, in fact, anxious to learn more. Finding me unable to offer a closely observed report on their activities, she abandoned the subject and renewed her general attack on Tolland.

'And then Hugo,' she said. 'What about Hugo?'

She spoke as if Hugo clinched every other argument. If the name of Norah had knocked Tolland out, that of Hugo reduced him to the position of an army not only defeated in the field, but also forced to join as an ally its victorious adversary.

'I hear his clothes are—well, awful,' he muttered, almost inaudibly.

So far as Hugo was concerned, he seemed to agree absolutely with Molly Jeavons in thinking the situation could scarcely be worse.

'But all undergraduates are like that,' said Mrs. Conyers, unexpectedly. 'I mean they all wear extraordinary clothes, don't they? They always have—and say things to try and shock people. My father used to say they were like that even in his day. I know he himself, just after he had been sent down from Oxford, said some terrible thing to Mr. Gladstone when he was introduced to him at Holland House. My father had to write and apologise, or I don't know what would have happened. I am not sure the Ministry might not have fallen.'

'Well,' said Molly Jeavons, 'I've known some undergraduates in my time—Jumbo, for instance, you should have seen him in his young days—but I've never met one who dressed like Hugo. I was talking to the Bridgnorths' boy, John Mountfichet, when he was here the other day. He is at the same college as Hugo. He told us some things that would make your hair stand on end. They made Teddy laugh, and you know how difficult that is.'

'Even Sillery says Hugo goes too far,' said Lovell. 'He drives all the other dons quite mad, of course, but I should have thought Sillery would have stuck up for him. The other undergraduates are very disapproving too. Apart from anything else, æsthetes have gone completely out of fashion at both universities these days. I told Hugo when I saw him the other day that he was hopelessly out of date.'

'What did he say?'

' "My dear, I love being *dated*. I hate all this bickering that goes on about politics. I wish I'd lived in the *Twenties* when people were *amusing*." '

Lovell spoke the words with the mannerism he judged appropriate to such an impersonation.

'He'll grow out of it,' said Mrs. Conyers, surprising me with this repeated display of toleration. 'Lots of nice young men go through a stage of being rather silly.'

'Let's hope so,' said Alfred Tolland, with a sigh.

He did not sound very confident.

'At any rate, George is all right,' he added a moment later.

I had the impression he was playing his last card, but that this card was a trump.

'What is George Tolland doing now?' I asked. 'He was the one of the family who was my contemporary, though I never really knew him.'

'In the Coldstream for some years,' said Alfred Tolland. 'Then he thought he ought to try and make some money, so he went into the City. He has done fairly well, so they say. Never know what people mean by that—but they say pretty well.'

'Oh, yes,' said Molly Jeavons. 'I am sure that George has done well. But what a correct young man—*what a correct young man*! I don't think I ever met a young man who was so correct. I can't see how we are ever going to get him married, he is so correct—and even if we found a correct wife for him, I am sure they would both be much too correct to have any children. And even if they did, what frightfully correct children they would have to be.'

'You can't have it both ways, Molly,' grumbled Tolland. 'You blame some of them for misbehaving themselves. Perhaps you are right. But then you don't approve of George because he is what you call "correct". Can't understand it. There is no pleasing you. It isn't reasonable.'

'Well, now I'll tell you about the rest of them,' said Molly Jeavons, turning to me. 'Of course I really adore them all, and just say these things to make Alfred cross. There is Susan, who is showing every sign of getting engaged to a nice young man, then there is Blanche——'

'I've seen Blanche, though I don't know her.'

'Blanche is dotty. You must know that much, if you've seen her. But she's not a bad old thing.'

'Of course not.'

Alfred Tolland showed no disposition to deny the 'dottiness' of his niece, Blanche.

'Robert is a bit of a mystery. He is in some business, but I don't know whether he will stay there. Isobel—well, she is a bit different too. I'm not sure she isn't going to get engaged soon herself. Then there is Priscilla, who is on the point of coming out, and was to have been here tonight, but she doesn't seem to have turned up yet.'

I made an effort to take in this bird's-eye view of the Tollands, who now seemed to surround me on all sides after this vivid exposition of their several characters. Instinctively, I felt the greatest interest in Isobel, who was 'different'; and also an odd feeling of regret that she might be about to become engaged in the near future. While I was brooding on this, Jeavons joined us. He stood there, scanning everyone's face closely, as if hoping for some explanation of the matter in hand; perhaps even of life itself, so intense was his concentration: some reasonable interpretation couched in terms simple enough for a plain man to understand without undue effort. He also gave the impression of an old dog waiting to have a ball thrown to retrieve, more because that was the custom in the past than because sport or exercise was urgently required. However, no one enlightened him as to the subject under discussion, so he merely filled up my glass, and then his own. His wife and Alfred Tolland had now embarked on some detailed aspect of Tolland life, too esoteric for an outsider to follow.

'In the film business like Chips?' Jeavons asked, in a low husky voice, as if he had a cold coming on, or had drunk too much whisky the night before.

'Yes.'

'Ever met any of the stars?'

'Not so you'd notice. I'm on the scenario side. The studio only makes English pictures for the quota. They wouldn't be likely to employ anyone very grand in the way of an actor or actress.'

Jeavons seemed disappointed at this answer.

'Still,' he urged, 'you must see some beauties sometimes, don't you?'

'I've sat next to Adolph Menjou,' said his wife, suddenly abandoning the subject of the Tollands, and breaking in with her accustomed violence, though not, I think, with any idea of preventing him from pursuing the question of film actresses and their looks. 'He had such nice manners. Of course Garbo is the one I should really like to meet. I suppose everyone would. Wouldn't you like to meet Garbo, Alfred?'

'Never heard of him,' said Tolland.

Inevitably there was some laughter at this.

'It's a *she,*' said Molly Jeavons. 'It's a *she,* Alfred.'

'An actress, I suppose,' said Tolland, 'or you wouldn't be using that tone of voice. I don't think I particularly want to meet Miss Garbo—or perhaps it is Mrs. Garbo.'

There was more laughter at that. I was not sure—I am not sure to this day—whether he was feigning ignorance of the famous film star, whose name at that moment, the zenith of her fame, was a synonym for mysterious, elusive, feminine beauty; or whether he had, in truth, never heard of her.

'I once met Mrs. Patrick Campbell when I was a young man,' he said, speaking as if the statement was an afterthought. 'Heard her read aloud *High Tide on the Coast of Lincolnshire*. Wonderful experience. Felt different all the evening. Couldn't sleep after it. Lay awake—well—till the morning, nearly.'

Possibly Molly Jeavons felt that for a brief second the tables had been turned on her, because she now returned to the charge in the game of baiting him about his family, probably feeling in that activity on safer ground.

'Tell us more about the stained-glass window, Alfred,' she said.

This request galvanised him once more to the point of anger. She seemed to have touched some specially sensitive nerve.

'I've told you already, Molly,' he said, 'the window has never been put up as it should have been. Erridge isn't interested.'

'Surely somebody in the family can tell him to do it,' she said. 'Why can't you tell him to get on with the job yourself? He must do it, that's all.'

She spoke as if her own decision made the matter final. Alfred Tolland shook his head gloomily.

'As well ask him to lead the glass himself,' he said. 'Better, in fact. He might have a try at that. Dignity of labour or something. But as for taking an interest in his own grandfather's memorial——'

Tolland shook his head, finding metaphor, as applied to Erridge, impotent.

'Can't George take it on?' insisted Molly Jeavons. 'You think so highly of George.'

Tolland shook his head again.

'Difficult for George,' he said. 'Delicate, with Erridge the eldest son. George doesn't want to be snubbed.'

'Oh, goodness,' said Molly Jeavons, throwing up her hands, 'you Tollands drive me mad.'

Some new guests came into the room at that moment, so that her own plan for solving the problem of the stained-glass window was never revealed. In the reshuffle of places, I found myself *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Conyers. After a few preliminary enquiries about my parents, she explained that the General was indisposed, though not seriously, having fallen headlong from the stable loft where the poodles' food was stored. He must at that time have been a few years short of eighty.

'But I did not remember you knew Lady Molly,' said Mrs. Conyers in a low voice.

'I did not, until tonight.'

'Rather a happy-go-lucky household. That very extraordinary butler. One does not know what is going to be said next.'

'So I should think.'

'Too much so for me. I am old-fashioned, I'm afraid. I do not at all mind admitting it.'

I was reminded of Hugo Tolland, said to like being 'dated', but thought it wiser not to remind Mrs. Conyers of the parallel. I wondered why she had agreed to dine with the Jeavonses if she felt so inimical to them.

'But you yourself must have known Lady Molly for a long time?'

'Of course we have known her for years and years. But never well. When she was Lady Sleaford my youngest sister, Mildred, knew her, and we used to meet sometimes. I have hardly seen her since her second marriage. We know the present Sleafords, but I don't think Lady Molly ever sees anything of them. That is to be expected, perhaps.'

'You dined here?'

'It was really on account of my sister. I can't remember whether you have ever met Mildred.'

'Only when I was a child. When you showed me the sword the sultan gave the General.'

Mrs. Conyers smiled.

'That was a long time ago,' she said. 'Then you really do not know her.'

Some of the subsequent history of Mildred Blaides was, in fact, familiar to me from occasional talk on the part of my parents. Considered rather 'fast' in her early days—as might be expected from my memory of her—she had married a Flying Corps officer called M'Cracken, who had been killed not long after the wedding in a raid over Germany. Then there had been a period of widowhood, when her behaviour had been thought 'flighty'. From the manner in which this interlude in her career used to be discussed, I imagine that my parents' generation supposed her to be about to go to the bad in a spectacular manner. However, this very generally prophesied débâcle never took place. Mildred Blaides married again: the second time to an Australian business-man, a Mr. Haycock, retired, fairly rich, who owned a villa in the South of France and spent a good deal of his time travelling round the world. Mr. Haycock, who was said to possess sterling virtues in addition to his comfortable income, was also agreed to be 'rather rough'. The marriage, so far as I knew, had been quite a success. There were children, but I did not know how many.

'As a matter of fact, my sister Mildred is a very old friend of our hostess,' said Mrs. Conyers, as if the matter was weighing on her mind. 'As I say, she knows Lady Molly far better than I do. Mildred nursed at Dogdene during the war.'

'I remember her in nurse's uniform.'

'She is coming here tonight. She was to have dined, but at the last moment she was unable to be at dinner. She is—more or less engaged to a friend of Lady Molly's. As I expect you know, Mildred's husband died about a year ago. Unfortunately a business engagement prevented her—I suppose I should say—fiancé from dining. He is a very busy man. He just could not get away tonight in time. Then Mildred herself is always changing her plans. Goodness knows why she herself could not come here without him. However, she couldn't, so there it was. They are both looking in later.'

There could be no doubt now that the matter which worried, or at least unusually preoccupied, Mrs. Conyers was connected with her sister's arrival. I could not at first decide exactly what had upset her.

'This is not the first time you have met him—the fiancé?'

'As a matter of fact, I haven't seen him yet,' she said, almost apologetically, as if that was the least I could expect of her. 'You see, it only happened yesterday. That was why Lady Molly arranged the dinner. She didn't seem to mind their not turning up in the least. Of course, she is much more used to people changing their arrangements than I am.'

It seemed probable that she was merely suffering some anxiety regarding the potentialities of the man who was to be her sister's third husband. I knew enough about the reputation of Mildred Blaides to realise that anxiety was reasonable enough.

'He is a good deal younger than Mildred,' she said.

After announcing this fact, Mrs. Conyers decided to abandon the subject, perhaps fearing that in her own overwrought state she might say too much. She gave a sigh.

'If I must talk French,' she went on, with rather forced gaiety, 'I do so much prefer not to have to talk the language to a Frenchman. They are so terribly severe. I always tell them that they will never admit that any other Frenchman speaks correct French, so how can they possibly expect me to do so. That young man over there actually complimented me on my French accent.'

'Who is he?'

'From one of the Balkan Legations. I think his father was Minister over here, and used to stop at Dogdene. He was invited about rather more than you might expect because he was an unusually good shot. In the end the poor fellow was shot himself by an anarchist in his own country. The son had news of Prince Theodoric. In fact, I think he has just ceased to be a member of the Prince's personal household. As you probably know, Theodoric was rather a special friend of the divorced wife of Lady Molly's brother, Lord Ardglass, who died some years ago. Our hostess always likes to hear about him on that account. Between you and me, I am afraid she is a tiny bit of a gossip, but don't say I said so.'

Mrs. Conyers smiled a little slyly.

'Who are the two girls who have just come in and are talking to Chips Lovell?'

'He is the young man you arrived with, isn't he? The nearest is one of the Tolland girls, Priscilla, I think. She was going to see a film with a former school friend of hers whose name I was not told.'

Priscilla Tolland looked more than seventeen: even so, she had not entirely lost a long-legged, childish awkwardness in the manner in which she stood with her legs crossed. I could see she bore a strong likeness to the 'dotty' Blanche, though certainly free herself from any such disability. The girl with her, prototype of all school friends, was small and dark with horn-rimmed spectacles and an air of bossing everyone about. I thought I would have a word with them in a minute or two; when Mrs. Conyers had finished speaking of the misty past, into which she was now making a deep excursion. However, opportunity to approach the girls never came, because a second later, just as Mrs. Conyers had invited me to tea with herself and the General the following Sunday, two more persons, a man and woman, entered the room.

'Ah, there is Mildred at last,' said Mrs. Conyers, fumbling with her lorgnette, her thin hands, almost pale mauve in colour, shaking with excitement and anxiety.

I myself was curious to see what Mildred Blaides—or rather Mildred Haycock—might look like after all these years, half expecting her to be wearing her V.A.D. outfit and smoking a cigarette. But when my eyes fell on the two of them, it was the man, not the woman, who held my attention. Life is full of internal dramas, instantaneous and sensational, played to an audience of one. This was just such a performance. The fiancé was Widmerpool. Scarlet in the face, grinning agitatedly through the thick lenses of his spectacles, he advanced into the room, his hand on Mrs. Haycock's arm. He was wearing a new dark suit. Like a huge fish swimming into a hitherto unexplored and unexpectedly exciting aquarium, he sailed resolutely forward: yet not a real fish, a fish made of rubber or some artificial substance. There was something a little frightening about him. That could not be denied. Molly Jeavons, this time supported by her husband, closed in on these new arrivals immediately.

'Well, he is no beauty,' said Mrs. Conyers.

She spoke with such deep relief at her discovery of the unpleasingness of Widmerpool's features that she must have feared the worst of her sister's choice on account of the reported difference of age. Probably she had pictured some golden-haired gigolo of altogether unacceptable personal appearance. The truth was a great consolation to her. Certainly, to look at them, they seemed on the score of age to be a couple very reasonably to be associated together. Mrs. Haycock was in the neighbourhood of forty, and looked no younger, but Widmerpool, although only a year or so over thirty, had always appeared comfortably middle-aged even as a boy.

'I know him.'

'Who is he?'

'He is called Kenneth Widmerpool. I was at school with him as a matter of fact. He is in the City.'

'I know his name of course. And that he is in the City. But what is he like?'

Mrs. Conyers did not attempt to conceal her own impatience. The reason of her anxiety was now made plain. She had no confidence in her sister's choice of husband. She wanted to know the worst as soon as possible. Her first, and most serious, fears were passed; she wished to move on to a later stage of enquiry. Widmerpool, although giving her reason to be thankful that the outlook was not more threatening, had evidently made no very captivating impression.

'Is he nice?'

'I've known him a long time——'

By then we were both involved in general introductions taking place round the room, so that I was not forced to answer the question. Afterwards, when I got home, I pondered what I should most properly have said in reply. The fact was that Widmerpool could hardly be described as 'nice'. Energetic: able: successful: all kinds of things that had never been expected of him in the past; but 'nice' he had never been, and showed little sign of becoming. Yet, for some reason, I was quite glad to see him again. His reappearance, especially in that place, helped to prove somehow rather consolingly, that life continued its mysterious, patterned way. Widmerpool was a recurring milestone on the road; perhaps it would be more apt to say that his course, as one jogged round the track, was run from time to time, however different the pace, in common with my own. As an aspect of my past he was an element to be treated with interest, if not affection, like some unattractive building or natural feature of the landscape which brought back the irrational nostalgia of childhood. A minute later I found myself talking to him. 'No, I haven't seen you for a long time,' he said, breathing heavily as usual, 'I've been trying to get hold of you, as a matter of fact, to tell you I was getting married.'

'Many congratulations.'

'Time to settle down,' he said.

This remark was fatuous, since he had never been anything but 'settled down', at least in my eyes. I could not imagine why he should specially wish to tell me about his marriage, although there could be no doubt from his manner that he was in a great state of excitement at the thought of being engaged. His nose and lips, beneath the huge headlamps of his now rimless spectacles, were twitching slightly. Lunging out towards Mrs. Haycock, who stood not far from him, he seized her arm and drew her in our direction.

'This is Nicholas Jenkins, my dear. An old friend of mine. He was somewhat my junior at school.'

Mrs. Haycock, who had been talking to her sister, now turned and faced me, so that for the first time since she had entered the room I had an opportunity of observing closely the woman he hoped to make his wife. I could at once appreciate the strong impression she might have made on him the moment she showed herself prepared to accept him as an admirer. Tall, elegant, brassy, she was markedly of the same generation as Molly Jeavons, without personally at all resembling her. Mrs. Haycock's moral separateness from Widmerpool, immediately noticeable, was not on account of any difference of age, as such, for—as I have said —Widmerpool had never looked young. It was a separateness imposed upon her by the war. Like Jeavons, that was the epoch to which she belonged by some natural right. Life on the Riviera had no doubt left its mark too: a society in which Widmerpool was unlikely hitherto to have participated. She retained some of her sunburn from the previous summer, and, although dressed quite normally—indeed, rather well—her clothes seemed in some indefinable manner more adapted to a *plage* or casino than the Jeavons drawing-room.

I had always felt an interest in what might be called the theoretical side of Widmerpool's life: the reaction of his own emotions to the severe rule of ambition that he had from the beginning imposed upon himself: the determination that existence must be governed by the will. However, the interest one takes in the lives of other people is, at best, feeble enough, so that, knowing little of his affairs in recent years, I had in truth largely forgotten about him. Now, for the second time that evening, I recalled the night when that noisy little girl, Barbara Goring, had poured sugar over his head at the Huntercombes' dance. He had been in love with her; and I, too, for that matter, or had thought so at the time. Then there had been his brief, painful association with Gipsy Jones, the grubby Left Wing nymph, whose 'operation' he had defrayed unrewarded. After the Gipsy Jones business, he had told me he would never again have anything to do with a woman who 'took his mind off his work.' I wondered whether Mrs. Haycock would satisfy that condition: whether he had proposed to her under stress of violent emotion, or had decided such a marriage would help his career. Perhaps there was an element of both motives; in any case, to attempt to disengage motives in marriage is a fruitless task. Mrs. Haycock took my hand, smiling absently, and gave it a good squeeze; the clutch of a woman pretty familiar with men and their ways.

'One always has to meet such crowds of people when one gets married,' she said, 'It is really too, too exhausting. Did you say we had met before? Was it at Cannes? I seem to know your face.'

She spoke breathlessly, almost asthmatically, in which she resembled Widmerpool, but using that faint hint of cockney, an accent in part bequeathed by the overtones of the Prince of Wales to the world to which she belonged. I tried, quite unsuccessfully and perhaps not very tactfully, to explain the circumstances of our infinitely distant former meeting. It was plainly years since she had listened to any remarks addressed to her, either serious or trivial, so that perhaps deservedly—for the exposition was a formidable rigmarole upon which to embark at that moment—she swiftly disengaged herself from its demands.

'I'm absolutely longing for a drink, Molly,' she said. 'Oh, thank you so much, Mr. Jeavons, what an angel you are. I have been having the most awful time tonight. You know I abominate making plans. Never make them, as a matter of fact. I just won't. Well, this evening I got caught up by one of the most awful bores you ever met.'

She drank deeply of the glass brought by Jeavons, and began telling him the story. Widmerpool took me aside.

'Did I hear you say you had met Mildred before?'

He spoke anxiously.

'When I was about nine or ten.'

'What on earth do you mean?'

He sounded quite angry at this statement of mine, intended to set his mind at rest. He supposed I wanted to tease him.

'Just what I said. It was years ago—with her sister, Mrs. Conyers, to whom you were introduced a second ago. My family have always known General Conyers.'

I hardly knew why I added this last piece of information which sounded somehow a trifle absurd and unnecessary, emphasing the fact that Widmerpool and the General would become brothers-in-law. However, Widmerpool was appeased by this amplification.

'Quite so,' he said. 'Quite so.'

All at once he became abstracted in manner.

'Look here,' he said. 'Come and have luncheon with me. We haven't had a talk for a long time. What about next Sunday—at my club?'

'All right. Thanks very much.'

The name of the club surprised me a little. There was no reason at all why he should not belong there, yet its mild suggestion of cosmopolitan life and high card stakes evoked an environment seemingly unsuited to his nature. When employed at Donners-Brebners, Widmerpool must have spent a fair amount of his time with foreign businessmen. Indeed, his professional background at that time might well have been described as international. There was nothing against him on that count. Equally, if he ever played cards, he might, for all I knew, venture high stakes. He could presumably afford such a risk. Neither of these aspects of the scene altered the sense of incongruity. To eyes that had known him as a boy, even the smallest pretension to swagger appeared, for Widmerpool, out of place. That was the point. The verdict was inescapable. Only an atmosphere of quiet hard work and dull, serious conversation were appropriate to him. Such a demand on my part, even though unvoiced, was, of course, absurd. Widmerpool's conduct was, in any case, no concern of mine. Besides, these sentiments were utterly at variance with Widmerpool's own view of himself; a view that would obviously play the chief part in his choice of club—or, for that matter, of wife. If such a club was inappropriate to him, how much more incongruous would be a wife like

Mrs. Haycock. I could not help thinking that. We talked for a time of general matters. Later on Lovell came across the room.

'I am giving Priscilla Tolland and her friend a lift home,' he said. 'Do you want to be taken as far as your flat?'

I had no difficulty in perceiving the reason for this offer and resigned myself to sitting in the back with the friend.

'Come and see us again,' said Molly Jeavons, when saying good-bye. 'Make Chips bring you, or just drop in.'

'So long, old man, come again,' said Jeavons.

He had been standing for a long time by the drink tray, plunged in deep thought, perhaps still contemplating the subject of film stars and their varied, disturbing charms. Now he took me by the hand, as if his thoughts were far away. I followed Lovell and the girls downstairs to the car. Outside there was a hint of fog in the air. The river mist seemed to have pursued us from the Studio. Nothing of note happened on the way home. The school friend talked incessantly of the visit she was going to pay to Florence. We dropped her at an address in Wimpole Street, after disposing of Priscilla Tolland at her stepmother's house in Hyde Park Gardens.

2.

'We might go straight in to lunch,' said Widmerpool, when we met a day or two later. 'If you so wish, you can drink a glass of pale sherry at the table. We are sometimes crowded at the luncheon hour. Incidentally, you will probably see the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Home Office at one table. He honours us with his presence most days—but I forgot. It is Sunday today, so that he may not be with us. I am afraid, now I come to think of it, that it is a long time since I went to church. I shall attend a service next week when I stay with my mother in the country.'

'How is your mother?'

'Better than ever. You know she literally grows younger. A wonderful woman.'

'Does she still have the cottage near Hinton?'

'It is a little small, but it suits us both. We could well afford something larger nowadays, but she loves it. Her roses are the admiration of the neighbourhood.'

'You still see something of the Walpole-Wilsons and Sir Magnus Donners?'

'The Walpole-Wilsons I have lost all touch with,' said Widmerpool. 'Sir Magnus is, of course, an old friend. Whatever his faults—some of which it would be foolish to disregard—he has rendered me in the past inestimable service. As it happens, he has not asked me over to Stourwater recently. I must ring him up. But come along. To lunch, to lunch.'

He spoke with that air of bustle that infected all his dealings. During the few seconds in which we talked he had managed to convey the sensation that we were physically too close together. More than once I edged away. He seemed all the time pressing at one's elbow, like a waiter who breathes heavily over you as he irritably proffers a dish awkward to handle. Widmerpool, too, gave the impression of irritation, chronic irritation, as if he felt all the time that the remedy to alleviate his own annoyances lay in the hands of the people round him, who would yet at the same time take no step to relieve his mounting discomfort; for his manner conveyed always a suspicion that he knew only too well that things were almost as bad for those who were with him as for himself.

He swept me forward into the dining-room. The club steward, no doubt familiar with Widmerpool's predispositions, indicated a table by the window, flanked on one side by two yellow-faced men conversing in stilted, sing-song French: on the other, by an enormously fat old fellow who was opening his luncheon with dressed crab and half a bottle of hock. One of the men talking French I thought I recognised as the Balkan diplomatist seen at the Jeavonses and said to be of Prince Theodoric's entourage.

'Have anything you like to eat or drink,' said Wimerpool. 'Consult the menu here. Personally I am on a diet—a little gastric trouble—and shall restrict myself to cold tongue and a glass of water.'

He handed me the card, and I ordered all I decently could in the face of this frugality.

'You are still—publishing—advertising——?' he asked. 'Was it not something of the sort?'

His manner of asking personal questions was of that kind not uncommonly to be found which is completely divorced from any interest in the answer. He was always prepared to embark on a lengthy cross-examination of almost anyone he might meet, at the termination of which—apart from such details as might chance to concern himself—he had absorbed no more about the person interrogated than he knew at the outset of the conversation. At the same time this process seemed somehow to gratify his own egotism.

'I was in publishing. Art books. Now it is the film business.'

'Indeed? What unusual ways you choose to earn a living. Not acting, surely?'

'Hardly. I am on what is called the "scenario side". I help to write that part of the programme known as the "second feature". For every foot of American film shown in this country, a proportionate length of British film must appear. The Quota, in fact.'

'Ah, yes, the Quota, the Quota,' said Widmerpool, cutting short any further explanation, which would certainly have been tedious enough. 'Well, I never expected to sit at the same table as host of a man who wrote films for the Quota. Do you like the work?'

'Not greatly.'

'It may lead to something better. If you are industrious, you get on. That is true of all professions, even the humblest. You will probably end up in Hollywood, or somewhere like that. But tell me, do you still see those friends of yours, Stringham and Templer?'

'Stringham I haven't seen since the night he got so tight, and you and I helped to put him to bed. I rang up a day or two later and found he had gone abroad. From what I hear, he is drinking enough to float a battleship. There was even a question of taking a cure.'

'And Templer?'

'I see him occasionally. Not for rather a long time, as it happens. You know his marriage broke up?'

'Like Stringham's,' said Widmerpool. 'Your friends do not seem very fortunate in their matrimonial ventures. I run across Templer sometimes in the City. We have even done a little business together. I was able to fix up a job for Bob Duport, that rather disreputable brother-in-law of his.'

'So I heard.'

'Oh, he told you, did he?' said Widmerpool, gratified at this action of his being so widely known. 'I believe there were various repercussions from that good turn I was able to do him. For instance, Duport was living apart from his wife. He had behaved rather badly, so people say. When he got this job, the two of them patched things up again, and she went back to him. I was glad to have been the cause of that. We all three had dinner together. Rather an odd woman. Moody, I should think. She didn't seem particularly pleased at the reunion. Not at all grateful to me, at least.'

'Why not?'

'I couldn't say. She hardly spoke a word throughout the course of an extremely good dinner at the Savoy. I may say it cost me quite a lot of money. Not that I grudge it. They are in South America now, I believe. Did you ever meet either of them?'

'Met him once with Templer when I was an undergraduate.'

'And her?'

'I knew her a bit. In fact I first met her ages ago when I stayed with the Templers. Peter's father was still alive then.'

'Not unattractive.'

'No.'

'Quite elegant in her way too.'

'Yes.'

'Too good for Duport, I should have thought.'

'Possibly.'

Widmerpool could not have had the smallest notion of anything that had taken place between Jean Duport and myself; but people are aware of things like this within themselves without knowing of their own awareness. In any case, conscious or unconscious, Widmerpool had the knack of treading on the corns of others. His next question seemed to show the extraordinary telepathic connection of ideas that so often takes place in the mind when anything in the nature of being in love is concerned.

'You are not married yourself, are you, Nicholas?'

'No.'

'Not—like me—about to take the plunge?'

'I haven't properly congratulated you yet.'

Widmerpool bowed his head in acknowledgment. The movement could almost have been called gracious. He beamed across the table. At that moment the prospect of marriage seemed all he could desire.

'I do not mind informing you that my lady mother thinks well of my choice,' he said.

There was no answer to that beyond agreeing that Mrs. Widmerpool's approval was gratifying. If Mrs. Haycock could face such a mother-in-law, one hurdle at least—and no minor one, so it seemed to me—had been cleared.

'There are, of course, a few small matters my mother will expect to be satisfactorily arranged.'

'I expect so.'

'But Mildred will fall in with these, I am sure.'

I thought the two of them, Mrs. Widmerpool and Mrs. Haycock, were probably worthy of the other's steel. Perhaps Widmerpool, in his heart, thought so too, for his face clouded over slightly, after the first look of deep satisfaction. He fell into silence. When pondering a matter of importance to himself, his jaws would move up and down as if consuming some immaterial substance. Although he had finished his slices of tongue, this movement now began. I guessed that he intended to pose some question, the precise form of which he could not yet decide. The men with yellow faces at the next table were talking international politics.

'C'est incontestable, cher ami, Hitler a renoncé à son intention d'engouffrer l'Autriche par une agression directe.'

'A mon avis—et d'ailleurs je l'ai toujours dit—la France avait tort de s'opposer à l'union douanière en '31.'

The fat man had moved on to steak-and-kidney pudding, leeks and mashed potato, with a green salad. Widmerpool cleared his throat. Something was on his mind. He began in a sudden burst of words.

'I had a special reason for inviting you to lunch today, Nicholas. I wanted to speak of my engagement. But it is not easy for me to explain in so many words what I desire to say.'

He spoke sententiously, breaking off abruptly. I had an uneasy feeling, unlikely as this would be, that he might be about to ask me to act as best man at his wedding. I began to think of excuses to avoid such a duty. However, it turned out he had no such intention. It seemed likely, on second thoughts, that he wanted to discuss seriously some matter regarding himself which he feared might, on ventilation, cause amusement. Certainly I found it difficult to take his engagement seriously. There is, for some reason, scarcely any subject more difficult to treat with gravity if you are not yourself involved. Obviously two people were contemplating a step which would affect their future lives in the most powerful manner; and yet the outward appearance of the two of them, and Widmerpool's own self-sufficiency, made it impossible to consider the matter without inner amusement.

'Years ago I told you I was in love with Barbara Goring,' said Widmerpool slowly.

'I remember.'

'Barbara is a thing of the past. I want her entirely forgotten.'

'Why not? I shan't stand up at your wedding and say: "This ceremony cannot continue—the bridegroom once loved another!".'

'Quite so, quite so,' said Widmerpool, grunting out a laugh. 'You are absolutely right to make a joke of it. At the same time, I thought I should mention my feelings on that subject. One cannot be too careful.'

'And I presume you want Gipsy Jones forgotten too?'

Widmerpool flushed.

'Yes,' he said. 'She too, of course.'

His complacency seemed to me at that time intolerable. Now, I can see he wanted only to discuss his own situation with someone he had known for a long period, who was at the same time not too closely associated with his current life. For that rôle I was peculiarly eligible. More than once before, he had told me of his emotional upheavals—it was only because of that I knew so much about Barbara Goring and Gipsy Jones—and, when a confessor has been chosen, the habit is hard to break. At the same time, his innate suspicion of everyone inhibited even his taste for talking about himself.

'Mildred is, of course, rather older than I,' he said.

I felt in some manner imprisoned by his own self-preoccupation. He positively forced one to agree that his own affairs were intensely important: indeed, the only existing question of any real interest. At the same time his intense egoism somehow dried up all sympathy for him. Clearly there was much about his present circumstances that made him nervous. That was, after all, natural enough for anyone contemplating marriage. Yet there seemed more here than the traditionally highly-strung state of a man who has only lately proposed and been accepted. I remembered that he had never asked Barbara Goring to marry him, because in those days he was not rich enough to marry. He read my thoughts, as people do when their intuition is sharpened by intensity of interest excited by discussing themselves.

'She was left with a bit of money by Haycock,' he said. 'Though her financial affairs are in an appalling mess.'

'I see.'

'How long have you known Lady Molly?'

'That was the first night I had been there.'

'I wish I had known her in the great days,' he said. 'I cannot say that I greatly care for the atmosphere of her present home.'

'You would prefer Dogdene?'

'I believe that in many ways Dogdene was far from ideally run either,' said Widmerpool curtly. 'But at least it provided a suitable background for a *grande dame*. Mildred is a friend of the present Lady Sleaford, so that I dare say in due course I shall be able to judge how Lady Molly must have looked there.'

This manner of describing Molly Jeavons somehow affronted me, not so much from disagreement, or on account of its pretentious sound, but because I had not myself given Widmerpool credit for thus estimating her qualities, even in his own crude terms. I was, indeed, surprised that he did not dismiss her as a failure, noting at the same time his certainty of invitation to Dogdene. From what Chips Lovell used to say on that subject, I was not sure that Widmerpool might not be counting his chickens before they were hatched.

'It is because of Dogdene, as you know yourself, that Mildred is such an old friend of Lady Molly's. Perhaps not a very close friend, but they have known each other a long time.'

'Yes?'

I could not guess what he was getting at.

'In fact we first met at Lady Molly's.'

'I see.'

'Mildred is—how shall I put it—a woman of the world like Lady Molly—but—well—hardly with Lady Molly's easy-going manner of looking at things—I don't mean that exactly—in some ways Mildred is very easy-going—but she likes her own way—and—in her own manner—takes life rather seriously——'

He suddenly began to look wretched, much as I had often seen him look as a schoolboy: lonely: awkward: unpopular: odd; no longer the self-confident business-man into which he had grown. His face now brought back the days when one used to watch him plodding off through the drizzle to undertake the long, solitary runs across the dismal fields beyond the sewage farms: runs which were to train him for teams in which he was never included. His jaws ceased to move up and down. He drank off a second glass of water.

'Anyway, you know General and Mrs. Conyers,' he said.

He added this rather lamely, as if he lacked strength of mind to pursue the subject upon which he hoped to embark.

'I am going to tea with them this afternoon as it happens.'

'Why on earth are you doing that?'

'I haven't seen them for a long time. We've known them for ages, as I told you.'

'Oh, well, yes, I see.'

He seemed disturbed by the information. I wondered whether Mrs. Conyers had already shown herself 'against' the marriage. Certainly she had been worried about her sister at the Jeavons house. I had supposed the sight of Widmerpool himself to have set her worst fears at rest. Even if prepared on the whole to accept him, she may have let fall some remark that evening unintentionally wounding to his self-esteem. He was immensely touchy. However, his present uneasiness appeared to be chiefly vested in his own ignorance of how much I already knew about his future wife. Evidently he could not make up his mind upon this last matter. The uncertainty irked him.

'Then you must have heard all about Mildred?' he persisted.

'No, not much. I only know about Mrs. Conyers, so to speak. And I have often been told stories about their father, of course. I know hardly anything about the other sisters. Mrs. Haycock was married to an Australian, wasn't she? I knew she had two husbands, both dead.'

'Only that?'

Widmerpool paused, disappointed by my ignorance, or additionally suspicious; perhaps both. He may have decided that for his purposes I knew at once too much and too little.

'You realise,' he said slowly, 'that Mildred has been used to a lot of her own way—her own way of life, that is. Haycock left her—in fact even encouraged her—so it seems to me—to lead—well—a rather—rather independent sort of life. They were—as one might say—a very modern married couple.'

'Beyond the fact that they lived on the Riviera, I know scarcely anything about them.'

'Haycock had worked very hard all his life. He wanted some relaxation in his later days. That was understandable. They got on quite well so far as I can see.'

I began to apprehend a little of what Widmerpool was hinting. Mrs. Haycock's outline became clearer. No doubt she had graduated from an earlier emancipation of slang and cigarettes, to a habit of life with threatening aspects for a future husband.

'Did they have any children?'

'Yes,' said Widmerpool. 'They did. Mildred has two children. That does not worry me. Not at all. Glad to start with a family.'

He said all this so aggressively that I suspected a touch of bravado. Then he paused. I was about to ask the age and sex of the children, when he began to speak hurriedly again, the words tumbling out as if he wanted to finish with this speech as quickly as possible.

'I should not wish to appear backward in display of affection,' he said, developing an increased speed with every phrase, 'and, in addition to that, I don't see why we should delay unduly the state in which we shall spend the rest of our life merely because certain legal and religious formalities take time to arange. In short, Nicholas, you will, I am sure, agree—more especially as you seem to spend a good deal of your time with artists and film-writers and people of that sort, whose morals are proverbial—that it would be permissible on my part to suppose—once the day of the wedding has been fixed—that we might—occasionally enjoy each other's company—say, over a week-end——'

He came to a sudden stop, looking at me rather wildly.

'I don't see why not.'

It was impossible to guess what he was going to say next. This was all far from anything for which I had been prepared.

'In fact my fiancée—Mildred, that is—might even expect such a suggestion?'

'Well, yes, from what you say.'

'Might even regard it as *usage du monde?*'

'Quite possible.'

Then Widmerpool sniggered. For some reason I was conscious of embarrassment, even of annoyance. The problem could be treated, as it were, clinically, or humorously; a combination of the two approaches was distasteful. I had the impression that the question of how he should behave worried him more on account of the figure he cut in the eyes of Mrs. Haycock than because his passion could not be curbed. However, to have released from his mind these observations had clearly been a great relief to him. Now he cheered up a little.

'There is a further point,' he said. 'As my name is an uncommon one, I take it I should be called upon to provide myself with a sobriquet.'

'I suppose so.'

'In your own case, the difficulty would scarcely arise—so many people being called "Jenkins".'

'It may surprise you to hear that when I embark on clandestine week-ends, I call myself "Widmerpool".'

Widmerpool laughed with reasonable heartiness at that fancy. All the same, the question of what name should cover the identity of Mrs. Haycock and himself when first appearing as husband and wife still worried him.

'But what surname *do* you think should be employed?' he asked in a reflective tone, speaking almost to himself.

' "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" would have the merit of such absolute banality that it would almost draw attention to yourselves. Besides, you might be mistaken for the Jeavonses' borrowed butler.'

Widmerpool, still pondering, ignored this facetiousness, regarding me with unseeing eyes.

' "Mr. and the Honourable Mrs. Smith?" You might feel that more in keeping with your future wife's rank and station. That, in any case, would strike a certain note of originality in the circumstances.'

At this suggestion, Widmerpool laughed outright. The pleasantry undoubtedly pleased him. It reminded him of the facts of his engagement, showing that I had not missed the point that, whatever her shortcomings, Mildred was the daughter of a peer. His face lighted up again.

'I suppose it should really be quite simple,' he said. 'After all, the booking clerk at an hotel does not actually ask every couple if they are married.'

'In any case, you are both going to get married.'

'Yes, of course,' he said.

'So there does not seem much to worry about.'

'No, I suppose not. All the same, I do not like doing irregular things. But this time, I think I should be behaving rightly in allowing a lapse of this kind. It is expected of me.'

Gloom again descended upon him. There could be no doubt that the thought of the projected week-end worried him a great deal. I could see that he regarded its achievement, perhaps rightly, as a crisis in his life.

'And then, where to go?' he remarked peevishly.

'Had you thought at all?'

'Of course it must be a place where neither of us is recognised—I don't want any——'

His words died away.

'Any what?'

'Any jokes,' he said irritably.

'Of course not.'

'The seaside, do you think?'

'Do you play any games still? Golf? You used to play golf, didn't you? Some golfing resort?'

'I gave up golf. No time.'

Again he looked despairing. He had devoted so much energy to achieving his present position in the world that even golf had been discarded. There was something impressive in this admission. We sat for a time in silence. The fat man was now enjoying the first taste of some apple-pie liberally covered with cream and brown sugar. The yellow-faced couple were still occupied with the situation in Central Europe.

'La position de Dollfuss envers le parti national-socialiste autrichien serait insoutenable s'il comptait sur une gouvernement soi-disant parlementaire: il faut bien l'avouer.'

'Heureusement le chancelier autrichien n'est pas accablé d'un tel handicap administratif.'

Widmerpool may have caught some of their words. In any case, he must have decided that the question of his own immediate problems had been sufficiently ventilated. He, too, began to speak of international politics; and with less pessimism than might have been expected.

'As you probably know,' he said, 'my opinions have moved steadily to the left of late years. I quite see that there are aspects of Hitler's programme to which objection may most legitimately be taken. For example, I myself possess a number of Jewish friends, some of them very able men—Jimmy Klein, for example—and I should therefore much prefer that item of the National Socialist policy to be dropped. I am, in fact, not at all sure that it will *not* be dropped when matters get straightened out a bit. After all, it is sometimes forgotten that the National Socialists are not only "national", they are also "socialist". So far as that goes, I am with them. They believe in planning. Everyone will agree that there was a great deal of the old Germany that it was right to sweep away—the Kaisers and Krupps, Hindenburgs and mediatised princes, stuff of that sort—we want to hear no more about them. Certainly not. People talk of rearming. I am glad to say the Labour Party is against it to a man—and the more enlightened Tories, too. There is far too much disregard, as it is, of the equilibrium to be maintained between the rate of production and consumption in the aggregate, without the additional interference of a crushing armaments programme. We do not want an obstacle like that in the way of the organised movement towards progressive planning in the economic world of today. People talk of non-aggression pacts between France, Belgium and ourselves. The plain consequence of any such scatter-brained military commitments would be merely to augment existing German fears of complete encirclement. No, no, none of that, please. What is much more likely to be productive is to settle things round a table. Business men of the right sort. Prominent trade unionists. Sir Magnus Donners could probably play his part. If Germany wants her former colonies, hand them back to her. What is the objection? They are no use to anyone else. Take a man like Goering. Now, it seems pretty plain to me from looking at photographs of him in the papers that he only likes swaggering about in uniforms and decorations. I expect he is a bit of a snob—most of us are at heart—well, ask him to Buckingham Palace. Show him round. What is there against giving him the Garter? After all, it is what such things are for, isn't it? Coffee?'

'Yes, black.'

'You can have it downstairs. I never take coffee.'

'Talking of uniforms, are you still a Territorial?'

'I *am* still a Territorial,' said Widmerpool, smiling with some satisfaction. 'I hold the rank of captain. I can perfectly follow your train of thought. You suppose that because I am opposed to sabre-rattling in the direction of our Teutonic neighbours, that therefore I must be the sort of man incapable of holding his own in an officers' mess. Let me assure you that such is not the case. Between you and me, I am by no means averse from issuing orders. An army—even an amateur army—is no bad school in which to learn to command—and you must know how to command in business, my dear Nicholas, as much as in any army. Besides that, one has in a battalion opportunity for giving expression to one's own point of view—a point of view often new to the persons I find myself among. These young bank clerks, accountants and so on, excellent Territorial officers, are naturally quite unfamiliar with the less limited world inhabited by someone like myself. I make it my business to instruct them. However, I dare say I may have to give up my Territorials when I get married. I do not know about that yet.'

At last it was time for me to go on my way.

'So you are off to have tea with some of my future in-laws, are you?' said Widmerpool, at the door of the club. 'Well, you mustn't repeat to them some of the things we have talked about. I am sure the General would be greatly shocked.'

He sniggered once again, making one of his awkward gestures of farewell that looked as if he were shaking his fist. I went down the steps feeling strangely dejected. It was a sunny afternoon and there was time to kill before the Conyers visit. I tried to persuade myself that the gloom that had descended upon me was induced by Widmerpool's prolonged political dissertations, but in my heart I knew that its true cause was all this talk of marriage. With the age of thirty in sight a sense of guilt in relation to that subject makes itself increasingly felt. It was all very well mentally to prepare ribald jokes about Widmerpool's honeymoon for such friends who knew him, and certainly nothing could be more grotesque than his approach to the matter in hand. That was undeniable. Yet one day, I knew, life would catch up with me too; like Widmerpool, I should be making uneasy preparations to 'settle down'. Should I, when the time came to 'take the plunge', as he had called it, feel inwardly less nervous about the future than he? Should I cut a better figure? This oppression of the heart was intensified by a peculiar awareness that the time was not far distant; even though I could think of no one whose shadow fell across such a speculation.

Dismissing my own preoccupations and trying to consider Widmerpool's position objectively, I found it of interest. For example, he was about to become brother-in-law of General Conyers, now little short of an octogenarian. I did not know whom the remaining Blaides sisters had married—one, at least, had remained single—but their husbands must all have been years senior to Widmerpool, even though they might be younger than the General. I attempted to find some parallel, however far-fetched, to link Widmerpool with General Conyers; thereby hoping to construct one of those formal designs in human behaviour which for some reason afford an obscure satisfaction to the mind: making the more apparent inconsistencies of life easier to bear. A list could be compiled. Both were accustomed to live by the will: both had decided for a time to carve out a career unburdened by a wife: both were, in very different ways, fairly successful men. There the comparison seemed to break down.

However, the family connexions of Mrs. Conyers had been thought by some to have played a part in bringing her husband to the altar; similar considerations might well be operating in the mind of Widmerpool where her sister was concerned. That would not be running contrary to his character. Alternatively, any such estimate of his motives—or the General's—might be completely at fault. In either case, love rather than convenience might dominate action. Indeed, such evidence as I possessed of Widmerpool's former behaviour towards women indicated a decided lack of restraint, even when passion was unsatisfied.

Then there was Mrs. Haycock herself. Why on earth—so her circumstances presented themselves to me—should she wish to marry Widmerpool? Such an inability to assess physical attraction or community of interest is, of course, common enough. Where the opposite sex is concerned, especially in relation to marriage, the workings of the imagination, or knowledge of the individuals themselves, are overwhelmed by the subjective approach. Only by admitting complete ignorance from the start can some explanation sometimes slowly be built up. I wondered, for example, whether she saw in Widmerpool the solid humdrum qualities formerly apparent in her Australian husband: although no evidence whatever justified the assumption that her Australian husband had been either solid or humdrum. For all I knew, he might have been a good-for-nothing of the first water. Once again, it was possible that Mrs. Haycock herself was in love. The fact that Widmerpool seemed a grotesque figure to some who knew him provided no reason why he should not inspire love in others. I record these speculations not for their subtlety, certainly not for their generosity of feeling, but to emphasise the difficulty in understanding, even remotely, why people behave as they do.

The question of love was still apt to be associated in my own mind with thoughts of Jean; additionally so since Widmerpool had spoken of her brother, Peter Templer, and her husband, Bob Duport: even making enquiries about Jean herself. Evidently she had impressed him in some way. Could I safely assure myself that I was no longer in love with her? I had recently decided, at last with some sense of security, that life could proceed on that assumption. All the same, it was not uniformly easy to state this decision to myself with a feeling of absolute confidence; even though

I found myself dwelling less than formerly on the question of whether we could have 'made a success of it'. For a moment the thought of her reunited to Duport had brought to the heart a touch of the red-hot pincers: a reminder of her voice saying 'that was rather a wet kiss.'

Some people dramatise their love affairs—as I was doing at that moment—by emphasis on sentiment and sensuality; others prefer the centre of the stage to be occupied by those aspects of action and power that must also play so prominent a part in love. Adepts of the latter school try to exclude, or at least considerably to reduce, the former emotions. Barnby would rarely admit himself 'in love' with the women he pursued: Baby Wentworth was believed never to speak another civil word to a man after taking him as a lover. The exhibitionism of publicity is necessary to one, just as to another is a physical beauty that must be universally acknowledged. Peter Templer liked to be seen about with 'obvious beauties': Bijou Ardglass, to be photographed in the papers with her lover of the moment. Most individual approaches to love, however unexpected, possess a logic of their own; for only by attempting to find some rationalisation of love in the mind can its burdens easily be borne. Sentiment and power, each in their way, supply something to feed the mind, if not the heart. They are therefore elements operated often to excess by persons in temperament unable to love at all, yet at the same time unwilling to be left out of the fun, or to bear the social stigma of living emotionally uninteresting lives.

I thought of some of these things as I made my way, later that afternoon, towards Sloane Square, the neighbourhood where General and Mrs. Conyers still inhabited the flat which I had visited as a small boy. I felt, to tell the truth, rather out of practice for paying a call of this sort. I was usually away from London on Sunday, certainly unaccustomed to spend the afternoon at tea with an elderly general and his wife. Even tea at the Ufford with Uncle Giles would take place only a couple of times within a period of about three years. However, this seemed one of several hints of change that had become noticeable lately, suggesting those times when the ice-floes of life's river are breaking up—as in that scene in *Resurrection*—to float down-stream, before the torrent freezes again in due course into new and deceptively durable shape.

Although I used to see the General or Mrs. Conyers once in a way when I was younger, usually with my parents at the Grand Military (the General himself had formerly done some steeplechasing) or at some point-to-point at Hawthorn Hill, the last of these meetings between us had taken place years before. The Conyers's flat, when I arrived there, appeared considerably smaller than I remembered. Otherwise the place was unchanged. There on the bookcase was the photograph of the General with his halberd. The 'cello I could not immediately locate. The reason for this became apparent a moment or two after I had been greeted by Mrs. Conyers, when a low melancholy wailing began all at once to echo from somewhere not far off, persistent, though muffled by several doors: notes of a hidden orchestra, mysterious, even a shade unearthly, as if somewhere in the vicinity gnomes were thumbing strange instruments in a cave. Then the music swelled in volume like a street band coming level with the window, so that one felt instinctively for a coin to throw down.

'Aylmer will be with us in a minute,' said Mrs. Conyers. 'He always practises until five o'clock when we are in London. As you were coming this afternoon he agreed to finish a little earlier. He is never satisfied with his execution.'

'The piece seems familiar.'

'Ave Maria.'

'But, of course.'

'When it isn't Gounod, it is Marcello's sonatas.'

The thought of the General at his 'cello conjured up one of those Dutch genre pictures, sentimental yet at the same time impressive, not only on account of their adroit recession and delicate colour tones, but also from the deep social conviction of the painter. For some reason I could not help imagining him scraping away in the uniform of the Bodyguard, helmet resting on a carved oak chest and halberd leaning against the wall. Mrs. Conyers dismissed her husband's cadences, no doubt only too familiar.

'What a strange household that is of Lady Molly's,' she said. 'I don't mind telling you that I find *him* rather difficult. He seems to have nothing whatever to talk about. He once told me of a wonderfully cheap place to buy white cotton shirts for men. Of course, Aylmer was glad to know of the shop, only you don't want to go on discussing it for ever. So tedious for his wife, it must be, but she doesn't seem to mind it. All the Ardglass family are very odd. I believe you come across all kinds of people at the Jeavonses—some of them decidedly what my father used to call "rum". Of course that was where my sister first met Mr. Widmerpool. How funny you should know him already.'

She spoke with some show of indifference, but there could be no doubt that her unconcern was simulated and that she longed to discuss the engagement exhaustively: probably hoping to hear special revelations about Widmerpool before her husband joined us.

'I know him quite well. In fact, I have just been lunching with him.'

Mrs. Conyers was enchanted at this news.

'Then you can really tell us what he is like,' she said. 'We have heard some—of course I don't believe them—not exactly flattering accounts of him. Naturally you don't want to listen to everything you hear, but Mildred *is* my youngest sister, and she *does* do some rather reckless things sometimes. Do describe him to me.'

At that moment tea was brought in by the maid, and, before Mrs. Conyers could further insist upon a reply, the General himself appeared. He was still limping slightly from his fall. He grasped my arm near the elbow for a second in a grip of steel, as if making a sudden arrest. Generals, as a collective rank, incline physically to be above, or below, average stature. Aylmer Conyers, notably tall, possessed in addition to his height, much natural distinction. In fact, his personality filled the room, although without active aggression. At the same time he was a man who gave the impression, rightly or wrongly, that he would stop at nothing. If he decided to kill you, he would kill you; if he thought it sufficient to knock you down, he would knock you down: if a mere reprimand was all required, he would confine himself to a reprimand. At the same time, he patently maintained a good-humoured, well-mannered awareness of the inherent failings of human nature: the ultimate futility of all human effort. He wore an unusually thick, dark hairy suit, the coat cut long, the trousers narrow, a high stiff collar, of which the stud was revealed by the tie, and beautifully polished boots of patent leather with grey cloth tops. He looked like an infinitely accomplished actor got up to play the part that was, in fact, his own. At the same time he managed to avoid that almost too perfect elegance of outward appearance to be found in some men of his sort, especially courtiers. The hairiness of the suit did that. It suggested that a touch of rough force had been retained as a reminder of his strenuous past, like ancient, rusty armour hanging among luxurious tapestries.

'Never get that last bit right,' he said. '. . . *Nunc et in* *hora mortis nostrae* . . . always a shade flat on that high note in *hora* . . .'

He slowly shook his head, at the same time lowering himself into an arm-chair, while he straightened out his left leg with both hands as if modelling a piece of delicate sculpture. Evidently it was still rather painfully stiff. After achieving the best angle for comfort, he began to conduct through the air the strokes of an imaginary baton, at the same time allowing himself to hum under his breath:

> 'Tum, tumtitty, tum-te-tum
> Te-tum te-titty tum-tum-te-titty, tum-te-titty
> Amen, A-a-a-ame-e-e-en . . .'

Mrs. Conyers, throughout these movements and sounds, all of which she completely ignored, could scarcely wait for the maid carrying the tea-tray to leave the room.

'Too late to learn at my age, much too late,' said the General. 'But I go on trying. Never mind, I'm not getting on too badly with those arrangements of Saint-Saëns.'

'Aylmer, you remember I told you Nicholas knows Mr. Widmerpool?'

'What, this Nicholas?'

'Yes.'

'You know the fellow who is going to marry Mildred?'

'Yes.'

If Mrs. Conyers had already told her husband of my acquaintance with Widmerpool, the General had entirely forgotten about that piece of information, for it now came to him as something absolutely new, and, for some reason, excruciatingly funny, causing him to fall into an absolute paroxysm of deep, throaty guffaws, like the inextinguishable laughter of the Homeric gods on high Olympus, to whose characteristic faults and merits General Conyers's own nature probably approximated closely enough. A twinge of pain in his leg brought this laughter to an end in a fit of coughing.

'What sort of a fellow is he?' he asked, speaking now more seriously. 'We haven't heard too satisfactory an account of him, have we, Bertha? Is he a good fellow? He'll have his hands full with Mildred, you may be sure of that. Much younger than her, isn't he?'

'I was at school with him. He must be about——'

'Nonsense,' said the General. 'You can't have been at school with him. You must be thinking of someone else of that name—a younger brother, I expect.'

'He is a year or two older than me——'

'But you couldn't have been *at school* with him. No, no, you couldn't have been at school with him.'

Mrs. Conyers, too, now shook her head in support of her husband. This claim to have been at school with Widmerpool was something not to be credited. Like most people who have known someone as a child, they were unwilling to believe that I could possibly have arrived at an age to be reasonably regarded as an adult. To have ceased, very recently, to have been an undergraduate was probably about the furthest degree of maturity either of them would easily be inclined to concede. That Widmerpool's name could be put forward as a contemporary of myself was obviously the worst shock the General had yet sustained on the subject. His earlier attitude suggested the whole affair to be one of those ludicrous incidents inseparable from anything to do with his wife's family; but the news that he might be about to possess an additional brother-in-law more or less of an age with myself disturbed him more than a little. He began to frown angrily.

'I met a young fellow called Truscott last week,' he said.

'There was a question of his coming on to a board from which I retired the other day. He is connected with the by-products of coal and said to have a good brain. I asked him if by any chance he knew Widmerpool—without divulging the nature of my interest, of course—and he spoke with the greatest dislike of him. The greatest dislike. It turned out they had been in Donners-Brebner together at one time. Truscott said Widmerpool was a terrible fellow. Couldn't trust him an inch. Now that may be a pack of lies. I've never been in the habit of listening to gossip. Haven't got time for it. Naturally I didn't tell Truscott that, in case it made him dry up. Thought it my duty to hear whatever he had to get off his chest. I must say he produced a whole string of crimes to be laid at Widmerpool's door, not the least of which was to have got him—Truscott—sacked from Donners-Brebner. Now what I say is that a man who marries Mildred must be a man with a will of his own. No good marrying Mildred otherwise. Now a man with a will of his own is often a man to make enemies. I know that as well as anyone. Evidently Widmerpool had made an enemy of Truscott. That isn't necessarily anything against Widmerpool. He may be an excellent fellow in spite of that. Getting rid of Truscott may have been a piece of first-class policy. Who am I to judge? But what I do know is this. Bertha's sister, Mildred, has been used to a lot of her own way. Do you think that Mr. Widmerpool is going to be able to manage a woman some years older than himself and used to a lot of her own way?'

I had not thought of Truscott for years. At the university he had been billed for a great career: prime minister: lord chancellor: famous poet: it was never finally decided which rôle he would most suitably ornament; perhaps all three. Now I remembered being told by someone or other that Widmerpool, before himself leaving the firm, had contrived to have Truscott ejected from Donners-Brebner. The General had certainly brought a crisp, military appraisal to the situation. I was wondering what to answer—since I saw no way of giving a simple reply to a subject so complicated as Widmerpool's character—when the maid reappeared to announce another guest.

'Lady Frederica Budd.'

The niece whose condition of unassailable rectitude had given such satisfaction to Alfred Tolland, and at the same time caused some unfriendly amusement to Molly Jeavons, was shown into the room. This crony of Mrs. Conyers, widow with several children and lady-in-waiting, was a handsome woman in her thirties. She was dressed in a manner to be described as impregnable, like a long, neat, up-to-date battle-cruiser. You felt that her clothes were certainly removed when she retired for the night, but that no intermediate adjustment, however minor, was ever required, or would, indeed, be practicable. This was the eldest of the Tolland sisters, formed physically in much the same mould as Blanche and Priscilla; though I could see no resemblance between her and her brothers as I remembered them. She kissed Mrs. Conyers. The General greeted her warmly, though with a touch of irony in his manner. I was introduced. Lady Frederica looked at me carefully, rather as if she were engaged upon an army inspection: a glance not unfriendly, but extensively searching. I could see at once that she and Molly Jeavons would not be a couple easily to agree. Then she turned towards the General.

'How are you feeling after your fall?' she asked.

'A bit stiff. A bit stiff. Took a fearful toss. Nearly broke my neck. And you, Frederica?'

'Oh, I've been rather well,' she said. 'Christmas was spoiled by two of the children developing measles. But they have recovered now. All very exhausting while it lasted.'

'I spent Christmas Day cleaning out the kennels,' said the General. 'Went to Early Service. Then I got into my oldest clothes and had a thorough go at them. Had luncheon late and a good sleep after. Read a book all the evening. One of the best Christmas Days I've ever had.'

Frederica Tolland did not seem greatly interested by this account of the General's Christmas activities. She turned from him to Mrs. Conyers, as if she hoped for something more congenial.

'What have you been doing, Bertha?' she asked.

'I went to the sales yesterday,' said Mrs. Conyers, speaking as if that were a somewhat disagreeable duty that had been long on her mind.

'Were you nearly trampled to death?'

'I came away with a hat.'

'I went earlier in the week,' said Frederica. 'Looking for a cheap black dress, as a matter of fact. So many royalties nearing their century, we're bound to be in mourning again soon.'

'Have they been working you hard?' asked the General.

I had the impression that he might be a little jealous of Frederica, who, for her part, was evidently determined that he should not be allowed to take himself too seriously. There was just a touch of sharpness in their interchanges.

'Nothing really lethal since the British Industries Fair,' she said. 'I had to throw away my best pair of shoes after *that*. You are lucky not to have to turn out for that sort of thing. It will finish me off one of these days.'

'You come and carry my axe at the next levée,' said the General. 'Thought I was going to drop with fatigue the last time I was on duty. Then that damned fellow Ponsonby trod on my gouty toe.'

'We saw your Uncle Alfred the other night, Frederica,' said Mrs. Conyers.

She spoke either with a view to including me in the conversation or because habit had taught her that passages of this kind between her husband and Frederica Budd might become a shade acrimonious: perhaps merely to steer our talk back to the subject of Widmerpool.

'He was looking well enough,' she added.

'Oh no, really?' said Frederica, plainly surprised at this. 'Where did you meet him? I thought he never went out except to things like regimental dinners. That is what he always says.'

'At Molly Jeavons's. I had not been there before.'

'Of course. He goes there still, doesn't he? What strange people he must meet at that house. What sort of a crowd did you find? I really must go and see Molly again myself some time. For some reason I never feel very anxious to go there. I think Rob was still alive when I last went to the Jeavonses'.'

These remarks, although displaying no great affection, were moderate enough, considering the tone in which Molly Jeavons herself had spoken of Frederica.

'That was where I found Nicholas again,' said Mrs. Conyers.

She proceeded to give some account of why they knew me. Frederica listened with attention, rather than interest, again recalling by her manner the checking of facts in the course of some official routine like going through the Customs or having one's passport examined. Then she turned to me as if to obtain some final piece of necessary information.

'Do you often go to the Jeavonses'?' she asked.

The enquiry seemed to prepare the way to cross-questioning one returned from the remote interior of some little-known country after making an intensive study of the savage life existing there.

'That was the first time. I was taken by Chips Lovell, whom I work with.'

'Oh yes,' she said vaguely. 'He is some sort of a relation of Molly's, isn't he?'

She showed herself not at all positive about Lovell and his place in the world. This surprised me, as I had supposed she would know him, or at least know about him, pretty well. A moment later I wondered whether possibly she knew him, but pretended ignorance because she disapproved. Lovell was by no means universally liked. There were people who considered his behaviour far from impeccable. Frederica Budd might be one of these. A guarded attitude towards Lovell was only to be expected if Molly Jeavons was to be believed. At that moment the General spoke. He had been sitting in silence while we talked, quite happy silence, so it appeared, still pondering the matter of Widmerpool and his sister-in-law; or, more probably, his own rendering of Gounod and how it could be bettered. His sonorous, commanding voice, not loud, though pitched in a tone to carry across parade-ground or battle-field, echoed through the small room.

'I like Jeavons,' he said. 'I only met him once, but I took to him. Lady Molly I hardly know. Her first husband, John Sleaford, was a pompous fellow. The present Sleaford—Geoffrey—I knew in South Africa. We see them from time to time. Bertha tells me Lady Molly was teasing your Uncle Alfred a lot the other night. People say she always does that. Is it true?'

The General laughed a deep ho-ho-ho laugh again, like the demon king in pantomime. He evidently enjoyed the idea of people teasing Alfred Tolland.

'I think she may rag Uncle Alfred a bit,' said Frederica, without emotion. 'If he doesn't like it, he shouldn't go there. I expect Erridge came up for discussion too, didn't he?'

I suspected this was said to forestall comment about Erridge on the part of the General himself. There was a distinct rivalry between them. Men of action have, in any case, a predisposition to be jealous of women, especially if the woman is young, good looking or placed in some relatively powerful position. Beauty, particularly, is a form of power of which, perhaps justly, men of action feel envious. Possibly there existed some more particular reason: the two of them conceivably representing rival factions in their connexion with the Court. I supposed from her tone and general demeanour that Frederica could hardly approve of her eldest brother's way of life, but, unlike her uncle, was not prepared to acquiesce in all criticism of Erridge.

'Do you know my brother, Erridge—Warminster, rather?' she asked me, suddenly.

She smiled like someone who wishes to encourage a child who possesses information more accurate, or more interesting, than that available to grown-ups; but who may be too shy or too intractable to impart such knowledge.

'I used to know him by sight.'

'He has some rather odd ideas,' she said. 'But I expect you heard plenty about that at Molly Jeavons's. They have hardly anything else to talk about there. He is a real blessing to them.'

'Oh, I think they have got plenty to talk about,' said Mrs. Conyers. 'Too much, in fact.'

'I don't deny that Erridge has more than one bee in his bonnet,' said the General, unexpectedly. 'But I doubt if he is such a fool as some people seem to think him. He is just what they call nowadays introverted.'

'Oh, Erry isn't a fool,' said Frederica. 'He is rather too clever in a way—and an awful nuisance as an eldest brother. There may be something to be said for his ideas. It is the way he sets about them.'

'Is it true that he has been a tramp?' I asked.

'Not actually been one, I think,' said Frederica. 'Making a study of them, isn't it?'

'Is he going to write a book about it?' asked Mrs. Conyers. 'There have been several books of that sort lately, haven't there? Have you read anything else interesting, Nicholas? I always expect people like you to tell me what to put down on my library list.'

'I've been reading something called *Orlando*,' said the General. 'Virginia Woolf. Ever heard of it?'

'I read it when it first came out.'

'What do you think of it?'

'Rather hard to say in a word.'

'You think so?'

'Yes.'

He turned to Frederica.

'Ever read *Orlando*?'

'No,' she said. 'But I've heard of it.'

'Bertha didn't like it,' he said.

'Couldn't get on with it,' said Mrs. Conyers, emphatically. 'I wish St. John Clarke would write a new one. He hasn't published a book for years. I wonder whether he is dead. I used to love his novels, especially *Fields of Amaranth*.'

'Odd stuff, *Orlando*,' said the General, who was not easily shifted from his subject. 'Starts about a young man in the fifteen-hundreds. Then, about eighteen-thirty, he turns into a woman. You say you've read it?'

'Yes.'

'Did you like it? Yes or no?'

'Not greatly.'

‘You didn’t?’

‘No.’

‘The woman can write, you know.’

‘Yes, I can see that. I still didn’t like it.’

The General thought again for some seconds.

‘Well, I shall read a bit more of it,’ he said, at last. ‘Don’t want to waste too much time on that sort of thing, of course. Now, psychoanalysis. Ever read anything about that? Sure you have. That was what I was on over Christmas.’

‘I’ve dipped into it from time to time. I can’t say I’m much of an expert.’

‘Been reading a lot about it lately,’ said the General. ‘Freud—Jung—haven’t much use for Adler. Something in it, you know. Tells you why you do things. All the same, I didn’t find it much help in understanding *Orlando.*’

Once more he fell into a state of coma. It was astonishing to me that he should have been reading about psychoanalysis, although his mental equipment was certainly in no way inferior to that of many persons who talked of such things all day long. When he had used the word ‘introverted’ I had thought that no more than repetition of a current popular term. I saw now that the subject had thoroughly engaged his attention. However, he wished to discuss it no further at that moment. Neither of the two ladies seemed to share his interest.

‘Is it true that your sister, Mildred, is going to marry again?’ asked Frederica. ‘Someone told me so the other day. They could not remember the name of the man. It hasn’t been in the papers yet, has it?’

She spoke casually. Mrs. Conyers was well prepared for the question, because she answered without hesitation, allowing no suggestion to appear of the doubts she had revealed to me only a short time earlier.

'The engagement is supposed to be a secret,' she said, 'but, as everybody will hear about it quite soon, there is really no reason to deny the rumour.'

'Then it is true?'

'It certainly looks as if Mildred is going to marry again.'

No one, however determined to make a good story, could have derived much additional information on the subject from the manner in which Mrs. Conyers spoke, except in so far that she could not be said to show any obvious delight at the prospect of her sister taking a third husband. That was the farthest implication offered. There was not a hint of disapproval or regret; on the contrary, complete acceptance of the situation was manifest, even mild satisfaction not openly disavowed. It was impossible to withhold admiration from this façade, so effortlessly presented.

'And he——?'

'Nicholas, here, was at school with him,' said Mrs. Conyers, tranquilly.

She spoke as if most people must, as a matter of course, be already aware of that circumstance; for it now seemed that, in spite of her husband's doubts, she had finally accepted the fact that I was within a few years of Widmerpool's age. The remark only stimulated Frederica's curiosity.

'Oh, do tell me what he is like,' she said. 'Mildred was just that amount older than me to make her rather a thrilling figure at the time when I first came "out". She was at the Huntercombes' once when I stayed there not long after the war. She was rather a dashing war widow and wore huge jade ear-rings, and smoked all the time and said the most hair-raising things. What is her new name to be, first of all?'

'Widmerpool,' I said, since the question was addressed to me.

'Where do they come from?' asked Mrs. Conyers, anxious to profit herself from Frederica's interrogation.

'Nottinghamshire, I believe.'

This reply was at worst innocuous, and might be taken, in general, to imply a worthy family background. It was also—as I understood from Widmerpool himself—in no way a departure from the truth. Fearing that I might, if pressed, be compelled ultimately to admit some hard things about Widmerpool, I felt that the least I could do for an old acquaintance in these circumstances was to suggest, however indirectly, a soothing picture of generations of Widmerpools in a rural setting: an ancient, if dilapidated, manor house: Widmerpool tombs in the churchyard: tankards of ale at the 'Widmerpool Arms'.

'You haven't said what his Christian name is,' said Frederica, apparently accepting, anyway at this stage, the regional superscription.

'Kenneth.'

'Brothers or sisters?'

'No.'

I admired the thoroughness with which Frederica set to work on an enquiry of this kind, as much as I had admired Mrs. Conyers's earlier refusal to give anything away.

'And he is in the City?'

'He is supposed to be rather good at making money,' interpolated Mrs. Conyers.

She had begun to smile indulgently at Frederica's unconcealed curiosity. Now she employed a respectful yet at the same time deprecatory tone, as if this trait of Widmerpool's—his supposed facility for 'making money'—was, extraordinary as this might appear, a propensity not wholly unpleasant when you became accustomed to it. At the same time she abandoned her former position of apparent neutrality, openly joining in the search. Indeed, she put the next question herself.

'His father is dead, isn't he?' she said. 'Nottinghamshire, did you say?'

'Or Derbyshire. I don't remember for certain.'

Widmerpool had once confided the fact that his grandfather, a business man from the Scotch Lowlands, had on marriage changed his name from 'Geddes'; but such an additional piece of information would sound at that moment too esoteric and genealogical: otiose in its exactitude. In a different manner, to repeat Eleanor Walpole-Wilson's remark made years before—'Uncle George used to get his liquid manure from Mr. Widmerpool's father'—might strike, though quite illogically, a disobliging, even objectionably facetious note. Eleanor's 'Uncle George' was Lord Goring. It seemed best to omit all mention of liquid manure; simply to say that Widmerpool had known the Gorings and the Walpole-Wilsons.

'Oh, the Walpole-Wilsons,' said Frederica sharply, as if reminded of something she would rather forget. 'Do you know the Walpole-Wilsons? My sister, Norah, shares a flat with Eleanor Walpole-Wilson. Do you know them?'

'I haven't seen Eleanor for years. Nor her parents, for that matter.'

The General now came to life again, after his long period of rumination.

'Walpole-Wilson was that fellow in the Diplomatic Service who made such a hash of things in South America,' he said. 'Got unstuck for it. I met him at a City dinner once, the Mercers—or was it the Fishmongers? Had an argument over Puccini.'

'I don't know the Gorings,' said Frederica, ignoring the General. 'You mean the ones called "Lord" Goring?'

'Yes. He is a great fruit farmer, isn't he? He talked about fruit on the only occasions when I met him.'

'I remember,' she said. 'He is.'

She had uttered the words 'Lord Goring' with emphasis on the title, seeming by her tone almost to suggest that all members of that particular family, male and female, might for some unaccountable reason call themselves "Lord": at least implying that, even if she did not really suppose anything so absurd, she wished to indicate that I should have been wiser to have steered clear of the Gorings: in fact, that informed persons considered the Gorings themselves mistaken in burdening themselves with the rather ridiculous pretension of a peerage. When I came to know her better I realised that her words were intended to cast no particular slur on the Gorings; merely, since they were not personal friends of hers, to build up a safe defence in case they turned out, in her own eyes, undesirable.

'I think Widmerpool *père* was mixed up with the fruit-farming side of Goring life.'

'But look here,' said General Conyers, suddenly emerging with terrific violence from the almost mediumistic trance in which he had sunk after the mention of Puccini. 'The question is simply this. Can this fellow Widmerpool handle Mildred? It all turns on that. What do you think, Nicholas? You say you were at school with him. You usually know a fellow pretty well when you have been boys together. What's your view? Give us an appreciation of the situation.'

'But I don't know Mrs. Haycock. I was only nine or ten when I first met her. Last night I barely spoke to her.'

There was some laughter at that, and the necessity passed for an immediate pronouncement on the subject of Widmerpool's potentialities.

'You must meet my sister again,' said Mrs. Conyers, involuntarily smiling to herself, I suppose at the thought of Widmerpool as Mildred's husband.

After that, conversation drifted. Mrs. Conyers began once more to talk of clothes and of how her daughter, Charlotte, had had a baby in Malta. The General relapsed once more into torpor, occasionally murmuring faint musical intonations that might still be ringing the changes on '. . . *nunc et in hora* . . .' Frederica rose to go. I gave her time to get down the stairs, and then myself said good-bye. It was agreed that so long a period must not again elapse before I paid another visit. Mrs. Conyers was one of those persons who find it difficult to part company quickly, so that it was some minutes before I reached the hall of the block of flats. In front of the entrance Frederica Budd was still sitting in a small car, which was making the horrible flat sound that indicates an engine refusing to fire.

'This wretched car won't start,' she shouted.

'Can I help?'

At that moment the engine came to life.

'Shall I give you a lift?' she said.

'Which way are you going?'

'Chelsea.'

I, too, was on my way to Chelsea that evening. It was a period of my life when, in recollection, I seem often to have been standing in a cinema queue with a different girl. One such evening lay ahead of me.

'Thank you very much.'

'Jump in,' she said.

Now that she had invited me into her car, and we were driving along together, her manner, momentarily relaxed while she had been pressing the self-starter, became once more impersonal and remote; as if 'a lift' was not considered an excuse for undue familiarity between us. When the car had refused to start she had seemed younger and less chilly: less part of the impeccable Conyers world. Now she returned to an absolutely friendly, but also utterly impregnable outpost of formality.

'You have known Bertha and the General for a long time?'

'Since I was a child.'

'That was when you met Mildred?'

'Yes.'

'You probably know all the stories about their father, Lord Vowchurch?'

'I've heard some of them.'

'The remark he is said to have made to King Edward just after Bertha's engagement had been announced?'

'I don't know that one.'

'It was on the Squadron Lawn at Cowes. The King is supposed to have said: "Well, Vowchurch, I hear you are marrying your eldest daughter to one of my generals", and Bertha's father is said to have replied: "By Gad, I am, sir, and I trust he'll teach the girl to lead out trumps, for they'll have little enough to live on". Edward VII was rather an erratic bridge-player, you know. Sir Thomas Lipton told me the story in broad Scotch, which made it sound funnier. Of course, the part that appealed to Sir Thomas Lipton was the fact that it took place on the Squadron Lawn.'

'How did the King take it?'

'I think he was probably rather cross. Of course it may not be true. But Lord Vowchurch certainly was always getting into trouble with the King. Lord Vowchurch was supposed to be referring to some special game of bridge when he had been dummy and things had gone badly wrong with King Edward's play. You said you'd met my Uncle Alfred, didn't you?'

'A couple of times.'

'And you know whom I mean by Brabazon?'

'The Victorian dandy—"Bwab"?'

'Yes, that one.'

'Who said he couldn't remember what regiment he had exchanged into—after leaving the Brigade of Guards because it was too expensive—but "they wore green facings and you got to them by Waterloo Station"?'

'That's him. How clever of you to know about him. Well, when Uncle Alfred was a young man, he was dining at Pratt's, and Colonel Brabazon came in from the Marlborough Club, where he had been in the card-room when the game was being played. According to Uncle Alfred, Colonel Brabazon said: "Vowchurch expwessed weal wesentment while his Woyal Highness played the wottenest wubber of wecent seasons—nothing but we-deals and wevokes." '

'I had no idea your uncle had a fund of stories of that kind.'

'He hasn't. That is his only one. He is rather a shy man, you see, and nothing ever happens to him.'

This was all very lively; although there was at the same time always something a shade aloof about the manner in which these anecdotes were retailed. However, they carried us down the King's Road in no time. There was, in addition, something reminiscent about the tone in which they were delivered, a faint reminder of Alfred Tolland's own reserve and fear of intimacy. Amusing in themselves, the stories were at the same time plainly intended to establish a specific approach to life. Beneath their fluency, it was possible to detect in Frederica Budd herself, at least so far as personal rather than social life was concerned, a need for armour against strangers. Almost schooled out of existence by severe self-discipline, a faint trace of her uncle's awkwardness still remained to be observed under the microscope. There could be no doubt that I had scored a point by knowing about "Bwab".

'I met your sister, Priscilla, at the Jeavonses the other night—only for a minute or two. Chips Lovell drove us both home.'

She did not seem much interested by that, hardly answering. I remembered, then, that she probably did not care for Lovell. However, her next words were entirely unexpected.

'I am on my way to see my sister, Norah, now,' she said. 'It seemed rather a long time since I had set eyes on her. I thought I would just look in to see that she is behaving herself. Why not come and meet her—and see Eleanor again.'

'Just for a second. Then I shall have to move on.'

At the sound of this last statement I was aware of a faint but distinct disapproval, as if my reply had informed her quite clearly—indeed, almost grossly—that I was up to no good; yet made her at the same time realise that in a locality where so much human behaviour commanded disapprobation, minor derelictions—anyway, in a man—must, in the interest of the general picture, be disregarded. However, together with that sense of constraint that she conveyed, I was by then also aware of a second feeling: a notion that some sort of temporary alliance had been hurriedly constructed between us. I could not explain this impression to myself, though I was prepared to accept it.

By that time we had arrived before a dilapidated stucco façade in a side street, a house entered by way of a creaking, unlatched door, from which most of the paint had been removed. The hall, empty except for a couple of packing-cases, gave off that stubborn musty smell characteristic of staircases leading to Chelsea flats: damp: cigarette smoke: face powder. We climbed the uncarpeted boards, ascending endlessly floor after floor, Frederica Budd taking the steps two at a time at a sharp pace. At last the attics were reached; and another battered door, upon which was fastened a brass knocker, formed in the image of the

Lincoln Imp. Attached with four drawing-pins to the panel below this knocker was a piece of grubby cardboard inscribed with the names:

TOLLAND
WALPOLE-WILSON

Frederica, ignoring the claims of the Lincoln Imp, clenched her fist and banged on the door with all her force, at the same time shouting in an unexpectedly raucous voice:

'Norah! Eleanor!'

There was a sound of someone stirring within. Then Eleanor Walpole-Wilson opened the door. She was wearing a very dirty pair of navy blue flannel trousers and smoking a stub of a cigarette. Apart from her trousers and cigarette, and also a decided air of increased confidence in herself, she had changed very little from the days when, loathing every moment of it, she used to trail round the London ball-rooms. She still wore her hair in a bun, a style which by then brought her appearance almost within measurable distance of 'the mode'; or at least within hail of something that might, with a little good will, be supposed unconventionally chic. Square and broad-shouldered as ever, she was plainly on much better terms with herself, and with others, than formerly.

'I've brought an old friend to see you,' said Frederica.

Eleanor showed no surprise at my arrival. There was even a slight suggestion of relief that Frederica Budd had not to be entertained singly; for towards Frederica Eleanor displayed a hint of her old aggressiveness, or at least gave indication that she was on the defensive. This sense of quiet but firm opposition became more positive when we moved into the sitting-room.

'How are you, Nicholas?' said Eleanor. 'Fancy your turning up here. Why, you've got a grey hair. Just above your ear.'

The place was horribly untidy, worse than the Jeavonses, and the furniture struck an awkward level between boudoir and studio: an ancient sofa, so big that one wondered how it could ever have been hoisted up the last flight of stairs, and stood covered with chintz roses among two or three unsubstantial, faintly 'Louis' chairs. The walls had been distempered yellow by some amateur hand. A girl was lying prone on the ground, her skirt rucked up to her thighs, showing a strip of skin above each stocking. This was Norah Tolland. She was pasting scraps on to the surface of a coal-scuttle.

'Hullo, Frederica,' she said, without looking up. 'I shan't be a moment. I must finish this before the paste runs out.'

She continued her work for a few moments, then, wiping the paste from her hands with a red check duster, she rose from the ground, pulled her skirt down impatiently, and gave her sister a peck on the cheek. Eleanor presented me, explaining that we had known each other 'in the old days'. Norah Tolland did not look very enthusiastic at this news, but she held out her hand. She was dark and very pale, with a narrow face like her sister's, her expression more truculent, though also, on the whole, less firm in character. The coltishness of her sister, Priscilla, had turned in Norah to a deliberate, rather absurd masculinity. Frederica glanced round the room without attempting to conceal her distaste, as if she felt there was much to criticise, not least the odour of turpentine and stale cake.

'I see you haven't managed to get the window mended yet,' she said.

Her sister did not answer, only flicking back her hair from her forehead with a sharp, angry motion.

'Isobel is supposed to be coming in to see us some time today,' she said, 'with her new young man. I thought it was her when you arrived.'

'Who is her new young man?'

'How should I know? Some chap.'

'I saw her last night at Hyde Park Gardens.'

'How were they all?' said Norah, indifferently. 'Would you like a drink? I think there is some sherry left.'

Frederica shook her head, as if the idea of alcohol in any form at that moment nauseated her.

'You?'

'No, thank you. I must really go in a moment.'

The sherry did not sound very safe: wiser to forego it.

'Don't leave yet,' said Eleanor. 'You've only just arrived. We must have a word about old times. I haven't seen the Gorings for ages. I always think of you, Nicholas, as a friend of Barbara's.'

'How is Barbara?'

It seemed extraordinary that I had once, like Widmerpool, thought myself in love with Barbara. Now I could hardly remember what she looked like, except that she was small and dark.

'You know she married Johnny Pardoe?' said Eleanor. 'I haven't set eyes on either of them since the wedding.'

'Things have been a bit difficult.'

'What?'

'There was a baby that went wrong.'

'Oh, dear.'

'Then Johnny got awfully odd and melancholy after he left the Grenadiers. You remember he used to be an absolutely typical guardee, pink in the face and shouting at the top of his voice all the time, and yelling with laughter. Now he has quite changed, and mopes for hours or reads books on religion and philosophy.'

'Johnny Pardoe!'

'He sits in the library for weeks at a time just brooding. Never shoots now. You know how much he used to love shooting. Barbara has to run the place entirely. Poor Barbara, she has an awful time of it.'

Life jogs along, apparently in the same old way, and then suddenly your attention is drawn to some terrific change that has taken place. For example, I found myself brought up short at that moment, like a horse reined in on the brink of a precipice, at the thought of the astonishing reversal of circumstances by which Eleanor Walpole-Wilson was now in a position to feel sorry for Barbara Goring—or, as she had by then been for some years, Barbara Pardoe. The relationship between these two first cousins, like all other relationships when one is young, had seemed at that time utterly immutable; Barbara, pretty, lively, noisy, popular: Eleanor, plain, awkward, cantankerous, solitary. Barbara's patronage of Eleanor was something that could never change. 'Eleanor is not a bad old thing when you get to know her,' she used to say; certainly without the faintest suspicion that within a few years Eleanor might be in a position to say: 'Poor Barbara, she does have a time of it.'

While indulging in these rather banal reflections, I became aware that the two sisters had begun to quarrel. I had not heard the beginning of the conversation that had led to this discord, but it seemed to be concerned with their respective visits that summer to Thrubworth, their brother's house.

'As you know, Erry always makes these difficulties,' Frederica was saying. 'It is not that I myself particularly want to go there and live in ghastly discomfort for several weeks and feel frightfully depressed at seeing the place fall to pieces. I would much rather go to the seaside or abroad. But it is nice for the children to see the house, and they enjoy going down to talk to the people at the farm, and all that sort of thing. So if you are determined to go at just that moment——'

'All right, then,' said Norah, smiling and showing her teeth like an angry little vixen, 'I won't go. Nothing easier. I don't particularly want to go to the bloody place either, but it is my home, I suppose. Some people might think that ought to be taken into consideration. I was born there. I can't say I've had many happy moments there, it's true, but I like walking by myself in the woods—and I have plenty of other ways of amusing myself there without bothering either you or Erry or anyone else.'

Eleanor caught my eye with a look to be interpreted as indicating that high words of this kind were not unexpected in the circumstances, but that we should try to quell them. However, before dissension could develop further, it was cut short abruptly by the door of the room opening. A small, gnarled, dumpy, middle-aged woman stood on the threshold. She wore horn-rimmed spectacles and her short legs were enclosed, like Eleanor's, in blue flannel trousers—somewhat shrunk, for her largely developed thighs seemed to strain their seams—into the pockets of which her hands were deeply plunged.

'Why, hullo, Hopkins,' said Norah Tolland, her face suddenly clearing, and showing, for the first time since I had been in the room, some signs of pleasure. 'What can we do for you?'

'Hullo, girls,' said the woman at the door.

She made no attempt to reply to Norah's question, continuing to gaze round the room, grinning broadly, but advancing no farther beyond the threshold. She gave the impression of someone doing a turn on the stage.

'If you take to leaving your front door on the latch,' she said at last, 'you'll find a *man* will walk in one of these days, and then where will you be, I should like to know? By Jove, I see a man has walked in already. Well, well, well, never mind. There are a lot of them about, so I suppose you can't keep them out all the time. What I came up for, dear, was to borrow an egg, if you've got such a thing. Laid one lately, either of you?'

Norah Tolland laughed.

'This is my sister, Lady Frederica Budd,' she said. 'And Mr. ——'

'Jenkins,' said Eleanor, in answer to an appeal for my name.

Eleanor was, I thought, less pleased than Norah to see the woman they called Hopkins. In fact, she seemed somewhat put out by her arrival.

'Pleased to meet you, my dear,' said Hopkins, holding out her hand to Frederica; 'and you, my boy,' she added, smirking in my direction.

'Miss Hopkins plays the piano most nights at the Merry Thought,' said Eleanor.

This explanation seemed aimed principally at Frederica.

'You ought to look in one night,' said Hopkins. 'But come soon, because I've got an engagement next month to appear with Max Pilgrim at the Café de Madrid. I'll have to make sure that old queen, Max, doesn't hog every number. It would be just like him. He's as vain as a peacock. Can't trust a man not to try and steal the show anyway, even the normal ones, they're the worst of all. Now the other thing I wanted to remind you girls about is my album. You've still got it. Have you thought of something nice to write in it, either of you?'

It appeared that no good idea had occurred either to Eleanor or Norah for inscription in the album.

'I shall want it back soon,' said Hopkins, 'because another girl I know—such a little sweetie-pie with a little fragile face like a dear little dolly—is going to write some *lovely* lines in it. Shall I repeat to you what she is going to write? You will love it.'

Frederica Budd, who had been listening to all this with a slight smile, imperceptibly inclined her head, as one might when a clown enquires from his audience whether they have understood up to that point the course of the trick he is about to perform. Eleanor looked as if she did not particularly wish to hear what was offered, but regarded any demur as waste of time. Hopkins spoke the words:

'Lips may be redder, and eyes more bright;
The face may be fairer you see tonight;
But never, love, while the stars shall shine,
Will you find a heart that is truer than mine.'

There was a pause when Hopkins came to the end of her recitation, which she had delivered with ardour. She struck an attitude, her hand on her hip.

'Sweet, isn't it?' she said. 'This friend of mine read it somewhere, and she memorised it—and so have I. I love it so much. That's the sort of thing I want. I'll leave the album a little longer then, girls, but remember—I shall expect something really nice when you do, both of you, think of a poem. Now what about that egg?'

Norah Tolland went into the kitchen of the flat. Hopkins stood grinning at us. No one spoke. Then Norah returned. On receiving the egg, Hopkins feigned to make it disappear up the sleeves of her shirt, the cuffs of which were joined by links of black and white enamel. Then, clenching her fist, she balanced the egg upon it at arm's length, and marched out of the room chanting at the top of her voice:

'Balls, Picnics and Parties,
Picnics, Parties and Balls . . .'

We heard the sound of her heavy, low-heeled shoes pounding the boards of the uncarpeted stairs, until at length a door slammed on a floor below, and the voice was cut off with a jerk.

'She really plays the piano jolly well,' said Norah.

It was a challenge, but the glove was not picked up.

'Rather an amusing person,' said Frederica. 'Do you see much of her?'

'She lives a couple of floors below,' said Eleanor. 'She is rather too fond of looking in at all hours.'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Norah. 'I like Heather.'

'So you've made up your mind about Thrubworth?' said Frederica, as if the merits of Hopkins were scarcely worth discussing.

I explained that I must now leave them. Frederica, at the moment of saying good-bye, spoke almost warmly; as if her conjecture that I might be a support to her had been somehow justified. Norah Tolland was curt. It was agreed that I should ring up Eleanor one of these days and come to see them again. I had the impression that my departure would be the signal for a renewed outbreak of family feuds. Anxious to avoid even their preliminary barrage, I descended the rickety, fœtid stairs, and proceeded on my way.

Later that evening, I found myself kicking my heels in one of those interminable cinema queues of which I have already spoken, paired off and stationary, as if life's co-educational school, out in a 'crocodile', had come to a sudden standstill: that co-educational school of iron discipline, equally pitiless in pleasure and in pain. During the eternity of time that always precedes the termination of the 'big picture', I had even begun to wonder whether we should spend the rest of our days on that particular stretch of London pavement, when, at long last, just as rain had begun to fall, the portals of the auditorium burst open to void the patrons of the earlier performance. First came those scattered single figures, who, as if distraught by what they have seen and seeking to escape at whatever the cost, hurry blindly from the building, they care not how, nor where; then the long serpentine of spectators to whom expulsion into the street means no more than a need to take another decision in life; who, accordingly, postpone in the foyer any such irksome effort of the will by banding themselves into small, irregular, restless groups, sometimes static, sometimes ineffectively mobile. As the queue of which we formed a link stumbled forward towards the booking office, I discerned through the mist of faces that must dissolve before we could gain our seats, the features of J. G. Quiggin. Our eyes met. He shook his head sharply from side to side, as if to express satisfaction that we should run into each other in so opportune a manner. A moment later he was near enough to make his small, grating tones heard above the murmur of other voices.

'I've been trying to get hold of you,' he said.

'We must meet.'

'There were some things I wanted to talk about.'

Since we had been undergraduates together my friendship with Quiggin, moving up and down at different seasons, could have been plotted like a temperature chart. Sometimes we seemed on fairly good terms, sometimes on fairly bad terms; never with any very concrete reason for these improvements and deteriorations. However, if Quiggin thought it convenient to meet during a 'bad' period, he would always take steps to do so, having no false pride in this or any other aspect of his dealings with the world. After such a meeting, a 'good' period would set in; to be dissipated after a time by argument, disagreement or even by inanition. This periodicity of friendship and alienation had rotated, almost like the seasons of the year, until a year or two before: a time when Quiggin had 'run away' with Peter Templer's wife, Mona. This act threatened to complicate more seriously any relationship that might exist between Quiggin and myself.

As things turned out, I had seen nothing either of Templer or Quiggin during the period immediately following the divorce. Templer had always been out or engaged when I had telephoned to him; and, as we had by then little left in common except having been friends at school, our intermittent meetings had entirely ceased. There was perhaps another reason why I felt unwilling to make more strenuous efforts to see him. He reminded me of Jean. That was an additional reason for allowing this course to prevail. I heard quite by chance that he had sold his Maidenhead house. It was said, whatever his inner feelings about losing Mona, that outwardly he was not taking things too hard: demonstrating a principle he had once expressed: 'Women always think if they've knocked a man out, that they've knocked him out cold—on the contrary, he sometimes gets up again.' However, no husband enjoys his wife leaving the house from one day to the next, especially with someone like Quiggin, in Templer's eyes unthinkable as a rival. Quiggin, indeed, belonged to a form of life entirely separate from Templer's, so that gossip on the subject of the divorce was exchanged within unconnected compartments; Templer's City acquaintances on the one hand: on the other, the literary and political associates of Quiggin.

'You are script-writing now, aren't you?' Quiggin asked, when we came within closer range of each other, and without any preliminary beating about the bush. 'I want to have a talk with you about films.'

My first thought was that he hoped to get a similar job. To be a script-writer was at that period the ambition of almost everyone who could hold a pen. There was no reason why Quiggin should prove an exception to the rule. So far as I knew, he had to yet make the experiment. I noticed that he had almost discarded his North Country accent, or perhaps thought it inappropriate for use at that moment. In his university days, one of his chief social assets had been what Sillery used to call 'Brother Quiggin's Doric speech'. He looked well fed, and his squat form was enclosed in a bright blue suit and double-breasted waistcoat. He was hatless, such hair as remained to him carefully brushed. I had never before seen him look so spruce.

'We've had a cottage lent us,' he said. 'I'd like you to come down for the week-end. Mona wants to see you again too.'

My first instinct was to make some excuse about week-ends being difficult owing to the oppressive manner in which the film business was organised: in itself true enough. However, as it happened, an electricians' strike had just been called at the Studio, with the result that work was likely to be suspended for at least a week or two. I was unwilling to seem to condone too easily the appropriation of an old friend's wife; although it had to be admitted that Templer himself had never been over-squeamish about accepting, within in his own circle, such changes of partnership. Apart from such scruples, I knew enough of Quiggin to be sure that his cottage would be more than ordinarily uncomfortable. Nothing I had seen of Mona gave cause to reconsider this want of confidence in their combined domestic economy. It was generally supposed by then that they were married, although no one seemed to know for certain whether or not any ceremony had been performed.

'Whereabouts is your cottage?' I asked, playing for time.

The place turned out to be rather further afield than the destination of the usual week-end visit. While this conversation had been taking place, the queue had been moving forward, so that at that moment my own turn came at the booking office; simultaneously, the crowd behind Quiggin launched themselves on and outwards in a sudden violent movement that carried him bodily at their head, as if unwillingly leading a mob in a riot.

'I'll write the address to you,' he bawled over his shoulder. 'You must certainly come and stay.'

I nodded my head, fumbling with tickets and money. Almost immediately Quiggin, driven ahead by his seemingly fanatical followers, was forced through the doors and lost in the night.

'Who was that?' asked the girl accompanying me.

'J. G. Quiggin.'

'The critic?'

'Yes.'

'I think he has gone off rather lately.'

'I expect he goes up and down like the rest of us.'

'Don't be so philosophical,' she said. 'I can't bear it.'

We passed into the darkness and *Man of Aran*.

3.

CURIOSITY, which makes the world go round, brought me in the end to accept Quiggin's invitation. There was, indeed, some slight mystery about its origin, for after our last meeting—late one evening in the days before he had gone off with Mona—there had been disagreement between us either about Milton as a poet, or (various writers had been discussed) Meredith as a novelist, as a result of which I thought myself finally in disgrace. Of recent years, so everyone agreed, Quiggin had become increasingly dogmatic on such subjects, unable to bear contradiction, and almost equally offended by verbal evasion that sought to conceal views differing from his own. Although publication of his long-promised work, *Unburnt Boats,* had been once more at the last moment postponed, Quiggin's occasional writings were at this time much in evidence. The subject matter of *Unburnt Boats*, thought to be largely autobiographical, remained, in spite of a good deal of speculation on the part of his friends, a closely guarded secret. His journalism was chiefly contributed to papers in which politics and literature attempted some fusion; and letters signed by him appeared with regularity in the 'weeklies' on the subject of public liberties or unworthy conduct on the part of the police. In private, Quiggin considered that there was too much freedom in modern life; but he was a great champion of individual liberty in his letters to the Press.

Accustomed, like so many literary men of that decade, to describe himself as a communist, he may indeed have been a member of the Communist Party. Later, at different stages of his career, he disseminated such contradictory statements on the subject of his own political history that card-holding membership remains uncertain. Most of his acquaintances inclined to think that at one moment or another he had belonged to some not very distinguished grade of the communist hierarchy. Certainly he pertained to the extreme Left and subscribed to several 'anti-fascist' organisations. He himself tended to cloak his political activities in mystery in so far as they took practical form: occasionally hinting that these activities might be more important, even more sinister, than persons like myself supposed.

'The Lewis gun may be sounding at the barricades earlier than some of your Laodicean friends think,' he had announced in a rasping undertone at the climax of our controversy about Milton—or Meredith.

'I can never remember what the Laodiceans did.'

'They were "neither hot nor cold".'

'Ah.'

Such revolutionary sentiments, as I have said, were common enough then, especially in the verse of the period, on which Quiggin was an authority. However, he had seemed rather unusually annoyed that evening, so that in spite of his friendliness in the foyer of the cinema I was not at all sure what sort of a reception I should get when I arrived on his doorstep. I went by train, and found a taxi had been sent to meet me at the station. We drove a mile or two through pretty country and by the low stone wall of a large estate. Quiggin was living in a small, grey, comparatively modern house, hardly a cottage in the sense that comes immediately to the mind—the cottage in a forest inhabited by a peasant in a fairy story, or the gabled, half-timbered sort of the Christmas card by which a robin sits in the snow—but, although the building itself was bleak, the situation was pleasant enough, in fact enchanting: overlooking woods, fields and distant hills, not another house in sight.

Quiggin was in a mood to be agreeable. When he set out to please, he was rarely unable to keep the most unpromising people amused; or at least quiet. He would assume his North Country accent, together with an air of informed simplicity, that would charm all kind of unexpected persons, normally in hearty disagreement with his literary or political opinions. He was particularly accomplished at effecting a reversal of feeling in the case of those who, on introduction, had taken an immediate dislike to his face or his clothes. Probably with that end in view, he cultivated a certain irregularity of dress. For example, when he opened the door on my arrival he was wearing a dark-grey woollen garment with a zip-fastener down the front, which, in conjunction with rope-soled canvas shoes, made him look like an instructor in some unusual sport or physical exercise.

'Come in,' he said, 'Mona is blonding her hair. She will be along soon.'

Mona's hair had been black in the days when I had first set eyes on her at Mr. Deacon's birthday party above the antique shop off Charlotte Street, but, even before she had married Templer—when her Cupid's bow mouth was still advertising toothpaste on the hoardings—it had already taken on a metallic honey colour. She looked distinctly sluttish when at length she appeared, far less trim than when married to Templer, a reversion to the Charlotte Street period when she had been an artists' model. However, she had not returned to the style of dress of her bohemian days, trousers and sandals or whatever was then the fashion. Instead, wearing an old black coat and skirt, an outfit not much suited to the country, she retained a kind of shabby smartness of appearance. I had not seen her for some time, and had forgotten the formal perfection of her face. Her skin was coarse, it was true, and her fixed smile recalled the days when her photograph was on the front of every London bus; yet, even admitting such defects, the detail of every feature insisted upon admiration. She was like a strapping statue Venus conceived at a period when more than a touch of vulgarity had found its way into classical sculpture.

I could not help thinking how odd it was that, having once married Templer, she should have deserted him for Quiggin. In the general way of gossip she had the reputation of a beautiful girl not particularly attractive to men. Naturally, with looks like hers, she had been accustomed to all the outward paraphernalia of male attack; certainly at what might be called the 'picking-up' level. In a railway carriage, or on board ship, there had always been a man to approach her with greater or lesser delicacy; but Templer and Quiggin (my informant was Templer) were the only men to have taken her 'seriously'. It had even been suggested (by Quiggin's old friend and rival, Mark Members, probably without much truth) that in her early days Mona had had emotional leanings towards her own sex. Latterly, there had been no talk of that sort. Her manner usually suggested that she was interested in no one except herself; although the fact remained that she had abandoned a comfortable home, and relatively rich husband, to share Quiggin's far from destitute, though not particularly luxurious existence.

To Templer, accustomed to easy success with women, she had perhaps represented the one absolutely first-rate example of the goods he had been for so long accustomed to handle—in the manner that a seasoned collector can afford to ignore every other point in any object he wishes to acquire provided it satisfies completely in those respects most difficult to attain. In some way, for Templer, Mona must have fulfilled that condition. Dozens of girls not very different from her were to be found in dress shops and art schools, but Templer, like a scholar who can immediately date a manuscript by the quality of the ink, or the texture of the parchment, had seen something there to crown his special collection: a perfect specimen of her kind. At least that seemed, on the face of it, the only reason why he should have married her.

To Quiggin, on the other hand, himself not particularly adept with girls, Mona must have appeared a wholly unexpected triumph, a 'beauty' at whom passers-by turned to gaze in the street, who had positively thrown herself at his head—leaving her 'boring' stockbroker husband to live with a writer and a revolutionary. Here was a situation few could fail to find flattering. It was clear from his demeanour that Quiggin still felt flattered, for, although sulky that afternoon, there seemed in general no reason to suppose that Mona regretted her past. Like Molly Jeavons, in such a different context, she appeared—so I had been told—to accept her completely changed circumstances. Her air of temporary dissatisfaction was no doubt merely the old one implying that insufficient attention was being paid to her whims. Perhaps for that reason she spoke of Templer almost at once.

'Have you been seeing anything of Peter?' she asked, without any self-consciousness.

'Not for some time, as it happens.'

'I suppose he has found a new girl?'

'I shouldn't wonder.'

She did not pursue the subject. It was just as if she had said: 'Have you change for a pound?'; and, on learning that I had no silver, immediately abandoned the matter. There was no question of emotion; only a faint curiosity. That, at least, was all she allowed to appear on the surface. Quiggin, on the other hand, looked a trifle put out at this early mention of Templer's name.

'By the way, ducks,' he said, 'I forgot to tell you I tried to get the bath-lotion when I was last in London. The shop was out of it. I'll try again next time.'

Mona compressed her lips in displeasure. Merely to have remembered to enquire for the bath-lotion she evidently considered insufficient on Quiggin's part. She began to hum to herself.

'You have a nice landscape here,' I said. 'Is there a house behind those trees? It looks as if there might be.'

'Do you think it nice?' said Quiggin, his previous tone of harsh geniality somewhat impaired by Mona's mood. 'You know these days I scarcely notice such things. Once I might have done—should have done, certainly, in my romantic period. I suppose by "nice" you mean undeveloped. Give me something a bit more practical. You can keep your picturesque features so far as I am concerned. If English agriculture was organised on a rational —I do not even say a just—basis, I dare say there might be something to be said for the view from this window. As it is, I would much rather be looking at a well-designed power station. Perhaps, as being more rural, I should say a row of silos.'

He smiled to show that he did not mean to be too severe. This was, after all, the kind of subject upon which we had often disagreed in the past. There was something about Quiggin that always reminded me of Widmerpool, but, whereas Widmerpool was devoid of all æsthetic or intellectual interests, as such, Quiggin controlled such instincts in himself according to his particular personal policy at any given moment. Widmerpool would genuinely possess no opinion as to whether the view from the cottage window was good or bad. The matter would not have the slightest interest for him. He would be concerned only with the matter of who owned the land. Perhaps that was not entirely true, for Widmerpool would have enjoyed boasting of a fine view owned by himself. Quiggin, on the other hand, was perfectly aware that there might be something to be admired in the contours of the country, but to admit admiration would be to surrender material about himself that might with more value be kept secret. His rôle, like Widmerpool's was that of a man of the will, a rôle which adjudged that even here, in giving an opinion on the landscape, the will must be exercised.

'No,' he said. 'What I like in this place, as a matter of fact, is the excellent arrangement that the bath is in the scullery. Now that is realistic. Not a lot of bourgeois nonsense about false refinement. The owner had it put there quite recently.'

'Does he live here himself?'

Quiggin smiled at this question as if it displayed an abyss of ignorance.

'No, he doesn't. He keeps it for lending friends—usually people with views similar to my own—*our* own, I should say.'

He slipped his arm round Mona's waist. She was not won over by this attention, disengaging his hand, and making no effort to assume the comportment of a woman gifted with keen political instincts. An extreme, uninhibited silliness had formerly been her principal characteristic. Now I had the impression she had become more aware of life, more formidable than in her Templer days.

'Your landlord is an active Leftist too, is he?'

'Of course.'

'You speak as if all landlords belonged automatically to the Left.'

'We are expected to do a bit of work for him in return for living here free,' said Quiggin. 'That's human nature. But everything he wants is connected with my own political life, so I did not mind that.'

'Who is the owner?'

'You wouldn't know him,' said Quiggin, smiling with a kind of fierce kindliness. 'He is a serious person, as a matter of fact. You would not come across him at parties. Not the sort of parties you go to, at least.'

'How do you know the sort of parties I go to?'

'Well, he wouldn't go to the sort of parties I used to see you at.'

'Why? Does he go to parties only frequented by his own sex?'

Quiggin laughed heartily at that.

'No, no,' he said. 'Nothing of that kind. How like you to suggest something of the sort. He is just a politically conscious person who does not enjoy a lot of gallivanting about.'

'I believe he is going to turn out to be Howard Craggs, after all this mystery you are making.'

Quiggin laughed again.

'I still see a certain amount of Craggs,' he admitted. 'His firm may be launching a little scheme of mine in the near future—not a book. Craggs is politically sound, but I prefer a publishing house of more standing than Boggis & Stone for my books.'

Since Quiggin's books remained purely hypothetical entities, it seemed reasonable enough that their publisher should exist hypothetically too. I was tempted to say as much, but thought it wiser to avoid risk of discord at this early stage. Quiggin was evidently enjoying his own efforts to stir up my curiosity regarding his landlord and benefactor.

'No, no,' he said again. 'My friend, the owner—well, as a good social revolutionary, I don't quite know how I should describe him. He is a man of what used to be regarded—by snobs—as of rather more distinction, in the old-fashioned sense, than poor Craggs.'

'Poor Craggs, indeed. That just about describes him. He has the most loathsomely oily voice in the whole of Bloomsbury.'

'What has been happening in London, talking of Bloomsbury?' asked Mona, bored by all this fencing on Quiggin's part. 'Have there been any parties there, or anywhere else? I get a bit sick of being stuck down here all the time.'

Her drawling, angry manner showed growing discontent, and Quiggin, clearly foreseeing trouble, immediately embarked upon a theme he had probably intended to develop later in the course of my visit.

'As a matter of fact there was something I wanted specially to ask you, Nick,' he said hurriedly. 'We may as well get on to the subject right away. Mona has been thinking for some time that she might make a career as a film star. I agree with her. She has got champion looks and champion talent too. She made more than one appearance on the screen in the past—small rôles, of course, but always jolly good. That gives the right experience. We thought you ought to be able to hand out some useful "intros" now that you are in the business.'

To emphasise his own enthusiasm for Mona's talent, Quiggin renewed in his voice all the force of his former rough honesty of tone. The enquiry revealed the cause of my invitation to the cottage. Its general application was not unexpected, though I had supposed Quiggin, rather than Mona, hoped to launch out into the fierce, chilling rapids of 'the industry'. However, since Mona was to be the subject of the discussion, we began to talk over possibilities of introductions to those who might be of use. Her previous employment in films seemed to have been of scarcely higher grade than superior crowd work, or the individual display on her part of some commodity to be advertised; although, at the same time, it could be said in her favour that when, in the past, she had belonged to the advertising world, she could have claimed some little fame as a well-known model.

Quiggin, whose grasp of practical matters was usually competent enough, must have known that I myself was unlikely to be any great help to an aspiring film star. As I had explained to Jeavons, I had little or no contact with the acting side of the business. But people of undoubted ability in their own line are often completely lost in understanding the nature of someone else's job. It was possible that he pictured nothing easier than introducing Mona to some famous director, who would immediately offer her a star part. Alternately, there was, of course, the possibility that Quiggin himself wished merely to allow the matter free ventilation in order to supply Mona with some subject upon which happily to brood. He might easily have no thought of practical result, beyond assuming that a prolonged discussion about herself, her beauty and her talents, held between the three of us over the course of the week-end, would have a beneficial effect on Mona's temper. This might even be a method of scotching the whole question of Mona's dramatic ambition, of which Quiggin might easily be jealous.

On the other hand, the film business, always unpredictable, might envisage Mona as a 'discovery'. Perhaps, after all, the change from the time when she had been married to Templer was not so great as physical and financial circumstances might make it appear. She was still bored: without enough to do. A woman who could 'cook a bit' had been provided by the mysterious personage who had lent them the cottage. It was natural that Mona should want a job. Chips Lovell, always engaged in minor intrigue, would be able to offer useful advice. We were still discussing her prospects later that evening, sitting on kitchen chairs drinking gin, when a faint tapping came on the outside door. I thought it must be a child come with a message, or delivering something for the evening meal. Mona rose to see who was there. There was the noise of the latch; then she gave an exclamation of surprise, and, so it seemed to me, of pleasure. Quiggin, too, jumped up when he heard the voice, also looking surprised: more surprised than pleased.

The man who came into the room was, I suppose, in his early thirties. At first he seemed older on account of his straggling beard and air of utter down-at-heelness. His hair was long on the top of his head, but had been given a rough military crop round the sides. He wore a tweed coat, much the worse for wear and patched with leather at elbows and cuffs; but a coat that was well cut and had certainly seen better days. An infinitely filthy pair of corduroy trousers clothed his legs, and, like Quiggin, his large feet were enclosed in some form of canvas slipper or *espadrille*. It seemed at first surprising that such an unkempt figure should have announced himself by knocking so gently, but it now appeared that he was overcome with diffidence. At least this seemed to be his state, for he stood for a moment or two on the threshold of the room, clearly intending to enter, but unable to make the definitive movement required which would heave him into what must have appeared the closed community of Quiggin and myself. I forgot at the time that this inability to penetrate a room is a particular form of hesitation to be associated with persons in whom an extreme egoism is dominant: the acceptance of someone else's place or dwelling possibly implying some distasteful abnegation of the newcomer's rights or position.

At last, by taking hold of himself firmly, he managed to pass through the door, immediately turning his sunken eyes upon me with a look of deep uneasiness, as if he suspected —indeed, was almost certain—I was plotting some violently disagreeable move against himself. By exercising this disturbed, and essentially disturbing, stare, he made me feel remarkably uncomfortable; although, at the same time, there was something about him not at all unsympathetic: a presence of forcefulness and despair enclosed in an envelope of constraint. He did not speak. Quiggin went towards him, almost as if he were about to turn him from the room.

'I thought you were going to be in London all the week,' he said, 'with your committee to re-examine the terms of the Sedition Bill.'

He sounded vexed by the bearded man's arrival at this moment, though at the same time exerting every effort to conceal his annoyance.

'Craggs couldn't be there, so I decided I might as well come back. I walked up from the station. I've got a lot of stuff to go through still, and I always hate being in London longer than I need. I thought I would drop in on the way home to show you what I had done.'

The bearded man spoke in a deep, infinitely depressed voice, pointing at the same time with one hand to a small cardboard dispatch-case he carried in the other. This receptacle was evidently full of papers, for it bulged at top and bottom, and, since the lock was broken, was tied round several times with string.

'Wouldn't you rather deal with it another time?' Quiggin asked, hopefully.

He seemed desperately anxious to get rid of the stranger without revealing his identity. I strongly suspected this to be the landlord of the cottage, but still had no clue to Quiggin's secrecy on the subject of his name, if this suspicion proved to be true. The man with the beard looked fairly typical of one layer of Quiggin's friends: a layer which Quiggin kept, on the whole, in the background, because he regarded them for one reason or another—either politically or even for reasons that could only be called snobbish—to be bad for business. Quiggin possessed his own elaborately drawn scale of social values, no less severe in their way than the canons of the most ambitious social hostess; but it was not always easy for others to know where, and how, he drew his lines of demarcation. Possibly the man with the beard was regarded as not quite at a level to be allowed to drink with Quiggin when friends were present. However, he was not to be expelled so easily. He shook now his head resolutely.

'No,' he said. 'There are just one or two things.'

He looked again in my direction after saying this, as if to make some apology either for intruding in this manner, or, as it were, on behalf of Quiggin for his evident wish that we should have nothing to do with each other.

'I haven't butted in, have I?' he said.

He spoke not so much to Quiggin as to the world at large, without much interest in a reply. The remark was the expression of a polite phrase that seemed required by the circumstances, rather than anything like real fear that his presence might be superfluous. My impression of him began to alter. I came to the conclusion that under this burden of shyness he did not care in the least whether he butted in on Quiggin, or on anyone else. What he wanted was his own way. Mona, who had gone through to the kitchen now returned, bringing another glass.

'Have a drink, Alf,' she said. 'Nice to see you unexpectedly like this.'

She had brightened up noticeably.

'Yes, of course, Alf, have a drink,' said Quiggin, now resigning himself to the worst. 'And sorry, by the way, for forgetting to explain who everybody is. My rough North Country manners again. This is Nick Jenkins—Alf Warminster.'

This, then, was the famous Erridge. It was easy to see how the rumour had gone round among his relations that he had become a tramp, even if actual experience had stopped short of that status in its most exact sense. I should never have recognised him with his beard and heavily-lined face. Now that his name was revealed, the features of the preoccupied, sallow, bony schoolboy, with books tumbling from under his arm, could be traced like a footpath lost in the brambles and weeds of an untended garden: an overgrown crazy pavement. Examining him as a perceivable entity, I could even detect in his face a look of his sisters, especially Frederica. His clothes gave off a heavy, earthen smell as if he had lived out in them in all weathers for a long time.

'Alf owns this cottage,' said Quiggin, reluctantly. 'But he kindly allows us to live here until the whole place is turned into a collective farm with himself at the head of it.'

He laughed harshly. Erridge (as I shall, for convenience, continue to call him) laughed uneasily too.

'Of course you know I'm frightfully glad to have you here,' he said.

He spoke lamely and looked more than ever embarrassed at this tribute paid him, which was certainly intended by Quiggin to carry some sting in its tail: presumably the implication that, whatever his political views, whatever the social changes, Erridge would remain in a comfortable position. When Quiggin ingratiated himself with people —during his days as secretary to St. John Clarke, for example—he was far too shrewd to confine himself to mere flattery. A modicum of bullying was a pleasure both to himself and his patrons. All the same, I was not sure that Erridge, for all his outward appearance, might not turn out a tougher proposition than St. John Clarke.

'I don't know that farming is quite my line,' Erridge went on, apologetically. 'Though of course we have always done a bit of it here. Incidentally, is the water pumping satisfactorily? You may find it rather hard work, I am afraid. I had the hand pump specially put in. I think it is a better model than the one in the keeper's cottage, and they seem to find that one works all right.'

'Mona and I take our turn at it,' said Quiggin; and, grinning angrily in my direction, he added: 'Guests are expected to do their stint at the pump as a rule. Pumping is a bit of a bore, as you say. You can't do it any better, or any quicker, or any way that makes the tank last longer. The pump movement is just short of the natural leverage of the arm from the elbow, which makes the work particularly laborious. But we get along all right. Pumping is a kind of image of life under the capitalist system.'

Erridge laughed constrainedly, and took a gulp of gin, involuntarily making a grimace as he did so. This seemed to indicate that he belonged to the class of egoist who dislikes the taste of food and drink. He would probably have abstained from alcohol entirely had not his special approach to life made a duty of mixing on equal terms with people round him. He seemed now a little put out by Quiggin's lack of affection for the pump. Having installed the equipment himself, like most innovators or, indeed, most owners of property, he did not care for the disparagement of his organisation or possessions; at least on the part of persons other than himself.

'I met some of your sisters the other day,' I said.

Erridge's face clouded at this, while Quiggin gritted his teeth in irritation. This, as intended, was nothing short of a declaration that I knew more about Erridge and his background than Quiggin might think desirable, and also was not prepared to move solely upon lines laid down by Quiggin himself. Indeed, Quiggin may have hoped that the name 'Warminster' inarticulately mumbled with the emphasis on the prefix 'Alf', would in itself at the time convey little or nothing; later, he could please himself how much he revealed about his current patron. There was a moment's pause before Erridge answered.

'Oh, yes—yes——' he said. 'Which—which ones——?'

'Priscilla and then Frederica, who took me to see Norah.'

'Oh, yes,' said Erridge. 'Priscilla—Frederica—Norah.'

He spoke as if he had now begun to remember them quite well. The manner in which he screwed up his face, while making this effort of memory recalled his uncle, Alfred Tolland. Although, at first sight, it would have been difficult to think of two men whose outward appearance was superficially more different, something deeper remained in common. If Alfred Tolland had grown a beard, dressed in rags and slept out all night, or if Erridge had washed, shaved and assumed a stiff collar and dark suit, something more than a passing resemblance might have become evident. Indeed, Erridge's features had assumed some of that same expression of disappointment which marked his uncle's face when Molly Jeavons teased him; with the contrast that, in Erridge, one was reminded of a spoilt child, while Alfred Tolland's countenance was that of a child resigned from an early age to teasing by grown-ups. There could be no doubt that Erridge recoiled from the invocation of his immediate family. The world of his relations no doubt caused him chronic dissatisfaction. I saw no reason, for my own part, why he should be let off anything. If he lent Quiggin the cottage, he must put up with Quiggin's guests; especially those invited primarily to help Mona become a film star.

Silence fell. Erridge looked out towards the uncurtained window beyond which night had already fallen. Unlike his uncle, he had no wish to discuss his family. After all, it was perhaps hard that he should be forced to talk about them merely to plague Quiggin, though to try the experiment had been tempting. Quiggin himself had become increasingly restive during this interchange. Mona had spoken little, though undoubtedly cheered by the visit. Quiggin seemed to judge, perhaps correctly, that Erridge was displeased by all this chit-chat, and began to mention tentatively executive matters existing between them; although at the same time unquestionably anxious that Erridge should leave the cottage as soon as possible. However, Erridge in spite of his own unwillingness to make conversation, showed equally no desire to move. He took an ancient leather tobacco-pouch from one of his coat pockets and began to roll himself a cigarette. When he had done this—not very successfully, for a good deal of tobacco protruded from each end of the twist of rice-paper—he licked the edge to seal it and lit the rather flimsy result of these labours. The cigarette seemed not to 'draw' well, so after a minute or two he threw it into the grate. Sipping the drink Mona had given him, he again made a face, tipping back the kitchen chair upon which he sat until it cracked ominously. He sighed deeply.

'I was wondering whether it would be better for you to be secretary instead of Craggs,' he said.

'What makes you think so?' asked Quiggin cautiously.

'Craggs always seems to have something else to do. The fact is, Craggs is so keen on running committees that he can never give any of them the right amount of attention. He is on to German refugees now. Quite right, of course, that something should be done. But last week I couldn't get hold of him because he was occupied with Sillery about the embargo on arms to Bolivia and Paraguay. Then there's the "Smash Fascism" group he is always slipping off to. He would like us to pay more attention to Mosley. He wants to be doing the latest thing all the time, whether it's the independence of Catalonia or free meals for school-children.'

'Anti-fascism comes first,' said Quiggin. 'Even before pacifism. In my opinion, the Sedition Bill can wait. After all, didn't Lenin say something about Liberty being a bourgeois illusion?'

Quiggin had added this last remark in not too serious a tone, but Erridge seemed to take it seriously, shifting about uncomfortably on his hard wooden seat as if he were a galley-slave during an interval of rest.

'Of course,' he said. 'I know he did.'

'Well, then?'

'I don't always think like the rest of you about that.'

He rose suddenly from his chair.

'I want to have a talk about the magazine some time,' he said. 'Not now, I think.'

'Oh, that,' said Quiggin.

He sounded as if he would have preferred 'the magazine' not to have been so specifically named.

'What magazine?' asked Mona.

'Oh, it's nothing, ducks,' said Quiggin. 'Just an idea Alf and I were talking about.'

'Are you going to start a magazine?'

Mona sounded quite excited.

'We might be,' said Erridge, moving his feet about.

'It is all very vague still,' said Quiggin, in a voice that closed the matter.

Mona was not to be so easily silenced. Whether her interest had been genuinely aroused or whether she saw this as a means expressing her own views or teasing Quiggin was not clear.

'But *how* thrilling,' she said. 'Do tell me all about it, Alf.'

Erridge smiled in an embarrassed way, and pulled at his beard.

'It is all very vague, as J.G. has explained,' he said. 'Look here, why not come to dinner tomorrow night? We could talk about it then.'

'Or perhaps later in the week,' said Quiggin.

'I've got to go away again on Monday,' Erridge said.

There was a pause. Quiggin glared at me.

'I expect you will have to go back to London on Sunday night, won't you, Nick?' he said.

'Oh, do come too,' said Erridge, at once. 'I'm so sorry. Of course I meant to ask you as well if you are staying until then.'

He seemed distressed at having appeared in his own eyes bad mannered. I think he lived in a dream, so shut off from the world that he had not bothered for a moment to consider whether I was staying with Quiggin, or had just come in that night for a meal. Even if he realised that I was staying, he was probably scarcely aware that I might still be there twenty-four hours later. His reactions placed him more and more as a recognisable type, spending much of his time in boredom and loneliness, yet in some way inhibited from taking in anything relevant about other people: at home only with 'causes'.

'The trains are not too good in the morning,' said Quiggin. 'I don't know when you have to be at the Studio——'

'The Studio is closed all this week owing to the strike,' I said. 'So I had thought of going up on Monday morning in any case—if that is all right.'

'Oh, are you on strike?' asked Erridge, brightening up at once, as if it were for him a rare, unexpected pleasure to find himself in such close contact with a real striker. 'In that case you simply must come and have a meal with me.'

'I'd love to, but it is not me on strike, I am afraid—the electricians.'

'Oh, yes, the strike, of course, the strike,' said Quiggin, as if he himself had organised the stoppage of work, but, in the light of his many similar responsibilities, had forgotten about its course. 'In that case we would all like to come, Alf. It's an early supper, as I remember.'

So far as Quiggin was concerned, it had been one of those great social defeats; and, in facing the fact squarely, he had done something to retrieve his position. Presumably he was making plans for Erridge to put up the money to install him as editor of some new, Left Wing magazine. It was perhaps reasonable that he should wish to keep their plans secret in case they should miscarry. However, now that the dinner had been decided upon, he accepted the matter philosophically. Erridge seemed to have no similar desire to discuss matters in private. He was, I think, quite unaware of Quiggin's unwillingness to allow others to know too much of their life together. I could see, too, that he was determined not to abandon the idea that I was myself a striker.

'But you support them by not going,' he said. 'Yes, come early. You might possibly like to look round the house—though there really is nothing to see there that is of the slightest interest, I'm afraid.'

He moved once more towards the door, sunk again in deep despair, perhaps at the thought of the lack of distinction of his house and its contents. Shuffling his *espadrilles* against the stone floor, he caught his foot in the mat, swore gently and a trifle self-consciously, as if aspiring to act as roughly as he was dressed, and left with hardly a further word. Quiggin accompanied him to the door, and shouted a farewell. Then he returned to the room in which we sat. No one spoke for a minute or two. Quiggin slowly corked up the gin bottle, and put it away in a cupboard.

'Alf is *rather* sweet, isn't he?' said Mona.

'Alf is a good fellow,' agreed Quiggin, a shade sourly.

'Where does he live?' I asked.

'Thrubworth Park. It is a big house beyond the trees you see from our windows.'

Quiggin had been put out by this sudden appearance of Erridge. It had been a visit for which he was unprepared: a situation he had not bargained for. Now he seemed unable to decide what line he himself should take about his friend.

'How much do you know about him?' he asked at last.

'Hardly anything, except that he is said to have been a tramp. And, as I said just now, I met some of his sisters the other day.'

'Oh, yes,' said Quiggin, impatiently. 'I am not at all interested in the rest of his family. He never sees anything of them, anyway. A lot of social butterflies, that's all they are. Just what you might expect. Alf is different. I don't know what you mean by being a tramp, though. Where did you get that story? I suppose you think everyone is a tramp who wears a beard.'

'Aren't they? Some of his relations told me he had been experimenting in life as a tramp.'

'Just the sort of thing they would put about,' said Quiggin. 'Isn't it like people of that class? It is true he has been making some study of local conditions. I don't think he stayed anywhere very luxurious, but he certainly didn't sleep in casual wards.'

'His relations suppose he did. I think they rather admire him for it.'

'Well, they suppose wrong,' said Quiggin. 'Alf is a very good fellow, but I don't know whether he is prepared to make himself as uncomfortable as that.'

'What did he do then?'

'Useful work collecting information about unemployment,' Quiggin conceded. 'Distributed pamphlets at the same time. I don't want to belittle it in any way, but it is absurd to go round saying he was a tramp. All the same, the experience he had will be of political value to him.'

'I think he is rather attractive,' said Mona.

For some reason this did not seem to please Quiggin.

'Did you ever meet a girl called Gypsy Jones?' he said. 'A Communist. Rather a grubby little piece. I'm not sure Alf may not be a bit keen on her. I saw them sitting together at a Popular Front meeting. All the same, he is not a man to waste time over women.'

'What do you mean, "waste time over women"?' said Mona. 'Anyway, nobody could blame you for that. You think about yourself too much.'

'I think about you too, ducks,' said Quiggin mildly, no doubt judging it advisable to pacify her. 'But Alf is an idealist. Rather too much of one sometimes, when it comes to getting things done. All the same, he has most of the right ideas. Shall I get that bottle out again? Supper doesn't seem to be nearly ready.'

'Yes, get it out,' said Mona. 'I can't imagine why you put it away.'

All this was reminiscent of the Templer household before Mona left her husband. During the twenty-four hours that followed, this recollection was more than once repeated.

Quiggin, too, had begun to placate her with 'treats', the impending dinner with Erridge certainly grading in that class. In fact Quiggin began to talk as if he himself had arranged the invitation as an essential aspect of the weekend. Although its potentialities had been reduced for him by my inclusion, there was, I think, nothing personal in that. He would equally have objected to any other friend or acquaintance joining the party. Dinner at Thrubworth was an occasion not to be wasted, for Mona had remarked: 'We don't get invited every day of the week.' I asked how long they had known Erridge.

'In the days when I was secretary to St. John Clarke,' said Quiggin, smiling to show how distant, how incongruous, he now regarded that period of his life. 'St. J. went one afternoon to a bookshop in Charing Cross Road, where he wanted to cast his eye over some of Lenin's speeches. As you know, St. J. was rather careful about money, and he had suggested I should hold the bookseller in conversation while he looked up just as much as he needed. This was at the beginning of St. J.'s conversion to Marxism. We found Alf pottering about the shop, trying to get through the afternoon. Old habits die hard, and, of course, up to the time I met him, St. J. had been a champion snob—and he wasn't altogether cured of his liking for a high-sounding name. He often said afterwards, when we knew each other well, that I'd saved him from snobbery. I only wish I could also have saved him from Trotskyism. But that is another story. It happened that St. J. had met Alf quite a time before at the home of one of Alf's relatives—is there a woman called Lady Molly Jeavons? There is—well, it was at her house. St. J. had a word or two with Alf in the bookshop, and, in spite of his changed view of life, forgot all about Lenin's speeches and asked him back to tea.'

'And you have known him ever since?'

'Alf turned up trumps when St. J. behaved so foolishly about myself and Mona. Since then, I've done my best to canalise his enthusiasms.'

'Has St. John Clarke still got his German boy as secretary?'

'Not he,' said Quiggin. 'Guggenbühl is a shrewd young man, Trotskyist though he be. He has moved on to something more paying. After all, he was smart enough to see Hitler coming and clear out of Germany. I hear he is very patronising to the German refugees arriving now.'

'He is probably a Nazi agent.'

'My God,' said Quiggin. 'I wouldn't wonder. I must talk to Mark about that when he comes back from America.'

The possibility that Mark Members and himself had been succeeded in the dynasty of St. John Clarke's secretaries by one of Hitler's spies greatly cheered Quiggin. He was in a good mood for the rest of the day, until it was time to start for Thrubworth. Then, as the hour approached, he became once more nervous and agitated. I had supposed that, having secured Erridge for a patron some years before, Quiggin must be used by then to his ways. The contrary seemed true; and I remembered that in his undergraduate days he used to become irritable and perturbed before a party: master of himself only after arrival. He had changed into his suit of that cruel blue colour when at last we set off across the fields.

'What date is the house?'

'What house?'

'Where we are going.'

'Oh, Thrubworth Park,' said Quiggin, as if he had forgotten our destination. 'Seventeenth century, I should say, much altered in the eighteenth. Alf will tell you about it. Though he doesn't really like the place, he likes talking about it for some reason. You will hear all you want about its history.'

Passing into the wood to be seen from the windows of the cottage, we went through more fields and climbed a stile. Beyond was a deserted road, on the far side of which, set back some distance from the highway, stood an entrance —evidently not the main entrance—to a park, the walls of which I had already seen from another side on my way from the station the day before. A small, unoccupied lodge, now fallen into decay, lay beside two open, wrought-iron gates. We went through these gates, and made our way up a drive that disappeared among large trees. The park was fairly well kept, though there was an unfriended, melancholy air about the place, characteristic of large estates for which the owner feels no deep affection.

'I hope there will be something to drink tonight,' said Mona.

'Is it a bit short as a rule?' I asked.

'Doesn't exactly flow.'

'Why didn't you have a pint of gin before you came out then,' asked Quiggin, gratingly, 'if you can't ever get through an evening without wanting to feel tipsy at the end of it? There always seems enough to me. Not buckets but enough.'

His nerves were still on edge.

'All right,' said Mona. 'Don't bite my head off. You grumbled yourself the last time you came here.'

'Did I, ducks?'

He took her arm.

'We'll have a nice drink when we get back,' he said, 'if Alf should happen to be in one of his moods.'

I felt apprehensive at the thought that Erridge might be 'in one of his moods'. Quiggin had not mentioned these 'moods' before, although their nature was easy to imagine from what had been said. I wished we could continue to walk, as we were doing, through glades of oak and chestnut trees in the cool twilight, without ever reaching the house and the grim meal which now seemed to lie ahead of us. We had continued for about ten minutes when roofs came suddenly into view, a group of buildings of some dignity, though without much architectural distinction: a seventeenth-century mansion such as Quiggin had described, brick at the back and fronted in the eighteenth century with stone. The façade faced away from us across a wide stretch of lawn, since we had arrived at the side of the house amongst a network of small paths and flower-beds, rather fussily laid out and not too well kept. Quiggin led the way through these borders, making for a projection of outbuildings and stables. We passed under an arch into a cobbled yard. Quiggin made for a small door, studded with brass nails. By the side of this door hung an iron bell-pull. He stopped short and turned towards me, looking suddenly as if he had lost heart. Then he took hold of himself and gave the bell a good jerk.

'Does one always come in this way?'

'The front of the house is kept shut,' he said.

'What happens inside?'

'The state rooms—if that is what you call them—are closed. Alf just lives in one corner of the place.'

'In the servants' quarters?'

'More or less. That is probably what they used to be.'

We waited for a long time. Quiggin appeared unwilling to ring again, but, under pressure from Mona, at last decided to repeat his wrench at the bell. There was another long pause. Then steps could be heard moving very slowly and carefully down the stairs. Inner fumbling with the door-knob took place, and the door was opened by a man-servant. I recognised Smith, the butler temporarily employed by the Jeavonses on my first visit to their house.

'Lord Warminster?' muttered Quiggin, interrogatively.

Smith made no answer. A kind of grimace had crossed his features when he saw Quiggin and Mona; naturally enough, he did not give me any sign of recognition. Apart from this brief, indeed scarcely perceptible contraction of nose and lips—perhaps merely a nervous twitch—he expressed no further welcome. However, he stood aside to allow us to enter. We trooped in, finding ourselves in a kind of back hall where several passages met. There was an impression of oak chests, shabby bookcases full of unreadable books, mahogany dressers and other huge pieces of furniture, expelled at one time or another from the central part of the house; the walls covered with large oil paintings of schools long fallen out of fashion. Smith, as if suffering from some painful disease in the lower part of his body, strode uncertainly before us towards a narrow flight of stairs. We followed in silence. Even Mona seemed overawed by the cavernous atmosphere of gloom. Passing through corridors, and still further corridors, all lined with discredited canvases and an occasional marble bust, Smith stopped before a door. Then he turned almost savagely upon us.

'Mr. and Mrs. Quiggin—and what other name?'

Fancy made him seem to emphasise the word 'Mrs.', as if he wished to cast doubt on the legal union of the two of them. Quiggin started, then mumbled my name grudgingly. Smith threw open the door, bawling out his announcement, and propelled us within.

Erridge was sitting at a desk, the upper part surmounted by a glass-fronted bookcase filled with volumes enclosed for the most part in yellow paper wrappers. He jumped up immediately we entered, removing his spectacles and stumbling forward confusedly, as if our arrival was totally unexpected. He had been writing, and the open flap of the desk was covered with letters and papers which now cascaded to the floor; where they lay in a heap for the rest of the time we were in the house. A dark wall-paper and heavy mahogany furniture, not very different in style to that exiled to the back parts of the house through which we had passed, made the room seem smaller than its real extent, which was considerable. There were no pictures, though rectangular discoloured patches on the walls showed where frames had once hung. Over the fireplace a chart which I took to be the Tolland pedigree, but on closer examination proved to illustrate in descending scale some principle of economic distribution. Shelves holding more books—classics, Baedekers and a couple of bound copies of the *Boy's Own Paper*—covered the far wall. At the end of the room stood a table littered with current newspapers and magazines. Another smaller table had been laid with four places, for a meal.

It was clear that Erridge lived and moved and had his being in this room. I wondered whether he also spent his nights there on the sofa. Such rough and ready accommodation might easily be in keeping with his tenets: except that the sofa looked rather too comfortable to assuage at night-time his guilt for being rich. Still embarrassed, so it seemed, by the unexpectedness of our arrival, he had now begun to walk quickly up and down the room, as if to give expression and relief to the nervous tension he felt. Quiggin, his own self-possession completely restored by contact with his host—like the warm glow that comes after a plunge in cold water—must have recognised these symptoms in Erridge as normal enough. He took Mona by the arm and drew her towards the window, where the two of them stood side by side, looking down at the gardens and the park beyond. They began to discuss together some feature of the landscape.

Left by myself in the middle of the room, I was at first uncertain whether to join Quiggin and Mona in their survey of the Thrubworth grounds, or, by interrupting his pacing with some conventional remark, to follow up Erridge's vague but general greeting to the three of us on arrival. The latter course threatened to entail an attempt to march up and down the room beside him: like officers waiting for a parade to begin. On the other hand, to move away towards Quiggin and the window would seem ineffective and unfriendly. I decided to glance at the economic chart for a minute or two in the hope that the situation might assume a less enigmatic aspect; but when a moment later Erridge paused by his desk, and began laboriously to straighten some of the few papers that remained there, I saw that he and I, sooner or later, must establish some kind of host-guest relationship, however uneasy, if we were to spend an evening together. The quicker this were done the better, so far as my own peace of mind was concerned. I therefore tackled him without further delay.

'I saw your butler some months ago at the Jeavonses'.'

Erridge started, at last coming to himself.

'Oh, did you, yes,' he said, laughing uncomfortably, but at least putting down the pages of typescript which he was shuffling together. 'Smith went there while I was—while I was away—doing this—this—sort of investigation. He has been with me for—oh, I don't know—several years. Our other butler died. He had something ghastly wrong with his inside. Something really horrible. It was quite sudden. Smith is rather a peculiar man. He doesn't have very good health either. You can never guess what he is going to say. You know Aunt Molly, do you?'

Erridge's face had begun to work painfully when he spoke of his earlier butler's unhappy state of health and subsequent death. It was easy to see that he found the afflictions of the human condition hard even to contemplate; indeed, took many of them as his own personal responsibility.

'I've been there once or twice.'

'You seem to know a lot of my relations,' said Erridge.

He made this remark in a flat, despondent tone, as if interested, even faintly surprised that such a thing should happen, but that was all. He appeared to wish to carry the matter no further, uttering no warning, but certainly offering no encouragement. It would probably have been necessary to discover a fresh subject to discuss, had not Quiggin at that moment decided that the proper period of segregation from Erridge was at an end—or had been satisfactorily terminated by my own action—so that he now rejoined us.

'I was showing Mona the place where I advise you to have those trees down,' he said. 'I am sure it is the right thing to do. Get them out of the way.'

'I'm still thinking it over,' said Erridge, again using an absolutely flat tone.

He did not show any desire to hear Quiggin's advice about his estate, his manner on this subject contrasting with his respectful reception of Quiggin's political comments. Mona sat down on the sofa and gave a little sigh.

'Would you—any of you—like a drink?' asked Erridge.

He spoke enquiringly, as if drink at that hour were an unusual notion that had just occurred to him. It was agreed that a drink would be a good idea. However, Erridge seemed to have little or no plan for implementing his offer. All he did further was to say: 'I expect Smith will be back in a minute or two.'

Smith did, indeed, return a short time later. He added a large jug of barley water to the things on the table.

'Oh, Smith,' said Erridge. 'There is some sherry, isn't there?'

'Sherry, m'lord?'

It was impossible to tell from Smith's vacant, irascible stare whether he had never before been asked for sherry since his first employment at Thrubworth; or whether he had himself, quite simply, drunk all the sherry that remained.

'Yes, sherry,' said Erridge, with unexpected firmness. 'I am sure I remember some being left in the decanter after the doctor came here.'

Erridge said the word 'doctor' in a way that made me think he might add hypochondria to his other traits. There was something about the value he gave to the syllables that emphasised the importance to himself of a doctor's visit.

'I don't think so, m'lord.'

'I know there was,' said Erridge. 'Please go and look.'

A battle of wills was in progress. Clearly Erridge had little or no interest in sherry as such. Like Widmerpool, he did not care for eating and drinking: was probably actively opposed to such sensual enjoyments, which detracted from preferable conceptions of pure power. Quiggin, of course, liked power too; though perhaps less for its own sake than for the more practical consideration of making a career for himself of a kind that appealed at any given moment to his imagination. Quiggin could therefore afford to allow himself certain indulgences, provided these did not endanger the political or social front he chose to present to the world. In supposing that Erridge, like most people who employ eccentric servants, was under Smith's thumb, I now saw I had made an error of judgment. Erridge's will was a strong one. There could be no doubt of that. At his words Smith had bowed his head as one who, having received the order of the bowstring, makes for the Bosphorus. He turned in deep dejection from the room. Erridge's sallow cheeks had almost taken on a touch of colour. In this mood his beard made him look quite fierce.

'You would like some sherry, wouldn't you?' he repeated to Mona.

He was suffering a twinge of conscience that to the rest of us his demeanour to Smith might have sounded arrogant: out of keeping with his fundamental beliefs.

'Oh, *yes*,' said Mona.

She adopted towards Erridge a decidedly flirtatious manner. Indeed, I wondered for a moment whether she might not now be contemplating a new move that would make her Countess of Warminster. Almost immediately I dismissed such a speculation as absurd, since Erridge himself appeared totally unaware that he was being treated to Mona's most seductive manner. Turning from her, he began to discuss with Quiggin the economics of the magazine they hoped to found. The Quiggin plan was evidently based on the principle that Erridge should put up the money, and Quiggin act as editor; Erridge, on the other hand, favoured some form of joint editorship. I was surprised that Mona showed no sign of dissatisfaction at Erridge's indifference to her. I noted how much firmer, more ruthless, her personality had become since I had first met her as Templer's wife, when she had seemed a silly, empty-headed, rather bad-tempered beauty. Now she possessed a kind of hidden force, of which there could be no doubt that Quiggin was afraid.

Smith returned with sherry on a salver. There was just enough wine to give each of us a full glass. I remarked on the beauty of the decanter.

'Are you interested in glass?' said Erridge. 'Some of it is rather good here. My grandfather used to collect it. I don't know, by the way, whether you would like to look round the house by any chance. There is nothing much to see, but some people like that sort of thing. Or perhaps you would rather do that after dinner.'

'Oh, we are more comfortable here with our drinks, aren't we, Alf?' said Quiggin. 'I don't expect you want to trudge round the house, do you, Nick? I am sure I don't.'

I think Quiggin knew, even at this stage, that there was no real hope of sabotaging the project, because Erridge was already determined to go through with it; but he felt at the same time, in the interests of his own self-respect, that at least an effort should be made to prevent a tour of the house taking place. Erridge's face fell; looking more cheerful again at the assurance that, after we had dined, I should like to 'see round'. Smith appeared with some soup in a tureen, and we ranged ourselves about the table.

'Will you drink beer?' asked Erridge, doubtfully. 'Or does anyone prefer barley water?'

'Beer,' said Quiggin, sharply.

He must have felt that the suggested tour of the house had strengthened his own moral position, in so much as the proposal was an admission of self-indulgence on the part of Erridge.

'Bring some beer, Smith.'

'The pale ale, m'lord?'

'Yes, I think that is what it is. Whatever we usually drink on these occasions.'

Smith shook his head pessimistically, and went off again. Erridge and Quiggin settled down to further talk about the paper, a conversation leading in due course to more general topics, among these the aggressive foreign policy of Japan.

'Of course I would dearly like to visit China and see for myself,' Quiggin said.

It was a wish I had heard him express before. Possibly he hoped that Erridge would take him there.

'It would be interesting,' Erridge said. 'I'd like to go myself.'

Soup was followed by sausages and mash with fried onions. The cooking was excellent. The meal ended with cheese and fruit. We left the table and moved back to the chairs round the fireplace at the other end of the room. Mona returned to the subject of her film career. We had begun to talk of some of the minor film stars of the period, when the sound of girls' voices and laughter came from the passage outside. Then the door burst open, and two young women came boisterously into the room. There could be no doubt that they were two more of Erridge's sisters. The elder, so it turned out, was Susan Tolland; the younger, Isobel. The atmosphere changed suddenly, violently. One became all at once aware of the delicious, sparkling proximity of young feminine beings. The room was transformed. They both began to speak at once, the elder one, Susan, finally making herself heard.

'Erry, we were passing the gates and really thought it would be too bad mannered not to drop in.'

Erridge rose, and kissed his sisters automatically, although not without some shade of warmth. Otherwise, he showed no great pleasure at seeing them; rather the reverse. I had by then become familiar with the Tolland physical type, to which Susan Tolland completely conformed. She was about twenty-five or twenty-six, less farouche, I judged, than her sister, Norah; less statuesque than Frederica, though resembling both of them. Tall and thin, all of them possessed a touch of that angularity of feature most apparent in Erridge himself: a conformation that in him became a gauntness recalling Don Quixote. In the girls this inclination to severity of outline had been bred down, leaving only a liveliness of expression and underlying sense of melancholy: this last characteristic to some extent masked by a great pressure of high spirits, notably absent in Erridge. His eyes were brown, those of his sisters, deep blue.

Would it be too explicit, too exaggerated, to say that when I set eyes on Isobel Tolland, I knew at once that I should marry her? Something like that is the truth; certainly nearer the truth than merely to record those vague, incohate sentiments of interest of which I was so immediately conscious. It was as if I had known her for many years already; enjoyed happiness with her and suffered sadness. I was conscious of that, as of another life, nostalgically remembered. Then, at that moment, to be compelled to go through all the paraphernalia of introduction, of 'getting to know' one another by means of the normal formalities of social life, seemed hardly worth while. We knew one another already; the future was determinate. But what —it may reasonably be asked—what about the fact that only a short time before I had been desperately in love with Jean Duport; was still, indeed, not sure that I had been wholly cured? Were the delights and agonies of all that to be tied up with ribbon, so to speak, and thrown into a drawer to be forgotten? What about the girls with whom I seemed to stand nightly in cinema queues? What, indeed?

'Aren't we going to be told who everyone is?' said Susan, looking round the room and smiling.

Although her smile was friendly, charming, there could be no doubt that, like her sister, Norah, Susan was capable of making herself disagreeable if she chose.

'Oh, sorry,' said Erridge. 'What am I thinking of? I am not used to having so many people in this room.'

He mumbled our names. Isobel seemed to take them in; Susan, less certainly. Both girls were excited about something, apparently about some piece of news they had to impart.

'Have you come from far?' asked Quiggin.

He spoke in an unexpectedly amiable tone, so much muting the harshness of his vowels that these sounded almost like the ingratiating speech of his associate, Howard Craggs, the publisher. Quiggin had previously named Erridge's family in such disparaging terms that I had almost supposed he would give some outward sign of the disapproval he felt for the kind of life they lived. He would have been capable of that; or at least withholding from them any mark of cordiality. Now, on the contrary, he had wrung the girls' hands heartily, grinning with pleasure, as if delighted by this opportunity of meeting them both. Mona, on the other hand, did not trouble to conceal traces of annoyance, or at least disappointment, at all this additional feminine competition put into the field against her so suddenly and without warning.

'Yes, we've come rather miles,' said Susan Tolland, who was evidently very pleased about something. 'The car made the most extraordinary sounds at one point. Isobel said it was like a woman wailing for her demon lover. I thought it sounded more like the demon lover himself.'

'Anyway, here you are in "sunny domes and caves of ice",' said Quiggin. 'You know I get more and more interested in Coleridge for some reason.'

'Do you—do you want anything to eat, either of you?' Erridge enquired, uneasily.

He pointed quite despairingly at the table, as if he hoped the food we had just consumed would, by some occult processs, be restored there once more; as if we were indeed living in the realm of poetic enchantment adumbrated by Quiggin.

'We had a bite at the Tolland Arms,' said Isobel, taking a banana from the dish and beginning to peel it. 'And very disgusting the food was there, too. We didn't know you would be entertaining on a huge scale, Erry. In fact we were not even certain you were in residence. We thought you might be away on one of your jaunts.'

She cast a glance at us from under her eyelashes to indicate that she was not laughing openly at her brother, but, at the same time, we must realise that the rest of the family considered his goings-on pretty strange. Quiggin caught her eye, and, with decided disloyalty to Erridge, smiled silently back at her: implying that he too shared to the fullest extent the marrow of that particular joke. Isobel threw herself haphazard into an armchair, her long legs stretched out in front of her.

'Where have you come from?' asked Erridge.

He spoke formally, almost severely, as if forcing himself to take an interest in his sisters' behaviour, however extraordinary; behaviour which, owing to the fortunate dispensations of circumstance, could never affect him personally to the smallest degree. Indeed, he spoke as if utter remoteness from his own manner of life, for that very reason, made a subject otherwise unexciting, even distasteful, possess aspects impossible for him to disregard. It was as if his sisters, in themselves, represented customs so strange and incalculable that even the most detached person could not fail to allow his attention to be caught for a second or two by such startling oddness.

'We've been at the Alfords',' said Isobel, discarding the banana skin into the waste-paper basket. 'Throw me an orange, Susy. Susan had an adventure there.'

'Not an adventure exactly,' said her sister. 'And, anyway, it's my story, not yours, Isobel. Hardly an adventure. Unless you call getting married an adventure. I suppose some people might.'

'Why, have you got married, Susan?' asked Erridge.

He showed no surprise whatever, and very little interest, at the presentation of this possibility: merely mild, on the whole benevolent, approval.

'I haven't yet,' said Susan, suddenly blushing deeply. 'But I am going to.'

She was, I think, suddenly overwhelmed at the thought of marriage and all it implied. The announcement of her engagement, planned with great dash, had not been entirely carried off with the required air of indifference. I even wondered for a moment whether she was not going to cry. However, she mastered herself immediately. At the sight of her sister's face, Isobel began to blush violently too.

'To whom?' asked Erridge, still completely calm. 'I am so glad to hear the news.'

'Roddy Cutts.'

The name clearly conveyed nothing whatever to her brother, who still smiled amiably, unable to think of anything to say.

'There was a Lady Augusta Cutts who used to give dances when I was a young man,' he said, at last.

He spoke as if he were at least as old as General Conyers. No doubt the days when he had occasionally gone to dances seemed by then infinitely distant: indeed, much further off, and no less historic, than the General's cavalry charge.

'Lady Augusta is his mother.'

'Oh, yes?'

'She is rather a terror.'

There was a pause.

'What does he do?' asked Erridge, as if conscious that it might seem bad-mannered to drop the subject altogether, however much he himself hoped to move on to something more interesting.

'I can't tell you exactly,' said Susan. 'But he has something he does. I mean he doesn't absolutely beg his bread from door to door. He looks into the Conservative Central Office once in a way too.'

Erridge's face fell at the mention of this last establishment. Quiggin, however, came to the rescue.

'Much as I hate the Tories,' he said, 'I've heard that Cutts is one of their few promising young men.'

Everyone, including Susan Tolland herself, was surprised by this sudden avowal on the part of Quiggin, who was showing at least as much enthusiasm on the subject of the engagement as might have been expected from Erridge himself.

'I grant it may not be my place to say so,' Quiggin went on, switching at the same time to a somewhat rougher delivery. 'But you know, Alf, you really ought to celebrate rightly in a bottle of champagne. Now, don't you think there is some bubbly left in that cellar of yours?'

This speech astonished me, not because there was anything surprising in Quiggin's desire for champagne, but on account of a changed attitude towards his host. Erridge's essentially ascetic type of idealism, concerned with the mass rather than the individual, and reinforced by an aristocratic, quite legitimate desire to avoid vulgar display, had no doubt moved imperceptibly into that particular sphere of parsimony defined by Lovell as 'upper-class stinginess'. To demand champagne was deliberately to inflame such responses in Erridge. Possibly Quiggin, seeing unequivocal signs of returning sulkiness in Mona, hoped to avert that mood by this daring manœuvre: equally, as a sheer exercise of will, he may have decided at that moment to display his power over his patron. Neither motive would be out of keeping with his character. Finally, he might have hoped merely to ingratiate himself with Susan Tolland—certainly a pretty girl—whom he possibly cast for some at present unrevealed rôle in his future plans. Whatever his reason, he received a very encouraging smile from her after making this proposal.

'What a jolly good idea,' she said. 'As a matter of fact I was waiting for Erry to suggest it.'

Erridge was undoubtedly taken aback, although not, I think, on the ground that the suggestion came from Quiggin. Erridge did not traffic in individual psychology. It was an idea that was important to him, not its originator. The whole notion of drinking champagne because your sister was engaged was, in itself, obviously alien to him; alien both to his temperament and ideals. Champagne no doubt represented to his mind a world he had fled. Now the wine was presented as a form of rite or observance, almost, indeed, as a restorative or tonic after hearing dangerously exciting news, he seemed primarily concerned with the question whether or not any champagne remained in the house. The fact that Quiggin had put forward the proposal must at least have disposed of any fears as to whether in this manner a coarse display of his own riches might be symbolised. However, even faced with this utterly unforeseen problem, Erridge was by no means thrown off his guard. I could not help admiring the innate caution with which he seasoned his own eccentricity. Even in Erridge, some trace of that 'realism' was observable of which Chipps Lovell used to speak; among the rest of the Tollands, as I discovered later, a characteristic strongly developed.

'I really cannot answer that question offhand,' Erridge said—and one caught a faint murmur of ancestral voices answering for the Government some awkward question raised by the Opposition—'As you know I hardly ever drink anything myself, except an occasional glass of beer—

certainly never champagne. To tell the truth, I hate the stuff. We'd better ask Smith.'

Smith, as it happened, appeared at that moment with coffee. Already he showed signs of being nervously disturbed by the arrival of the girls, his hands shaking visibly as he held the tray; so much so that some of the liquid spilled from the pot.

'Smith, is there any champagne left in the cellar?'

Erridge's voice admitted the exceptional nature of the enquiry. He asked almost apologetically. Even so, the shock was terrific. Smith started so violently that the coffee cups rattled on the tray. It was evident that we were now concerned with some far more serious matter than the earlier pursuit of sherry. Recovering himself with an effort, Smith directed a stare of hatred at Quiggin, at once revealed by some butler's instinct as the ultimate cause of this unprecedented demand. The colourless, unhealthy skin of his querulous face, stretched like a pale rubber mask over the bones of his features, twitched a little.

'Champagne, m'lord?'

'Have we got any? One bottle would do. Even a half-bottle.'

Smith's face puckered, as if manfully attempting to force his mind to grapple with a mathematical or philosophical problem of extraordinary complexity. His bearing suggested that he had certainly before heard the word 'champagne' used, if only in some distant, outlandish context; that devotion to his master alone gave him some apprehension of what this question—these ravings, almost—might mean. Nothing good could come of it. This was a disastrous way to talk. That was his unspoken message so far as champagne was concerned. After a long pause, he at last shook his head.

'I doubt if there is any champagne left, m'lord.'

'Oh, I'm sure there is, Smith, if you go and look,' said Susan. 'You see it is to celebrate my engagement, Smith. I'm going to get married.'

Another twitch passed quickly, almost like a flash of lightning, over Smith's face. I had by no means taken a fancy to him, either here or at the Jeavonses', but it was impossible not to feel some sympathy for his predicament: forced at short notice to adapt himself to the whims of his different employers; for it was unlikely that his Thrubworth routine was anything like that at the Jeavonses'.

'Very pleased to hear the news, m'lady,' he said. 'Wish you the best of luck. I expect it will be Lady Isobel's turn soon.'

These felicitations were handsome on Smith's part, although Isobel, in spite of being several years younger than her sister, evidently had no wish for comparison between them to be drawn in a manner which made her, by representing, as it were, those girls not yet engaged, seem to come out second best. However, if Smith hoped by drawing attention to engagements in general to dispose of the question of champagne, he was disappointed.

'Anyway, Smith, do go and have a look,' said Isobel. 'My throat is absolutely parched.'

Erridge might have no wish to drink champagne, even if available, but he had also clearly decided that things had gone too far for the idea to be abandoned without loss of face on his own part. Smith, too, must finally have realised that, for he now set down the coffee tray and abandoned the room in full retreat, moving like a man without either enthusiasm or hope.

'Smith doesn't seem to get any soberer,' said Susan, when he had shut the door.

'As a matter of fact, Smith hasn't had one of his real bouts for a long time,' said Erridge.

He spoke reprovingly.

'So drink is Smith's trouble, is it?' said Quiggin, with great geniality. 'You never told me that. I often thought he might be one over the eight. That explains a lot.'

'Smith sometimes takes a glass too much,' said Erridge, shortly, perhaps beginning to notice, and resent, the change in Quiggin's manner since the arrival of the girls. 'I usually pretend not to notice. It must be an awful job to be a butler anyway. I don't really approve of having indoor men-servants, but it is hard to run a house this size without them, even when you live, like me, in only a small part of it. I can't get rid of the place, because it is entailed—so there it is.'

He sighed. There was rather an awkward pause. Erridge was perhaps getting cross. It was possible that the entail was not a popular subject in the family.

'What sort of luck will he have in the cellar?' asked Isobel. 'I must say champagne is just what I need.'

'I really don't know,' said Erridge. 'As I told you, I hardly drink anything myself.'

'Do you keep it locked?' asked Susan.

Erridge coloured a little.

'No,' he said. 'I like trusting people, Susan.'

Susan showed no disposition to accept this observation as a snub, although her brother was obviously displeased by her flippancy. It was natural that anyone should be annoyed whose evening had been so radically altered by force of circumstance. He had been looking forward to some hours of discussing plans for the magazine, discussion which my own presence would not have hindered. A third, and unconcerned, party might even have made Quiggin more tractable, for a certain amount of patron-protégé conflict clearly took place between them. Now, the arrival of his sisters had transformed the room into a place not far removed from one of those haunts of social life so abhorrent to him. Instead of printing charges, advertising rates, the price of paper, names of suitable contributors, their remuneration, and other such matters which, by their very nature, carried with them a suggestion of energy, power and the general good of mankind, he was now compelled to gossip about such a trifle as Susan's engagement, a subject in which he could not feel the smallest interest. This indifference was not, I felt sure, due to dislike of Susan, but because the behaviour of individuals, consanguineous or not, held, as such, no charm whatever for him. His growing vexation was plain: not lessened by Quiggin's manifest betrayal of principles with the two girls.

'Do you like driving, Lady Susan?' asked Quiggin.

'Oh, all right,' she said. 'We rattled along somehow.'

'Have you had your car long?'

When he asked that, she began to blush furiously again.

'It is a borrowed car,' she said.

'It's Roddy's,' said Isobel. 'Just to show him what married life is going to be like. Sue took his car away from him, and made him go back by train.'

'Oh, shut up,' said her sister. 'You know it was the most convenient arrangement.'

This cross-fire continued until the return of Smith. He brought with him a bottle, which he banged down quite fiercely on the table. It was Mumm, 1906: a magnum. Nothing could have borne out more thoroughly Erridge's statement about his own lack of interest in wine. It was, indeed, a mystery that this relic of former high living should have survived. Some latent sense of its lofty descent must from time to time have dominated Smith's recurrent desire, and held him off. I could not help reflecting how different must have been the occasions when its fellows had been consumed; if, in truth, we were to consume this, which seemed not yet absolutely certain.

'Just the one left,' said Smith.

He spoke in anguish, though not without resignation. Erridge hesitated. Almost as much as Smith, he seemed to dislike the idea of broaching the wine for the rest of us to drink. A moral struggle was raging within him.

'I don't know whether I really ought not to keep it,' he said. 'If there is only one. I mean, if someone or other turned up who——'

He found no individual worthy enough to name, because he stopped suddenly short.

'Oh, *do* let's, Alf,' said Mona.

She had hardly spoken since the arrival of Susan and Isobel Tolland. Her voice sounded high and strained, as if she were suffering strong nervous tension.

'Oh, yes,' said Erridge. 'You're right, Mona. We'll break its neck and celebrate your engagement, Sue.'

He was undoubtedly proud of fetching from somewhere deeply embedded in memory this convivial phrase; also cheered by the immediate, and quite general, agreement that now was the moment to drink so mature—so patriarchal—a vintage. Smith disappeared again. After another long delay he returned with champagne glasses, which had received a perfunctory rub to dispel dust accumulated since at least the time of Erridge's succession. Then, with the peculiar deftness of the alcoholic, he opened the bottle. The explosion was scarcely audible. He poured the wine, a stream of the palest of pale gold, like wine in a fairy story, at the same time offering an almost inaudible, though certainly generous, appreciation of the occasion by muttering: 'I'll be drinking your ladyship's health myself later this evening.' Susan thanked him. Erridge, who had himself refused a glass, shifted his feet about uneasily. Traces of the Mumm's former excellence remained, like a few dimly remembered words of some noble poem sunk into oblivion, or a once famous statue of which only a chipped remnant still stands.

'Have you informed Hyde Park Gardens yet?' asked Erridge.

He spoke as if that were a new thought; one that worried him a little.

'I rang up,' said Susan.

The champagne had perhaps helped her to recover casualness of tone.

'What was said?'

'Great delight.'

I knew this reference must be to their stepmother, Katherine, Lady Warminster, of whom Lovell had given me some account, describing her as 'frightfully amusing'. Invalid and somewhat eccentric, she was, I suspected, a less easy-going figure than Lovell's words might lead one to suppose. There seemed indications that her stepchildren regarded her as formidable. She had always hated the country, so that her husband's death had provoked none of those embarrassments, not uncommon, in which an heir has to apply pressure to enjoy sole rights in his inheritance. On the contrary, the difficulty had been to persuade Erridge to take over Thrubworth when Lord Warminster, a traveller and big-game hunter of some celebrity, died abroad. That had been five or six years before, when Erridge's political views were still comparatively undeveloped. Lovell's picture of Erridge's early days depicted a vague, immature, unhappy young man, taking flats and leaving them, wandering about on the Continent, buying useless odds and ends, joining obscure societies, in general without friends or interests, drifting gradually into his present position.

'I'm glad the news was well received,' said Erridge.

'So was I,' said Susan. 'Jolly glad.'

This interchange on the subject of their stepmother was somehow of a much closer intimacy than anything said previously about the engagement. In relation to Lady Warminster, the Tollands presented a united front. Their sentiments towards her were not, one felt, at all unfriendly; on the contrary, rather well disposed. They were at the same time sentiments charged with that powerful family feeling with which no outward consideration, not even love or marriage, could compete, except upon very unequal terms.

'Have you been over the house?' asked Isobel, beside whom I was sitting on the sofa.

We had drunk the champagne, and the atmosphere had become more relaxed. Erridge heard the question, and spoke himself, before I could answer. Although he had had nothing to drink, he had not been able to withstand the increased warmth of relationship that the rest of us had drawn from the wine.

'Why, no, you haven't seen the house yet,' he said. 'Would you by any chance like to go round, Jenkins? There is really little or nothing of any interest to see, I must warn you, except a hat that is supposed to have belonged to the younger Pitt.'

'I should like to go round very much.'

'I expect you will prefer to stay where you are, J.G.,' said Erridge, who may have decided to take this opportunity of making a tour of the house as a kind of counterblast to Quiggin's demand for champagne. 'And I don't expect you will want to go round either, Mona, as you have seen it all several times. Jenkins and I will walk through the rooms very quickly.'

However, both Quiggin and Mona insisted that they would like to take part in the tour, in spite of its repetitive character, so far as they themselves were concerned; and the Tolland girls agreed, rather loudly, that there was nothing they enjoyed more than their eldest brother's showmanship in this particular undertaking.

'Those anti-fascist pamphlets will have to wait for another night,' Quiggin muttered to Erridge.

He spoke, as if to salve his conscience, as he rose from his chair.

'Oh, yes,' said Erridge testily, as if he wished to be reminded of the pamphlets as little as Quiggin. 'Anyway, I want to go through them carefully—not with a lot of people interrupting.'

He strode firmly in front of us. We followed down several passages, emerging at last at the head of a broad staircase. Erridge descended. Half-way down, where the wall of the landing faced the hall, hung the full-length portrait, by Lawrence, of an officer wearing the slung jacket of a hussar. Erridge stopped in front of the picture.

'The 4th Lord Erridge and 1st Earl of Warminster,' he said. 'He was a very quarrelsome man and fought a number of duels. The Duke of Wellington is supposed to have said of him: "By God, Erridge has shown himself a greater rake than Anglesey and more damn'd a fool than ever was Combermere. It is my firm belief that had he been present on the field of Waterloo we should never have carried the day." '

'But that was only when the Duke was cross,' said Isobel. 'Because he also remarked: "Erridge spoke out last night when Brougham extolled the virtues of Queen Caroline. I never saw a man so put out of countenance as was Brougham by his words." I always wonder what he said. Of course, one knows in a general way, but it would be nice to know the actual phrases.'

'I think he probably used to score off Wellington,' said Susan. 'And that was why the Duke was so sharp with him. Erridge was probably the more cunning of the two.'

'Oh, rot,' said Isobel. 'I bet he wasn't. Dukes are much more cunning than earls.'

'What makes you think so?' said her brother.

Not greatly pleased by this opinion, he did not wait for an answer, but moved on down the stairs. Denigration of ancestors was more agreeable to him than banter regarding the order of peerage to which he belonged. Not for the first time that evening one was conscious of the bones of an old world pomposity displayed beneath the skin of advanced political thought. However, he soon recovered from this momentary discomposure.

'Of course the Tollands were really nobody much at the beginning of the fourteenth century,' he said. 'That is when they first appear. Lesser gentry, I suppose you might call them. I think they probably made their money out of the Black Death.'

As such a foundation of the family fortunes seemed of interest, I enquired further. Erridge was taken back by the question.

'Oh, I don't know for certain,' he said. 'There was a big industrial and social upheaval then, as you probably know. The Tollands may have turned it to good account. I think they were a pretty awful lot.'

He appeared a little disturbed by this perhaps over close attention on my own part to the detail of the history he provided. The girls giggled. Quiggin came to the rescue.

'When did these *kulaks* begin their career of wholesale exploitation?' he asked.

He sweetened the enquiry with some harsh laughter. Erridge laughed too, more at home with Quiggin in his political phraseology than in domestic raillery with his sisters.

'*Kulaks* is the word,' he said. 'I think they first went up in the world when one of them was knighted by

Edward IV. Then another was Esquire of the Body to Henry VIII, whatever that may have been, and lost his job under Bloody Mary. They've been an awfully undistinguished lot on the whole. They were Cavaliers in the Civil War and got a peerage under Queen Anne. John Toland, the deist, was no relation, so I've been told. I should rather like to have claimed him.'

We entered a long room hung with portraits. The younger Pitt's hat stood within a glass case in one corner by the window. The furniture, as described by Lovell, was under dust-sheets.

'I never use any of these rooms,' said Erridge.

He pulled away the dust-sheets without ceremony; leaving in the centre of the room a heap of linen on the floor. The furniture was on the whole mediocre; although, as at the Jeavonses', there was a good piece here and there. The pictures, too, apart from the Lawrence—the bravura of which gave it some charm—were wholly lacking in distinction. Erridge seemed aware of these deficiencies, referring more than once to the 'rubbish' his forbears had accumulated. Yet, at the same time, in his own peculiar way, he seemed deeply to enjoy this opportunity of displaying the house: a guilty enjoyment, though for that reason no less keen.

'We really ought to have my Uncle Alfred here,' said Erridge. 'He regards himself as rather an authority on family history—and, I must say, is a very great bore on the subject. Nothing is worse than someone who takes that sort of thing up, and hasn't had enough education to carry it through.'

I recalled Alfred Tolland's own remarks about his nephew's failure to erect a memorial window. Erridge, whose last words revealed a certain intellectual arrogance, until then dormant, probably found it convenient to diminish his own scrutiny of family matters where tedious negotiation was concerned. In any case, however much an oblique contemplation of his race might gratify him, there could be no doubt that he regarded any such weakness as morally wrong.

'It makes a very nice museum to live in,' said Quiggin.

We had completed the tour and returned to the room where we had dined. No trace seemed to remain of Quiggin's earlier objections to the tour. His inconsistencies, more limited by circumstance than those of Erridge, were no less pronounced. Erridge himself, entirely at ease while displaying his possessions, now began once more to pace about the room nervously.

'How are you and Isobel getting back, Susy?' he asked.

He sounded apprehensive, as if he feared his sisters might have come with the idea of attempting to stay for several months: perhaps even hoping to take possession of the house entirely, and entertain at his expense on a huge scale.

'Well, I've got Roddy's car,' said Susan, blushing again at mention of her future husband. 'We thought if you could put us up for the night, we'd start early for London tomorrow morning.'

Erridge was not enthusiastic about this proposal. There was some discussion. However, he could not very well turn his sisters out of the house at that hour of the night, so that in the end he agreed; at the same time conveying a warning that the sheets might not be properly aired.

'All right,' said Isobel. 'We'll get rheumatic fever. We don't mind. I can't tell you how smart Roddy's car is, by the way. If we get up reasonably early, we shall reach London in no time.'

'It is rather a grand car,' said Susan. 'I don't know whether anyone would like a lift in the morning.'

This seemed an opportunity not to be missed. I asked if I might accept the offer.

'Yes, do come,' said Isobel. 'It will be too boring otherwise, driving all the way to London with Susy talking of nothing but arrangements for her wedding.'

'We will pick you up when we come past the cottage, which we do, anyway,' said Susan. 'I warn you I am frightfully punctual.'

Quiggin did not look too pleased at this, but, having enjoyed his evening, he was by that time in a mood to allow such an arrangement to pass. Erridge, already suppressing one or two yawns, seemed anxious now that we should go, and give him an opportunity to make for bed. Mona, too, had been silent for a long time, as if lost in thought. She looked tired. It was time to say good-night.

'See you in the morning,' said Isobel.

'I will be waiting at the gate.'

Erridge came to the door and let us out. We passed once more through the dim glades of the melancholy park, now dramatised by moonlight. It was a warm night, damp, though without rain, and no wind stirred the trees. There was a smell of hay and wet timber in the air. The noise of owls came faintly as they called to each other under the stars.

'Alf is a champion lad,' said Quiggin. 'His sisters are grand girls too. You didn't take long to press your company on them, I must say.'

'I've got to get back to London somehow.'

'I didn't think the girls were up to much,' said Mona. 'They behaved as if they owned the place. I hate those tweed suits.'

'You know, Alf is rather like Prince Myshkyn in *The Idiot,*' said Quiggin. 'A Myshkyn with political grasp. You wouldn't believe the money spent on good causes that he has got through, one way and another.'

'What sort of thing?'

'He has helped a lot of individual cases that have been recommended to him from time to time. Howard Craggs got quite a bit out of him a year or two back, which I bet he never repaid. Then Alf has founded several societies and financed them. Refugees, too.'

'Mind he doesn't meet Guggenbühl.'

'I'll see to that,' said Quiggin, laughing sourly.

'He ought to marry a nice girl who would teach him to look after his money instead of handing it out to all these wasters,' said Mona.

One of her bad moods seemed on the way.

'All very good causes,' said Quiggin, who seemed to enjoy contemplating this subject. 'But sums that would make you gasp.'

'Bloody fool,' said Mona.

4.

IN the Jeavonses' house everything was disposed about the rooms as if the owners had moved in only a week or two before, and were still picknicking in considerable disorder among their unsorted belongings. Whether the better pieces were Sleaford spoils, or derived from Molly's side of the family, Lovell was uncertain. Certainly Molly herself had not bought them; still less, Jeavons. Lovell said the only object the two of them were known to have acquired throughout their married life together was a cabinet made of some light, highly polished wood, designed—though never, I think, used—to enclose the wherewithal for mixing cocktails. In practice, bottles, glasses and ice were always brought into the drawing-room on a tray, the cabinet serving only as a plinth upon which to rest the cage enclosing two budgerigars. You could never tell who would carry in this drink tray; or, for that matter, who would open the front door. Regular servants were employed only spasmodically, their duties on the whole undertaken by such temporary figures as Erridge's Smith, or superannuated nurses and governesses of the Ardglass family, whose former dependants were legion. Even personal friends of Molly's, down on their luck for one reason or another, would from time to time lend a hand on the domestic side, while a succession of charwomen, gloomy or jocular, haunted the passages by day.

No one was ever, so to speak, turned away from the Jeavons table. The place was a hinterland where none of the ordinary rules seemed to apply and persons of every sort could encounter. Perhaps that description makes the company to be found there sound too diverting. Certainly Lovell was less complimentary. 'Of course you hardly ever meet intelligent people there,' he used to say, for some reason cherishing in his mind that category of person, without too closely defining means of recognition. 'And you rarely see anyone whom *I* would call really smart.' Then he was accustomed to relent a little, and add: 'All the same, you may find absolutely anybody at Aunt Molly's.'

In making this practical—even brutal—analysis, I think Lovell merely meant that individuals deeply ambitious of receiving a lot of grand invitations would never dream of wasting time among the rag, tag and bobtail normally to be found at the Jeavonses'; but he probably intended at the same time to imply that such over-eager people might sometimes be surprised—possibly even made envious—by the kind of visitor from Molly's past—or, for that matter, her unconformable present, who was the exception in the house rather than the rule. A powerful substratum of relations was usually to be found there, Ardglass and Sleaford connexions, as a rule: not, on the whole, the most eminent members of those families. Jeavons, certainly no snob in the popular and derogatory sense (although he had acquired for everyday purposes a modicum of lore peculiar to his wife's world) would from time to time produce a relation of his own—for example, a nephew who worked in Wolverhampton—but, even had he so desired, he could never have attempted to compete in point of number with the ramifications of Molly's family: the descendants of her grandfather's ninety-seven first cousins. It was at the Jeavonses' that I met the Tolland sisters again.

Lovell, probably unreliable, I thought, upon such a point, said that Jeavons used occasionally to kick over the traces of married life.

'He goes off by himself and gets tight and picks up a woman,' Lovell said. 'Just once in a way, you know. One evening he brought an obvious tart to the house to have a drink.'

'Were you there?'

'No. Someone told me. One of the Tollands, I think.'

I questioned the truth of the story, not so much because I wholly disbelieved it, as on account of the implications of such behaviour, suggesting additionally mysterious avenues of Jeavons's life, which for some reason I felt unwilling, almost too squeamish, to face. However, Lovell himself agreed that whichever Tolland sister had produced the story was probably no very capable judge of the degrees of fallen womanhood, and might easily have used the term without professional connotation: admitting, too, had any such incident taken place, that the girl was unlikely to have been remarked as someone very unusual in such a social no man's land as the Jeavons drawing-room. He conceded finally that Molly would be more than equal to dealing with an intrusion of just that sort, even had she decided—something very unlikely—that the trespassing guest had unexpectedly passed beyond some invisible, though as it were platonically defined, limit as to who might, and who might not, be suitably received under the Jeavons' roof.

All the same, the story, even if untrue, impressed me as of interest in its bearing on a sense of strain suffered, perhaps continuously, by Jeavons himself. At worst, the supposed introduction of a 'tart' into his house was a myth somehow come into existence, which represented in highly coloured terms a long since vanquished husband's vain efforts publicly to demonstrate his own independence from a wife's too evident domination. The legend itself was a kind of tribute to Molly's strength: a strength of which her first husband too, for all I knew, might in his time have been made equally aware; although Lord Sleaford, at least outwardly, was better equipped to control a wife of Molly's sort.

'I don't think she was unhappy when she was married to Uncle John,' Lovell used to say. 'Of course, he was rather a dull dog. Still, lots of women have to put up with dull dogs—not to say dirty dogs—without the advantage of lots of money and a stately home. Besides, Ted is a dull dog, too. I suppose Aunt Molly prefers husbands like that.'

My own feeling was that Jeavons could not be described as 'dull': even though he had appeared so, in that very phrase, to Widmerpool equally with Lovell. On the contrary, Jeavons seemed to me a person oddly interesting.

'Molly never really got on with her contemporaries,' Lovell said. 'The kind of people one associates with Lady Diana—and all that. She knew some of them, of course, very well, but she couldn't be called one of that, or any other, set. I dare say Uncle John was afraid of his wife being thought "fast". She was very shy, too, I believe, in those days. Quite different from what she is like now.'

A picture of Molly Jeavons was beginning to emerge: separateness from her 'young married' contemporaries: perhaps a certain recoil from their flamboyance: in any case, nothing in common with the fleeting interest in the arts of that new fashionable world. She might have the acquisitive instinct to capture from her first marriage (if that was indeed their provenance) such spoils as the Wilson and the Greuze, while remaining wholly untouched by the intellectual emancipation, however skin-deep, of her generation: the Russian Ballet: the painters of the Paris School: novels and poetry of the period: not even such a mournful haunt of the third-rate as the Celtic Twilight had played a part in her life. She had occupied a position many women must have envied, jogging along there for a dozen years without apparent dissatisfaction or a breath of scandal; then contentedly taking on an existence of such a very different kind, hardly noticing the change. All that was interesting. The fact was, perhaps, that her easy going, unambitious manner of life had passed unremarked in a vast house like Dogdene, organised in the last resort by the industrious Sleaford, who, according to Lovell, possessed rather a taste for interfering in domestic matters. While married to him, Molly remained a big, charming, noisy young woman, who had never entirely ceased to be a schoolgirl. When the Dogdene frame was removed, like the loosening of a corset of steel, the unconventional, the eccentric, even the sluttish side of her nature became suddenly revealed to the world.

So far as 'getting on' with her second husband was concerned, the strongest protest she ever seemed to make was: 'Oh, Teddy, dear, do you ever catch hold of the right end of the stick?', spoken kindly, and usually not without provocation; for Jeavons could be slow in grasping the point of a story. Some husbands might certainly take even that rebuke amiss, but Jeavons never seemed to question Molly's absolute sway over himself, the house and all those who came there. I heard her say these words on subsequent visits after Lovell had introduced me there. Neither Widmerpool nor Mrs. Haycock had turned up again since that first night, and I made some enquiry about them.

'Oh, you know Mr. Widmerpool?' said Molly, at once beginning to laugh. 'How extraordinary that you should know him. But perhaps you said so before. He has got jaundice. What a thing to happen when you are going to get married.'

'How disagreeable for him. But I am not altogether surprised. He always makes a great fuss about his health. I think he has had jaundice before.'

'You know him well then?'

'Fairly well—though I don't often see him.'

'He is rather amusing, isn't he?' said Molly. 'Quite a wit in his way. But he must look awful now that he is bright yellow.'

I agreed that the disease would give Widmerpool an unattractive appearance. It seemed to me extraordinary that she should have thought him 'amusing'. I sometimes found his company enjoyable, because we had experienced much in common; but I could never remember him making an entertaining remark. I wondered what he could have said to cause that judgment: learning in due course that she was quite reckless in the characteristics she attributed to individuals. A chance remark would have the effect of swaying her entirely in favour of one person, or of arousing the bitterest opposition to another. She was very critical of many of the people who came to see her, and hoarded an accumulation of largely unfounded inferences about their character. These inaccuracies seemed to cancel each other out in some manner, so that in the last resort Molly was no worse informed, indeed in point of acuteness often better placed, than what might be regarded as 'the average'.

'Do you think he is in love with Mildred?' she asked sharply.

'I really don't know. I suppose so. If he wants to marry her.'

I was not at all prepared for the question.

'Oh, that doesn't necessarily follow at all,' she said. 'I feel rather sorry for him in some ways. Mildred is not an easy person. I've known her such a long time. She isn't a bit easy. But now you simply must come up to my bedroom and see the monkey. I bought him today from a man in Soho, where I went to get some pimentos.'

A good deal of the life of the Jeavons' household was, in fact, lived in Molly's bedroom, either because a sick animal was established there (with the budgerigars, four principal dogs and at least as many cats inhabited the house), or simply because Molly herself had risen late, or retired early to rest, in either case holding a kind of reception from her bed, a Victorian fourposter that took up most of the room. On a chest of drawers beside the bed stood a photograph of Jeavons in uniform: breeches: puttees: at the back of his head a floppy service cap of the kind stigmatised by Mrs. Haycock in her youth as a 'gorblimey'. He held a knotted bamboo swagger cane under one arm, and, wearing on his tunic the ribbon of the M.C. (awarded after the action in which he had been so seriously wounded), he looked the complete subaltern of war-time musical comedy.

'Come along, all of you,' said Molly. 'You must all see the monkey. You too, Tuffy. You simply must see him.'

I had already recognised the tall, dark, beaky-nosed woman to whom she spoke as Miss Weedon, former secretary of my old friend Charles Stringham's mother, Mrs. Foxe. Miss Weedon, now in her late forties, had been his sister Flavia's governess. After Flavia grew up, she had stayed on to help with Mrs. Foxe's social engagements and charities. I had been waiting an opportunity to have a word with her. I reintroduced myself as we climbed the stairs with the other people who wished—or were being compelled—to visit the monkey. Miss Weedon, wholly unchanged, still sombrely dressed, gave me a keen look.

'But of course I remember,' she said. 'Charles brought you to luncheon in the London house before he went to Kenya to stay with his father. They had forgotten to get a ticket for Charles in a theatre party that had been made up—the Russian Ballet, I think. I was put to all kind of trouble to produce the extra ticket. However, I got it for him in the end.'

I, too, remembered the incident; and also the look of adoration Miss Weedon had given Stringham when she entered the room. I well recalled that passionate glance, although even then—that night at the Jeavonses'—I had not yet guessed the depths of her devotion. I wondered what she did with herself now. Stringham, when last we had seen something of each other, had told me: 'Tuffy has come into a little money,' and that she was no longer his mother's secretary. I found in due course that Miss Weedon was a close friend of Molly's; in fact that she re-enacted at the Jeavonses' many of her former duties when in the employment of Mrs. Foxe, although, of course, in a household organised on very different terms. It was impossible to know from her manner how unexpected, or the reverse, she found the fact that we had met again at this place. In her profound, though mysterious, dimness, she was typical of the background of Jeavons' gatherings.

'I always regret that Charles ever made that journey to Kenya,' she said.

She spoke severely, as if I had myself been in part to blame for allowing such a thing ever to have taken place; even though at the same time she freely forgave me for such former thoughtlessness.

'Why?'

'He was never the same afterwards.'

I had to admit to myself there was some truth in that. Stringham had never been the same after Kenya. It had been a water-shed in his life.

'Perhaps it was just because he became a man,' she said. 'Of course, his upbringing was impossible—always, from the beginning. But he changed so much after that trip to Africa. He was a boy when he went—and such a charming boy—and he really came back a man.'

'People do grow up. At least some do.'

'I am afraid Charles was not one of them,' she said gravely. 'He became a man, but he did not grow up. He is not grown up now.'

I hardly knew what to answer. It was one of those head-first dives into generalisation that usually precedes between two persons a greater conversational intimacy. However, Miss Weedon made no attempt to expand her statement; nor, so to speak, to draw closer in her approach to the problem of Stringham. She merely continued to look at me with a kind of chilly amiability; as if, by making an immediate confession that I was a former friend of his, I had, so far as she was concerned, just managed to save my bacon. When a boy, I had regarded her as decidedly formidable. I still found her a trifle alarming. She gave an impression of complete singleness of purpose: the impression of a person who could make herself very disagreeable if thwarted.

'Do you ever see Charles now?' I asked.

She did not answer at once, as if waiting a second or two in order to make up her mind how best to deal with that question; perhaps trying to decide the relative merits of plain statement and diplomatic evasion. Finally she came down on the side of bluntness.

'Yes, I do see him,' she said. 'Quite often. You probably know he drinks too much—really much too much. I am trying to help him about that.'

She stared at me very composedly. Once more I hardly knew how to reply. I had not expected our conversation to take this unreservedly serious turn; especially as we had by then reached the bedroom, and were only delayed in our introduction to the ape by the concourse of people who surrounded him, offering homage and applauding Molly's particularisation of his many charms of character.

'Charles had certainly had rather too much the last time I saw him,' I said, trying to pass off the matter of Stringham's drunkenness as if it were just a question of getting rather tight once in a way, which I knew to be far from the truth. 'That was at a dinner he and I went to—two or three years ago at least.'

'You have not seen him since then?'

'No.'

'It still goes on. But I think I shall be able to help him.'

I had no clear idea of how she would set about 'helping' Stringham, but the way she spoke made me conscious of her undoubted strength of will. In fact, her voice chilled my blood a little, she sounded so firm. However, at that moment we found ourselves confronted by the monkey—named by his owners 'Maisky', after the then Soviet Ambassador—and were introduced by Molly to shake hands with him. He was sitting thoughtfully among the cushions of a spacious basket, from time to time extending a small, dry paw in greeting to Molly's guests as they came into his immediate presence. A saucer of nuts stood beside him. There was something of Quiggin in his seriousness and self-absorbtion: also in the watchful manner in which he glanced from time to time at the nuts, sometimes choosing one specially tempting to crack.

'Have you known Lady Molly long?' asked Miss Weedon, after we had taken leave of Maisky, and were returning down the stairs.

'Only a short time.'

'I thought I had never seen you here before.'

'I was brought by Chips Lovell.'

'Oh, yes. One of her nephews. Rather a pushing young man. She was very good to him when he was a boy and his parents did not take much trouble about him. She is a very kind-hearted woman. Quite exceptionally kind-hearted. The house is always full of people she is doing good turns to. Children stay here while their parents are fixing up a divorce. Penniless young men get asked to meals. Former servants are always being given help of one sort or another. There is an old cousin of her husband's ill in one of the upper bedrooms now. She has nowhere else to go, and will certainly never leave the house alive. I really cannot think how Lady Molly stands some of the people who come here. Many are quite dreadful.'

'They certainly seem a mixed bag.'

'They are worse than that, some of them.'

'Really?'

'At the same time, you may find yourself talking to someone like Charles's former father-in-law, Lord Bridgnorth—whom Charles detests and thinks the most conceited, pompous man in the world—who eats out of Lady Molly's hand. He even takes her advice about his horses. Lady Plynlimmon was here at tea the other day. She really seemed quite interested in what Mr. Jeavons was saying about Germany, although usually she won't speak to anyone who is not in the Cabinet. Not long ago Lord Amesbury looked in on his way to a court ball, wearing knee breeches and the Garter. Lady Molly was giving the vet a meal she had cooked herself, because everyone else was out for one reason or another and she had made him come in from miles away in the suburbs to see a cat that had fever. I happened to drop in, and found all three of them eating scrambled eggs together.'

By that time we had once more reached the drawing-room. Miss Weedon ceased to enlarge upon these occasional—indeed, very occasional—glories of the Jeavons' salon; which were, as it happened, in marked contrast to the company gathered together that evening. I asked if she knew Mrs. Haycock.

'Certainly I do,' said Miss Weedon. 'Do you remember a boy called Widmerpool who was at school with Charles and yourself? I think you were all in the same house together, were you not? Charles used to give imitations of him. I am sure you must remember. Well, Mrs. Haycock is going to marry Mr. Widmerpool.'

She nodded her head sharply, to emphasise what she had said. I was amazed that she should be familiar with Stringham's mimicry of Widmerpool. I could have found it within the bounds of possibility that she had heard of Widmerpool, but that Stringham should have shared with her such jokes as his brilliant, though essentially esoteric, Widmerpool imitations, I should never have guessed. This new light on Stringham's relationship with Miss Weedon suggested quite a different sort of intimacy to any I had previously surmised. I told her that I already knew of Widmerpool's engagement. That had been my reason for enquiry. Miss Weedon smiled her thin freezing smile.

'I think Mildred Haycock was quite glad to find someone to marry,' she said. 'Especially a man with such a good future in front of him. Of course he is a bit young for her. All the same, it is *easier* for a woman like Mrs. Haycock—who has two children, both quite old now—to be married. Then, also, although she is not badly off, she is very extravagant. Everyone says so.'

'She has been living in the South of France?'

'Where she made herself rather notorious, I believe.'

'Meanwhile, her fiancé is suffering from jaundice.'

'Indeed,' said Miss Weedon, smiling thinly again. 'I expect she will find someone to console her. Commander Foxe, for example.'

'Buster? How is he?'

'He might begin to take her out again. Te retired from the Navy some years ago. He has got rather fat. It worries him terribly. He does all kinds of things for it. Every sort of diet. Cures at Tring. It is really his sole interest now.'

'And you thought Mrs. Haycock might take his mind off the weighing machine?'

Miss Weedon's mouth stiffened. I saw I had gone too far. She probably regretted her own indiscretion about Buster's past with Mrs. Haycock. I had not thought of Buster Foxe for years. Stringham had never cared for him. It sounded from Miss Weedon's tone as if Buster had been reduced—like Jeavons—to a purely subordinate position. There was a certain parallel in their situations. I wondered if they had ever met.

'And how is Mrs. Foxe herself?'

'Very well, I understand. As social as ever.'

'What does Charles do about money now?'

'Money is rather a difficulty,' said Miss Weedon, abandoning her air of cold malice, and now speaking as if we had returned to serious matters. 'His father, with that French wife of his in Kenya, has not much to spare. Mrs. Foxe has the Warrington money, but it is only for her lifetime. She spends it like water.'

At that moment Jeavons himself approached us, putting an end to any explanation Miss Weedon was about to offer on the subject of Stringham's financial resources.

'What do you make of Maisky?' asked Jeavons.

He spoke in a preoccupied, confidential tone, as if Miss Weedon's reply might make all the difference by its orientation to plans on foot for Maisky's education.

'I don't care for monkeys,' said Miss Weedon.

'Oh, don't you?' said Jeavons.

He stood pondering this flat, forthright declaration of anti-simianism on Miss Weedon's part. The notion that some people might not like monkeys was evidently entirely new to him; surprising, perhaps a trifle displeasing, but at the same time one of those general ideas of which one can easily grasp the general import without being necessarily in agreement. It was a theory that startled by its stark simplicity.

'Molly has taken a great fancy to him,' he said, at last.

'I know.'

'Oh, well,' said Jeavons. 'These fancies come and go.'

Miss Weedon made no attempt to deny the truth of that observation. Nor did she elaborate her dislike of monkeys. She continued to smile her arctic smile. Jeavons slowly strolled off again, as if to think out the implications of what Miss Weedon had said. I was aware once more of my strong disagreement with those—amongst whom I suspected Miss Weedon might be numbered—who found Jeavons without interest. On the contrary, he seemed to me, in his own way, rather a remarkable person. An encounter with him away from his own home confirmed that there existed more sides to him than might be apparent in the Jeavons drawing-room.

This episode took place a month or two later, on an evening that had begun with having a drink with Feingold in the pub near the Studio. Feingold had plans to write a satirical novel about life in the film business. He wanted to tell me the plot in the hope that I might be able to suggest a suitable ending to the story. Returning to London later than usual as a result of Feingold's unwillingness to treat the subject in hand briefly (he himself lived in the neighbourhood of the Studio), I decided to dine off a sandwich and a glass of beer at some bar. The pubs in the neighbourhood of my own flat had not much to offer, so, quite fortuitously, I entered an establishment off the south side of Oxford Street, where an illuminated sign indicated an underground buffet. It was the kind of place my old, deceased friend, Mr. Deacon, used to call a 'gin palace'.

At the foot of the stairs was a large, low-ceilinged room filled with shiny black-topped tables and red wicker armchairs. The bar, built in the shape of an L, took up most of two sides of this saloon, of which the pillars and marbled wall decoration again recalled Mr. Deacon's name by their resemblance to the background characteristic of his pictures: *Pupils of Socrates,* for example, or *By the Will of Diocletian.* No doubt this bar had been designed by someone who had also brooded long and fruitlessly on classical themes, determined to express in whatever medium available some boyhood memory of *Quo Vadis?* or *The Last Days of Pompeii.* The place was deserted except for the barman, and a person in a mackintosh who sat dejectedly before an empty pint tankard in the far corner of the room. In these oppressively Late Roman surroundings, after climbing on to a high stool at the counter, I ordered food.

I had nearly finished eating, when I became obscurely aware that the man in the corner had risen and was making preparations to leave. He walked across the room, but instead of mounting the stairs leading to the street, he came towards the bar where I was sitting. I heard him pause behind me. I thought that, unable at the last moment to tear himself away from the place, he was going to buy himself another drink. Instead, I suddenly felt his hand upon my shoulder.

'Didn't recognise you at first. I was just on my way out. Come and have one with me in the corner after you've finished your tuck-in.'

It was Jeavons. As a rule he retained even in his civilian clothes a faded military air, comparable with—though quite different from—that of Uncle Giles: both of them in strong contrast with the obsolete splendours of General Conyers. A safety pin used to couple together the points of Jeavons's soft collar under the knot of what might be presumed to be the stripes of a regimental tie. That night, however, in a somewhat Tyrolese hat with the brim turned down all the way round, wearing a woollen scarf and a belted mackintosh, the *ensemble* gave him for some reason the appearance of a plain-clothes man. His face was paler than usual. Although perfectly steady on his feet, and speaking in his usual slow, deliberate drawl, I had the impression he had been drinking fairly heavily. We ordered some more beer, and carried it across the room to where he had been sitting.

'This your local?' he asked.

'Never been here before in my life. I dropped in quite by chance.'

'Same here.'

'It's a long way from your beat.'

'I've been doing a pub crawl,' he said. 'Feel I have to have one—once in a way. Does you good.'

There could be no doubt, after that, that Jeavons was practising one of those interludes of dissipation to which Lovell had referred, during which he purged himself, as it were, of too much domesticity.

'Think there is going to be a war?' he asked, very unexpectedly.

'Not specially. I suppose there might be—in a year or two.'

'What do you think we ought to do about it?'

'I can't imagine.'

'Shall I tell you?'

'Please do.'

'Declare war on Germany right away,' said Jeavons. 'Knock this blighter Hitler out before he gives further trouble.'

'Can we very well do that?'

'Why not?'

'No government would dream of taking it on. The country wouldn't stand for it.'

'Of course they wouldn't,' said Jeavons.

'Well?'

'Well, we'll just have to wait,' said Jeavons.

'I suppose so.'

'Wait and see,' said Jeavons. 'That was what Mr. Asquith used to say. Didn't do us much good in 1914. I expect you were too young to have been in the last show?'

I thought that enquiry rather unnecessary, not by then aware that, as one grows older, the physical appearance of those younger than oneself offers only a vague indication of their precise age. To me, 'the Armistice' was a distant memory of my preparatory school: to Jeavons, the order to 'cease fire' had happened only the other day. The possibility that I might have been 'in the war' seemed perfectly conceivable to him.

'Some of it wasn't so bad,' he said.

'No?'

'Most of it perfect hell, of course. Absolute bloody hell on earth. Bloody awful. Gives me the willies even to think of it sometimes.'

'Where were you?'

'Joined up at Thirsk. Started off in the Green Howards. Got a commission after a bit in one of the newly-formed battalions of the Duke of Wellington's Regiment. I'd exchanged from the Duke's into the Machine-Gun Corps when I caught it in the tummy at Le Bassée.'

'Pretty unpleasant?'

'Not too good. Couldn't digest anything for ages. Can't always now, to tell the truth. Some of those dinners Molly gives. Still, digestion is a funny thing. I once knew a chap who took a bet he could eat a cut-off-the-joint-and-two-veg at a dozen different pubs between twelve o'clock and three on the same day.'

'Did he win his bet?'

'The first time,' said Jeavons, screwing up his face painfully at the thought of his friend's ordeal, 'someone else at the table lit a cigarette, and he was sick—I think he had got to about eight or nine by then. We all agreed he ought to have another chance. A day or two later he brought it off. Funny what people can do.'

Conversation could be carried no further because at this point 'closing time' was announced. Jeavons, rather to my surprise, made no effort to prolong our stay until the last possible moment. On the contrary, the barman had scarcely announced 'Time, gentlemen, please,' when Jeavons made for the stairs. I followed him. He seemed to have a course for himself clearly mapped out. When we reached the street, he turned once more to me.

'Going home?'

'I suppose so.'

'Wouldn't like to prolong this night of giddy pleasure with me for a bit?'

'If you have any ideas.'

'There is a place I thought of visiting tonight. A club of some sort—or a 'bottle party' as they seem to call it these days—that has just opened. Care to come?'

'All right.'

'A fellow came to see Molly some weeks ago, and gave us a card to get in any time we wanted. You know, you buy a bottle and all that. Makes you a member. Chap used to know Molly years ago. Gone the pace a bit. Now he is rather hard up and managing this hide-out.'

'I see.'

'Ever heard of Dicky Umfraville?'

'Yes. In fact I met him once years ago.'

'That's all right then. Umfraville is running the place. Molly would never dream of going near it, of course. Thought I might go and have a look-see myself.'

'Is Dicky Umfraville still married to Anne Stepney?'

'Don't think he is married to anyone at the moment,' said Jeavons. 'That would make his third or fourth, wouldn't it?'

'His fourth. She was quite young.'

'Come to think of it, Molly did say he'd had another divorce fairly recently,' said Jeavons. 'Anyway, he is more than usually on the rocks at the moment. He used to stay at Dogdene when Molly's first husband was alive. Gilded youth in those days. Not much left now. First-class rider, of course, Umfraville. Second in the National one year.'

While we talked, Jeavons had been making his way in a south-easterly direction. We continued in silence for some time, threading a path through a tangle of mean streets, past the plate-glass windows of restaurants opaque with steam.

'I think we must be close now,' said Jeavons, at last. 'I know more or less where the place is, and Dicky has drawn a sort of map at the back of the card.'

By that time we were in the neighbourhood of the Trouville Restaurant, a haunt of Uncle Giles, where one night, years before, I had joined him for a meal. The entrance to the club was concealed in an alleyway, by no means easy to find. We discovered the door at last. The name of the club was inscribed upon it on a minute brass plate, as if any kind of display was to be avoided. At the end of a narrow, dimly-lit passage a villainous-looking fellow with watery eyes and a nose covered with blue veins sat behind a rickety table. On the mention of Umfraville's name and production of the card, this Dickensian personage agreed that we might enter the precincts, after he had with his own hand laboriously inscribed our names in a book. 'The Captain's not in the club yet,' he said, as he shut this volume, giving at the same time a dreadful leer like that of a very bad actor attempting to horrify a pantomime audience. 'But I don't expect he'll be long now.'

'Tell him to report to the Orderly Room when he comes,' said Jeavons, causing the blue-nosed guardian of the door to reveal a few rotting teeth in appreciation of this military pleasantry.

The interior of the club was unimpressive. An orchestra of three, piano, drum and saxophone, were making a deafening noise in the corner of the room. A few 'hostesses' sat about in couples, gossiping angrily in undertones, or silently reclining in listless attitudes against the back of a chair. We seemed to be the first arrivals, not surprisingly, for it was still early in the evening for a place of this kind to show any sign of life. After a certain amount of palaver, a waiter brought us something to drink. Nothing about the club suggested that Umfraville's fortune would be made by managing it.

'Anyway, as I was saying,' remarked Jeavons, who had, in fact, scarcely spoken for some considerable time, except for his negotiations with the doorkeeper and waiter. 'As I was saying, you did have the odd spot of fun once in a while. Mostly on leave, of course. That stands to reason. Now I'll tell you a funny story, if you'll promise to keep it under your hat.'

'Wild horses won't drag it from me.'

'I suppose it's a story a real gent wouldn't tell,' said Jeavons. 'But then I'm not a real gent.'

'You are whetting my appetite.'

'I don't know why I should fix on you to hear the story,' said Jeavons, speaking as if he had given much thought to the question of who should be his confidant in this particular matter, and at the same time taking a packet of Gold Flake from his trouser pocket and beginning to tear open the wrapping. 'But I've got an idea it might amuse you. Did I see you talking to a fellow called Widmerpool at our house some little while ago—I believe it was the first night you ever came there?'

'You did.'

I was interested to find that new arrivals at the Jeavonses' were so accurately registered in the mind of the host.

'Know him well?'

'Quite well.'

'Then I expect you know he is going to marry someone called Mildred Haycock, who was also there that night.'

'I do.'

'Know her too?'

'Not really. I met her once when I was a small boy.'

'Exactly. You were a small boy and she was already grown up. In other words, she is quite a bit older than Widmerpool.'

'I know. She was a nurse at Dogdene when your wife was there, wasn't she——?'

'Wait a moment—wait a moment;' said Jeavons. 'Not so fast. Don't rush ahead. That's all part of the story.'

'Sorry.'

'Well, as I was saying, you did occasionally have a spot of fun in those days. Especially on leave. That's the point. No good going too fast. Had to dodge the A.P.M., of course. Still, that's by the way. Now I happened to get ninety-six hours' leave at short notice when I hadn't time to make any arrangements. Found the easiest thing was to spend the time in London. Didn't know a soul there. Not a bloody cat. Well, after I'd had a bit of a lie-up in bed, I thought I'd go to a show. The M.O. had told me to look in on Daly's, if I got the chance. It was a jolly good piece of advice. *The Maid of the Mountains.* Top-hole show. José Collins. She married into the aristocracy like myself, but that's nothing to do with the story. I bought myself a stall, thinking I might catch a packet in the next 'strafe' and never sit in a theatre again. Hadn't been there long before a large party came in and occupied the row in front of me. There were a couple of guardsmen in their grey greatcoats and some ladies in evening dress. Among this lot was a nurse—a V.A.D.—who, as I thought—and it subsequently proved correct—began to give me the glad eye.'

Jeavons paused to gulp his drink. He shook his head and sighed. There was a long silence. I feared this might be the termination of the story: a mere chronicle of nostalgic memory: a face seen on that one occasion, yet always remembered: a romantic dream that had remained with him all his life. I spurred him gently.

'What did you do about it?'

'About what?'

'The nurse who gave you the glad eye.'

'Oh yes, that. In the interval we managed to have a word together in the bar or somewhere. Next thing I knew, I was spending my leave with her.'

'And this was——'

'Mrs. Haycock—or, as she then was, the Honourable Mildred Blaides.'

Jeavons's expression was so oracular, his tone so solemn, when he pronounced the name with the formal prefix attached, that I laughed. However, he himself remained totally serious in his demeanour. He sat there looking straight at me, as if the profound moral beauty of his own story delighted him rather than any purely anecdotal quality, romantic or banal, according to how you took it.

'And you never saw her again from that time until the other night?'

'Never set eyes on her. Of course, I've often heard Molly speak of Mildred Blaides and her goings-on, but I never knew it was the same girl. She and Molly used to meet sometimes. It so happened, for one reason or another, I was never there.'

'Did she say anything about it the other night?'

'Not a word. Didn't recognise me. After all, I suppose I've got to take my place in what must be a pretty long list by now.'

'You didn't say anything yourself?'

'Didn't want to seem to presume on a war-time commission, so I kept mum. Besides, it's just as well Molly shouldn't know. If you gas about that sort of thing too much, the story is bound to get round. Silly of me to tell you, I expect. You'll keep your trap shut, won't you?'

'Of course.'

'Just thought it might interest you—especially as you know Widmerpool.'

'It does—enormously.'

'That's the sort of thing that happens in a war. Happens to some chaps in peace-time too, I suppose. Not chaps like me. Haven't the temperament. Things have changed a lot now anyway. I don't mean people don't sleep with each other any longer. Of course they do. More than ever, if what everyone says nowadays is true. But the whole point of view is different somehow. I expect you were too young to have seen *The Bing Boys*?'

'No, I wasn't too young. I saw the show as a schoolboy.'

The band had momentarily ceased its hubbub. Jeavons leant forward. I thought he had something further to say which he wished to run no danger of being overheard. Instead, he suddenly began to sing, quite loud and in an unexpectedly deep and attractive voice:

'I could say such—wonderful things to you,
There would be such—wonderful things to do . . .'

Taking this, perhaps not unnaturally, as a kind of summons, two of the girls at a neighbouring table rose and prepared to join us, a tall, muscular blonde, not altogether unlike Mona, and a small, plump brunette, who reminded me of a girl I used to know called Rosie Manasch. (Peter Templer liked to say that you could recognise all the girls you had ever met in a chorus: like picking out your friends from a flock of sheep.) Jeavons immediately checked this threatened incursion before it could take serious form by explaining that we were waiting for the 'rest of the party'. The girls withdrew. Jeavons continued the song as if there had been no interruption:

'If you were the only—girl in the world,
And I was the only boy . . .'

He had only just time to finish before the band broke out again in a deafening volume of sound, playing some tune of very different *tempo* from that sung by Jeavons.

'People don't think the same way any longer,' he bawled across the table. 'The war blew the whole bloody thing up, like tossing a Mills bomb into a dug-out. Everything's changed about all that. Always feel rather sorry for your generation as a matter of fact, not but what we haven't all lost our—what do you call 'em—you know—somebody used the word in our house the other night—saying much what I'm saying now? Struck me very forcibly. You know—when you're soft enough to think things are going to be a damned sight better than they turn out to be. What's the word?'

'Illusions?'

'Illusions! That's the one. We've lost all our bloody illusions. Put 'em all in the League of Nations, or somewhere like that. Illusions, my God. I had a few of 'em when I started. You wouldn't believe it. Of course, I've been lucky. Lucky isn't the word, as a matter of fact. Still people always talk as if marriage was one long roll in the hay. You can take it from me, my boy, it isn't. You'll be surprised when you get tied up to a woman yourself. Suppose I shouldn't say such things. Molly and I are very fond of each other in our own way. Between you and me, she's not a great one for bed. A chap I knew in the Ordnance, who'd carried on quite a bit with the girls, told me those noisy ones seldom are. Don't do much in that line myself nowadays, to tell the truth. Feel too cooked most of the time. Never sure the army vets got quite all those separate pieces of a toffee-apple out of my ribs. Tickles a bit sometimes. Still, you have to step out once in a way. Go melancholy mad otherwise. Life's a rum business, however you look at it, and—as I was saying—not having been born to all this high life, and so on, I can't exactly complain.'

It was clear to me now that, if Molly had had her day, so too in a sense had Jeavons, even though Jeavons's day had not been at all the same as his wife's: few days, indeed, could have been more different. He was one of those men, themselves not particularly aggressive in their relations with the opposite sex, who are at the same time peculiarly attractive to some women; and, accordingly, liable to be appropriated at short notice. The episode of Mildred Blaides illustrated this state of affairs, which was borne out by the story of his marriage. It was unlikely that these were the only two women in the course of his life who had decided to take charge of him. I was hoping for further reminiscences (though expecting none more extraordinary than that already retailed) when Dicky Umfraville himself arrived at our table.

Wearing a dinner jacket, Umfraville was otherwise unchanged from the night we had met at Foppa's. Trim, horsey, perfectly at ease with himself, and everyone around him, he managed at the same time to suggest the proximity of an abyss of scandal and bankruptcy threatening at any moment to engulf himself, and anyone else unfortunate enough to be within his immediate vicinity when the crash came. The charm he exercised over people was perhaps largely due to this ability to juggle with two contrasting, apparently contradictory attributes; the one, an underlying implication of sinister, disturbing undercurrents: the other, a soothing power to reassure and entertain. These incompatible elements were always to be felt warring with each other whenever he was present. He was like an actor who suddenly appears on the stage to the accompaniment of a roll of thunder, yet who utterly captivates his audience a second later, while their nerves are still on edge, by crooning a sentimental song.

'Why,' he said, 'this is a surprise. I never thought we should persuade you to come along here, Ted. Why didn't you bring Molly with you? Are they treating you all right? I see they've brought you a bottle. Apply to me if there is any trouble. Would you like to meet any of the girls? They are not a bad crowd. I can't imagine that you want anything of the sort.'

Jeavons did not answer. He barely acknowledged Umfraville's greeting. Once more he was lost in thought. He had undoubtedly had a fair amount to drink. Umfraville was not at all put out by this reception. He pulled a chair up to the table and glanced across at me.

'We've met before somewhere,' he said.

'At Foppa's two or three years ago. You had just come back from Kenya. Hadn't you been racing with Foppa?'

'My God,' said Umfraville, 'I should think I do remember. Foppa and I had been to Caversham together. We are both interested in trotting races, which many people aren't in this country. You came in with a very charming young woman, while Foppa and I were playing piquet. Then your friend Barnby appeared with Lady Anne Stepney—and before you could say Jack Robinson, the next thing I knew was that the Lady Anne had become my fourth wife.'

I laughed, wondering what he was going to say next. I knew that his marriage to Anne Stepney had lasted only a very short time.

'I expect you heard that Anne and I didn't manage to hit it off,' he went on. 'Charming child, but the fact was I was too old for her. She didn't like grown-up life—and who shall blame her?'

He sighed.

'I don't like it much myself,' he said.

'Where is she now?'

I hardly knew whether the question was admissible. However, Umfraville had apparently achieved complete objectivity regarding his own life: certainly his matrimonial life.

'Living in Paris,' he said. 'Doing some painting, you know. She was always tremendously keen on her painting. I fell rather short on that score too. Can't tell a Sargent from a "Snaffles". She shares a flat with a girl who also walked out on her husband the other day. Come on, Ted, you mustn't go to sleep. I agree this place is pretty boring, but I can't have it turned into a doss-house. Not for the first week or so, anyway.'

Jeavons came too with a jerk. He began to beat time thoughtfully on the table.

'How are you doing here?' he asked.

He spoke severely, as if he had come to audit the accounts. Umfraville shrugged his shoulders.

'Depends how people rally round,' he said. 'I don't picture myself staying at this job long. Just enough to cover my most urgent needs—or rather my creditors' most urgent needs. These joints have a brief vogue, if they're lucky. We haven't been open long enough yet to see how things are going. I look upon your arrival, Ted, as a very good omen. Well, I suppose I must see everything about the place is going all right. Ought to have turned up earlier and done that already. I'll look in again. By the way, Max Pilgrim and Heather Hopkins are coming in later to do a turn.'

He nodded to us, and moved away. People were now arriving in the club by twos and threes. The tables round us began to fill up. The girls lost some of their apathy. These newcomers offered little or no clue to the style of the place. They belonged to that anonymous, indistinct race of night-club frequenters, as undifferentiated and lacking in individuality as the congregation at a funeral. None of them was in evening dress.

'Rum bird, Umfraville,' said Jeavons, thickly. 'Don't like him much. Knows everybody. Wasn't a bit surprised when it turned out you'd met him before. Molly used to see quite a lot of him in the old days when he was a johnny about town.'

'He married a girl much younger than himself as his fourth wife. They parted company, I hear.'

'I know. The Bridgnorths' second daughter,' said Jeavons. 'She has been to the house. Badly brought up. Been taken down a peg or two, I hope. Bad luck on Eddie Bridgnorth to have a girl like that. Done nothing to deserve it.'

Earlier in the evening, Jeavons had expressed only the vaguest knowledge of Umfraville's last marriage. Now, he seemed familiar with all its essential aspects. His awareness seemed quite unpredictable from one moment to another. The compassionate tone in which he had named

Lord Bridgnorth clearly voiced regret for a member of a caste rather than an individual, revealing for a split second a side of Jeavons on the whole concealed, though far more developed than might be supposed on brief acquaintance; the side, that is to say, which had by then entirely assimilated his wife's social standpoint. Indeed, the words might have been uttered by Alfred Tolland, so conventional, yet at the same time so unaffected, was the reflection that Eddie Bridgnorth had done nothing to deserve a rackety daughter.

'I think I'll make a further inspection of these quarters,' said Jeavons, rising. 'Just as well to know your way about.'

He made at first towards the band, but a waiter redirected him, and he disappeared through a small door. He was away a long time, during which two fresh elements were added to the composition of the room.

The first of these new components, a man and a woman, turned out to be Max Pilgrim and Heather Hopkins. They entered with the animation of professionals, almost as if their act had already begun, at once greeted by Umfraville who led them to a table near the band. I had never met Pilgrim, although I had more than once watched his performances at restaurants or cabarets, since that night, years before, when he had quarrelled so bitterly with poor Mr. Deacon at Mrs. Andriadis's party. Tall and stooping, smiling through large spectacles, there was something mild and parsonic about his manner, as if he were apologising for having to draw peoples' attention to their sins in so blatant a manner. He wore tails. Hopkins had cleaned herself up greatly since her application for the loan of an egg from Norah Tolland and Eleanor Walpole-Wilson. Her black coat and skirt, cut like a dinner jacket, had silk lapels above a stiff shirt, butterfly collar and black bow tie. Her silk stockings were black, too, and she wore a bracelet round her left ankle.

This couple had scarcely appeared when another, far less expected party came in, and were shown to a table evidently reserved for them. Mrs. Haycock led the way, followed by my old friend, Peter Templer; then Widmerpool, walking beside an unusually good-looking girl whose face I did not know. They were in evening dress. From the rather stiff way in which Templer carried himself, I guessed that he felt a shade self-conscious about the company he was keeping. By that time I was used to the idea that he no longer regarded Widmerpool with derision. After all, they did business together, and Widmerpool had helped Bob Duport to get a job. All the same, there remained something incongruous about finding Templer and Widmerpool embarked upon a *partie carrée* at a night club. Night clubs were so much to be regarded as Templer's natural element, and so little Widmerpool's, that there seemed even a kind of injustice that Widmerpool should in this manner be forced to operate in a field so inappropriate to himself; and, on top of that, for Templer to be covertly ashamed of his company.

In addition to his air of being—almost literally—a fish out of water, Widmerpool looked far from well. Still yellow from his jaundice, he had grown thinner. His dinner jacket hung on him in folds. His hair was ruffled. His back was bent like that of an elderly man. Perhaps it was this flagging aspect of Widmerpool's that made Templer seem more elegant than ever. He, too, was thinner than when I had last seen him. His habitual tendency was to look just a little too well dressed, and that evening he gave the appearance of having walked straight out of his tailor's wearing an entirely new outfit. This glossy exterior, in juxtaposition with Widmerpool, could hardly have been more sharply emphasised. The unknown pretty girl was wearing an unadventurous frock, but Mrs. Haycock was dressed to kill. Enclosed within a bright emerald-green dress with huge leg-of-mutton sleeves, she was talking with great vivacity to Templer, whose arm from time to time she took and squeezed. She looked younger than when I had last seen her.

Before any sign of recognition could take place between the members of this party and myself, the band withdrew from their position at the end of the room, and settled down at one of the tables. A moment later Pilgrim and Hopkins mounted the dais, Hopkins appropriating the pianist's stool, while Pilgrim lounged against the drum. He glanced at his nails, like a nervous don about to lecture a rowdy audience of undergraduates. Hopkins struck a few bars on the piano with brutal violence. By that time Jeavons had returned.

'Found it all right,' he said.

'Have you seen who has arrived?'

'Saw them on my way back. You know Mrs. H. doesn't look a bit different from what she looked like in 1917.'

This comment on Mrs. Haycock seemed to me an extraordinary proposition: either crudely untrue, or most uncomplimentary to her earlier appearance. In due course one learns, where individuals and emotions are concerned, that Time's slide-rule can make unlikely adjustments. Angular and flamboyant, Mrs. Haycock was certainly not without powers of attraction, but I doubted whether Jeavons saw in those severe terms. It was impossible to say. That side of her may, indeed, have constituted her charm for him both at that moment and in 1917. On the other hand, both then and in Umfraville's night club, she may have been equally no more than a romantic dream, a figure transcending any mere question of personal appearance. At that moment Pilgrim advanced a little way in front of the drum, and, in a shrill, hesitant voice, like that of an elderly governess, began to sing:

'Di, Di, in her collar and tie,
Quizzes the girls with a monocled eye,
Sipping her hock in a black satin stock,
Or shooting her cuffs over *pernod* or *bock* . . .'

'I've a damn good mind to ask her for a dance,' said Jeavons. 'Who are they with? Do you know them?'

'The man is called Peter Templer. I've known him for years.'

'And the other girl?'

'I don't know.'

'Who is Templer?'

'A stockbroker. He was divorced not so long ago from a very pretty model, who then married a writer called Quiggin. Templer is like your friend in the Ordnance, a great one with the girls.'

'Looks it,' said Jeavons.

When Pilgrim and Hopkins had left their table, Umfraville had moved to the party of which Templer seemed to be host. He was talking to Mrs. Haycock. Templer began to gaze round the room. He caught sight of me and waved. I signalled back to him. Meanwhile, Pilgrim was continuing his song, while Hopkins thumped away vigorously, and with a great deal of facility, at the piano.

'Like a torpedo, in brogues or tuxedo,
She's tearing around at Cap Cod, or the Lido;
From Bournemouth to Biarritz, the fashion parades
Welcome debonaire Di in her chic tailor-mades . . .'

'You see this sort of song, for instance,' said Jeavons. 'Who the hell wants to listen to something like that? God knows what it is all about, for one thing. Songs were quite different when I was younger.'

The song came to an end and there was a little clapping.

Templer came across the dance floor to our table. I introduced him, explaining that Jeavons had brought me; and also that Jeavons knew Widmerpool and Mrs. Haycock. I told him that at once, to forestall comments that might easily be embarrassing in the mood to which Jeavons had abandoned himself.

'So you already know that Widmerpool is getting married?' said Templer. 'I was hoping to break the news to you. I am disappointed.'

For someone in general so sure of himself, he was a shade self-conscious at being caught entertaining Widmerpool in a haunt of this kind: hardly a routine place to take a business acquaintance. He had probably hoped that the news of Widmerpool's engagement, by its broad humour, would distract attention from his own immediate circumstances.

'The old boy behaved rather well about my brother-in-law, Bob,' he said, rather hurriedly. 'And then Dicky kept on pestering me to come to this dive of his. Do you know Dicky?'

'Just met him once before.'

'And then the girl I'm with loves to be taken to places she thinks "amusing". It seemed a chance of killing several birds with the same stone.'

'Who is your girl?'

'She is called Betty. I can never remember her married name. Taylor, is it? Porter? Something like that. We met at a dreadful bridge party the other day. Her husband is only interested in making money, she says. I can't imagine what she finds amiss in that. Rather a peach, isn't she?'

'Certainly.'

'Why don't you both come over and join us?'

Templer addressed the question to me, but he turned in the direction of Jeavons as if to persuade him.

'As you know our friend Widmerpool already,' said

Templer. 'I need not explain what he is like. I know he'll be glad to see both of you, even though he is a bit under the weather tonight.'

Rather to my surprise, Jeavons at once agreed to join the Templer party. I was not nearly so certain as Templer that Widmerpool would be glad to see us. Jeavons bored him; while Templer and I were such old friends that he might suspect some sort of alliance against himself. He was easily disturbed by such apprehensions.

'What is wrong with Widmerpool?'

'Feeling low generally,' said Templer. 'Mildred had to drag him out tonight. But never mind that. It is extraordinary those two should be engaged. Women may show some discrimination about whom they sleep with, but they'll marry anybody.'

Templer was already, so it appeared, on Christian name terms with Mrs. Haycock. We moved across, bearing our bottle with us. Widmerpool, as I could have foretold, did not look too well pleased to have us at the same table, but his state of health disposed him to show this no more than by offering a rather sour greeting. Mrs. Haycock, on the other hand, was delighted by this increase in numbers. Flushed in the face, she looked as hard as nails. She could hardly be called handsome, but there was a dash about her that Widmerpool could justly feel lacking in his own life as a bachelor. It was surprising to me not merely that he should be alarmed at the prospect of becoming her husband, but that he should ever have had the courage to propose; although, at the same time, plenty of reasons for his doing so presented themselves. Probably he was prepared—for he did most things rationally—to accept, even to welcome, attributes in a wife other men might have approached with caution. At the same time, the notion that he was entirely actuated by 'rational' motives was also no doubt far from the truth. He was possibly not 'in love', but at the same time impelled by feelings, if less definable than 'love', no less powerful. It was perhaps his imagination which had been captured; which is, after all, something akin to love. Who can say? Mrs. Haycock turned a dazzling smile upon us.

'I'm Molly's husband,' said Jeavons gruffly.

'But, of course.'

She held out her hand, cordially, but without any suggestion that she knew him apart from her recent visit to the Jeavons house. It was certain, I had no doubt on that point, that she remembered nothing of having met him on the earlier occasion. I was curious to see how he would conduct himself. Mrs. Haycock faced me.

'I know you are an old friend of Kenneth's,' she said. 'As you can see, the poor boy is still as yellow as a guinea, isn't he? It was over-eating that did it.'

'But he is always so careful about his food.'

'Of course, he fusses all the time,' she said. 'Or used to. That is just it. I won't stand any nonsense of that sort. I like my food. Naturally, if you are banting, that is another matter. What I can't stand is people who pick at carrots and patent foods and never have a drink.'

This description sounded a fairly exact definition of the meals Widmerpool enjoyed.

'I have been making him take me to some decent restaurants—such as there are in this country—and showed him how good food can be. I suppose some of it must have disagreed with him. He is back having his own way now, dining off a sardine and a glass of Malvern water.'

Widmerpool himself smiled feebly at all this, as if making no attempt to deny the truth of the picture presented by her of his medical condition. All the time she was speaking, I could think of nothing but the story Jeavons had told me of his former adventure with her. Conversation became general, only Widmerpool continuing to sit in bleak silence. Templer's girl had large, liquid eyes, and a drawl reminiscent of Mona's. She was evidently very taken with Templer, gazing at him all the time, as if she could not believe her luck. I asked her what she thought of the Pilgrim–Hopkins turn.

'Oh, they were good, weren't they?' she said. 'Didn't you think so, Peter?'

'A frightfully old-fashioned couple,' said Templer. 'The only reason they are here is because their act was a flop at the Café de Madrid. Still, I'm glad you liked them, darling. It shows what a sweet nature you have. But I don't want you to wear clothes like Miss Hopkins. You won't do that, will you?'

She found this dissent from her own opinion delicious, darting excited, apprehensive glances at him from under her eyelashes. I saw that it was no good attempting, even conversationally, to compete. Mrs. Haycock would make easier going. I asked whether she and Widmerpool had decided where they were going to live after they were married.

'That's rather a big question,' she said. 'Kenneth's business keeps him most of the time in London. I like the idea of making our headquarters in Paris. We could have a small flat over there quite cheaply—in some dingy neighbourhood, if necessary. But I've lived too long in France to want to live anywhere else now. Anyway, for most of the year. Then there are the boys. That's another problem.'

I thought for a second that she must refer to a personal obligation she owed to some male group living probably on the Riviera, to be generically thus classified. Seeing that she had not made herself clear, she added:

'My two sons, you know.'

'Oh, yes.'

'They are always cropping up.'

'Are they at school?'

'Yes, of course they are,' she said, as if that were a foolish question to ask. 'That is, when they haven't been expelled.'

She stared at me fixedly after saying this, still seeming to imply that I should already know about her sons, especially the fact that they were continually being expelled from school. Uncertain whether or not she intended to strike a jaunty or sombre note, I did not know whether to laugh or commiserate. In fact, so peculiar was her tone that I wondered now whether she were entirely sane. Although in most respects impossible to imagine anyone less like Mrs. Conyers, a change of expression, or tone of voice, would suddenly recall her sister. For example, when she spoke of her children, I was reminded of Mrs. Conyers invoking the General. There was, however, one marked difference between them. Mrs. Conyers bestowed about her a sense of absolute certainty that she belonged—could only belong—to the class from which she came, the world in which she lived. Mrs. Haycock, on the other hand, had by then largely jettisoned any crude certainties of origin. She may even have decided deliberately to rid herself of too embarrassing an inheritance of traditional thought and behaviour. If so, she had been on the whole successful. Only from time to time, and faintly, she offered a clue to correct speculation about herself: just as Jeavons would once in a way display the unmistakable action of his marriage on his point of view. On the whole, Mrs. Haycock's bluff manner suggested long association with people who were rich, but rich without much concern about other aspects of life.

'Of course I know they are dreadfully badly behaved,' she said. 'But what am I to do?'

She had that intense, voluble manner of speaking, often characteristic of those who are perhaps a little mad: a flow of words so violent as to give an impression of lack of balance.

'How old are they?'

'Fourteen and fifteen.'

Widmerpool, who at that moment looked in no state to shoulder such responsibilities as a couple of adolescent stepsons, habitually expelled from school, leant across the table to address Mrs. Haycock.

'I think I'll retire for a minute or two,' he said, 'and see what taking a couple of those pills will do.'

'All right, my own, off you go.'

Widmerpool scrambled out from where he sat in the corner next to the wall, and made for the door.

'Isn't he priceless?' said Mrs. Haycock, almost with pride. 'Do you know his mother?'

'I've met her.'

'Do you know that she suggested that she should live with us after we were married?'

Again she spoke in that strange, flat voice, looking hard at me, so that I did not know how to reply; whether to express horror or indulge in laughter. However, she herself seemed to expect no answer to her question. Whatever her feelings about Widmerpool's mother, they lay too deep for words. Instead of continuing to discuss her personal affairs, she pointed to Jeavons.

'Your friend seems to be going to sleep,' she said. 'You know I have always heard so much about him, and, although I've known Molly for years, I only met him for the first time the other night.'

Her observation about Jeavons's state was true. Templer and his girl had risen to dance, and Jeavons had fallen into a coma similar to those in which General Conyers would sometimes sink. Jeavons seemed to have lost all his earlier enthusiasm to dance with Mrs. Haycock, a change of heart due probably to the amount of beer he had drunk earlier in the evening, before we met. I roused him, and he moved to the other side of the table, into the seat next to Mrs. Haycock.

'How is Molly?' she asked him.

'Molly is all right.'

He did not sound too bright. However, he must have understood that something was expected of him, and made an effort.

'Where are you staying?' he asked.

'Jules's.'

'In Jermyn Street?'

'I always have a suite there when I come over.'

Jeavons suddenly straightened himself.

'Come and dance,' he said.

This surprised me. I had supposed him to be speaking without much serious intention, even when he had first said he wanted to dance with her. After he had all but gone to sleep at the table, I thought he had probably found sufficient entertainment in his own reflections. On the contrary, he had now thrown off his drowsiness. Mrs. Haycock rose without the smallest hesitation, and they took the floor together. I was sure she had not recognised Jeavons; equally certain that she was aware, as women are, that some disturbing element was abroad, involving herself in some inexplicable manner. She danced well, steering him this way and that, while Jeavons jogged up and down like a marionette, clutching her to him as he attempted the syncopated steps of some long-forgotten measure. I remembered that he himself never danced when the carpet was rolled back and the gramophone played at the Jeavonses' house. I was still watching them circle the floor when

Widmerpool returned from his absence in the inner recesses of the club. He looked worse than ever. There could be no doubt that he ought to go home to bed. He sat down beside me and groaned.

'I think I shall have to go home,' he said.

'Didn't the pills work?'

'Quite useless. I am feeling most unwell. Why on earth have you come here with that fellow Jeavons?'

'I ran across him earlier in the evening, and he brought me along. I've met Umfraville before, who runs this place.'

I felt, I did not know why, that it was reasonable for him to make this enquiry in an irritable tone; that some apology was indeed required for my appearance there at all. It was clear that the sooner Widmerpool left, the better for his state of health. He looked ghastly. I was going to suggest that he should make some sign to recall Mrs. Haycock to the table, so that they might leave immediately, when he began to speak in a lower voice, as if he had something on his mind.

'You know what we were talking about when we last met?'

'Yes—your engagement, you mean?'

'I—I haven't had an opportunity yet.'

'You haven't?'

I felt unwilling to reopen all that matter now, especially in his present state.

'But we've been asked to stay at Dogdene.'

'Yes?'

In spite of his malaise, Widmerpool could not keep from his voice a note of justifiable satisfaction.

'You know the house, of course.'

'I've never stayed there.'

'No, no,' he said. 'I mean you know about it. The Sleafords' place.'

'Yes, I know all that.'

'Do you think it would be—would be the moment?'

'It might be a very good one.'

'Of course it would make a splendid background. After all, if any house in the country has had a romantic history, it is Dogdene,' he said.

The reflection seemed to give him strength. I thought of Pepys, and the 'great black maid'; and immediately Widmerpool's resemblance to the existing portraits of the diarist became apparent. He had the same obdurate, put-upon, bad-tempered expression. Only a full-bottomed wig was required to complete the picture. True, Widmerpool shared none of Pepys's sensibility where the arts were concerned; in the æsthetic field he was a void. But they had a common preoccupation with money and professional advancement; also a kind of dogged honesty. Was it possible to imagine Widmerpool playing a similar rôle with the maid? There I felt doubtful. Was that, indeed, his inherent problem? Could it be that his love affairs had always fallen short of physical attack? How would he deal with Mrs. Haycock should that be so? I wondered whether their relationship was really so incongruous as it appeared from the exterior. So often one thinks that individuals and situations cannot be so extraordinary as they seem from outside: only to find that the truth is a thousand times odder.

While Widmerpool sat in silence, and I pondered these matters, there came suddenly a shrill burst of sound from the dance floor. I saw Mrs. Haycock break away violently from Jeavons. She clasped her hands together and gave peal after peal of laughter. Jeavons, too, was smiling, in his quiet, rather embarrassed manner. Mrs. Haycock caught his hand, and led him through the other dancing couples, back to the table. She was in a great state of excitement.

'Look here,' she said. 'We've just made the most marvellous discovery. Do you know that we both knew each other in the war—when I was a nurse?'

'What, when you were at Dogdene?' asked Widmerpool.

His mind, still full of the glories of that great house, remained unimpressed by this news. To him nothing could be more natural than the fact that Mrs. Haycock and Jeavons had met. She had been a V.A.D. at Dogdene: Jeavons had been a convalescent there. There was no reason why Widmerpool should even speculate upon the possibility that their Dogdene interludes had not overlapped. He was, in any case, not at all interested in the lives of others.

'I never recognised him, which was quite mad of me, because he looks *just* the same.'

'Oh, really,' said Widmerpool.

He could not see what the fuss was about.

'Isn't it absolutely marvellous to meet an old friend like that?'

'Why, yes, I suppose it is,' said Widmerpool, without any great conviction.

'It's scrumptious.'

Widmerpool smiled feebly. This was plainly a situation he found hard to envisage. In any case, he was at that moment too oppressed by his own state of health to attempt appreciation of Mrs. Haycock's former friendships.

'Look here, Mildred,' he said, 'I am still feeling far from well. I really think I will go home. What about you? Shall I take you back?'

Mrs. Haycock was appalled.

'Go back?' she said. 'Why, of course not. I've only just arrived. And, anyway, there are millions of things I want to talk about after making this marvellous discovery. It is too priceless for words. To think that I never knew all these years. It is really *too* extraordinary that we should never have met. I believe Molly did it on purpose.

Widmerpool, to do him justice, did not seem at all surprised at this not very sympathetic attitude towards his own condition. There was something dignified, even a little touching, about the manner in which he absolutely accepted the fact that his state of health did not matter to Mrs. Haycock in the least. Perhaps by then already inured to indifference, he had made up his mind to expect no more from married life. More probably, this chance offered to slip away quietly by himself, going home without further trouble—even without delivering Mrs. Haycock to her hotel—was a relief to him. In any case, he seemed thankful, not only that no impediment had been put in his way of escape, but that Mrs. Haycock herself was in the best possible mood at the prospect of her own abandonment.

'Then I can safely leave you with Peter Templer and Mrs. Taylor—or is it Mrs. Porter?' he said. 'You will also have Nicholas and Mr. Jeavons to look after you.'

'My dear, of course, of course.'

Widmerpool rose a little unsteadily. Probably the people round thought, quite mistakenly, that he had had too much to drink.

'I shall go then,' he said. 'I will ring you up tomorrow, Mildred. Make my apologies to Peter.'

'Night, night,' she said, not unkindly.

Widmerpool nodded to the rest of us, then turned, and picked his way through the dancers.

'But this is too, too amusing,' said Mrs. Haycock, taking Jeavons by the arm. 'To think we should meet again like this after all these years.'

She poured out another drink for himself, and passed the bottle round the table, so delighted by the discovery of Jeavons that Widmerpool seemed now dismissed entirely from her mind. The sentiments of Jeavons himself at that moment were hard to estimate; even to know how drunk he was. He might have reminded Mrs. Haycock of their former encounter with some motive in his mind, or merely on impulse. The information could even have emerged quite fortuitously in the course of one of his long, rambling anecdotes. No one could predict where his next step would lead. Outwardly, he gave no impression of intoxication, except for those intermittent bouts of sleepiness, in which, for that matter, he probably often indulged himself at home when dead sober. Templer and his girl returned to the table.

'This is really rather a grim place,' said Templer. 'What do you say to moving on somewhere else—the Slip-in, or somewhere like that?'

'Oh, but darling Peter,' said Mrs. Haycock, who had, so it appeared, met Templer for the first time that evening. 'I've just begun to enjoy myself so much. Kenneth decided he wasn't feeling well enough to stay, so he has gone home—with many apologies—and now I have just found one of my oldest, my very oldest, friends here.'

She pointed to Jeavons.

'Oh, yes,' said Templer.

He looked a bit surprised; but there was, after all, no reason why Jeavons should not be one of her oldest friends, even if, in Templer's eyes, he was rather an oddity. If Templer's first predisposition had been embarrassment at being caught in a party with Widmerpool, his mood had later changed to one of amusement at the insoluble problem of why I myself was visiting a night club with Jeavons. Jeavons was not an easy man to explain. Templer had none of Chips Lovell's appreciation of the subtleties of such matters. The Jeavons house, irretrievably tinged, in however unconventional a manner, with a kind of life against which he had rigidly set his face, would have bored Templer to death. Mrs. Haycock was, for some reason, another matter; he could tolerate her. Patently rackety, and habituated to association with what Uncle Giles called 'all sorts'—different, for some reason, from Molly Jeavons's 'all sorts'—she presented no impediment to Templer. He sat down beside and began to discuss other places that might be more amusing than Umfraville's club. Umfraville himself now returned, bringing with him Max Pilgrim and Heather Hopkins.

'May we join you for a moment?' he said. 'You know, Mildred, I don't believe we have met since that terrible night at Cannes in—what was it?—about 1923, when Milly Andriadis gave that great party, and we walked round the port together and watched the sunrise.'

We made room for them. Hopkins and Pilgrim were on their best behaviour. Templer's girl seemed for the moment almost to have forgotten him in the excitement of sitting with such celebrities. I found myself next to Templer and we had a moment to talk.

'How are you, Nick,' he said. 'I haven't seen you for centuries.'

'No worse—and you?'

'Not too bad,' said Templer. 'Family worries of various kinds, though there is a lot to be said for no longer being married. The usual trouble is raging with Bob and that sister of mine. No sooner does Bob get a good job than he goes off with some girl. All men are brothers, but, thank God, they aren't all brothers-in-law. I believe Jean has left him again, and gone to stay in Rome with Baby Wentworth—or whatever Baby Wentworth is now called after marrying that Italian.'

It was quite a good test, and I came out of it with flying colours; that is to say, without any immediate desire to buy an air ticket to Rome.

'You did know my sister, Jean, didn't you?' he said. 'I mean I haven't been telling you a long story about someone you've never met?'

'Of course I knew her. And your other sister, too. I met her ages ago.'

'Baby Wentworth is a cousin of mine,' said Mrs. Haycock, suddenly breaking off an argument with Hopkins regarding the private life of the barman at the Carlton Hotel at Cannes. 'What a pretty girl she is. When my father died, he hadn't managed to produce a son, so Baby's father succeeded. Her brother, Jack Vowchurch, is rather hell, I believe. I've never met him. They were quite distant cousins, and we never saw anything of them. Then one day at Antibes someone pointed out Baby to me. Didn't Sir Magnus Donners have rather a fancy for her? She was with him then.'

'Wasn't your father the chap who rode his horse upstairs after dinner?' asked Jeavons, wholly unexpectedly.

'Yes, of course he was,' said Mrs. Haycock. 'His favourite hunter. That was before I was born. I think he was supposed to be celebrating something. "Peace with Honour", would it have been? That kind of thing. I believe that was the story. We had a hunting-box at Melton Mowbray that season. They had to demolish the side wall of the house to retrieve the animal. It cost the hell of a lot of money, I know.'

Once again, when she spoke of her father, I was reminded of Mrs. Conyers, even though the phraseology of the narrative was so different from any her sister would have employed.

'And then there was some other story,' insisted Jeavons. 'Setting fire to a fellow's newspaper in a train. Something like that.'

This interest in Lord Vowchurch on the part of Jeavons I found astonishing.

'There are absolutely hundreds, darling,' said Mrs. Haycock. 'Do you know about when he squirted mauve ink over an archbishop at a wedding?'

'I met such a sweet archbishop at the Theatrical Garden Party last year,' said Pilgrim. 'Perhaps he wasn't an archbishop, but just a bishop. He wore a hat just like one of Heather's.'

'I might get a clerical hat,' said Hopkins. 'That's not a bad idea. There is a place off Oxford Street where they sell black boaters. I've always wanted one.'

I asked if she had been seeing much of Norah Tolland and Eleanor Walpole-Wilson.

'Oh, those two girls,' she said. 'I thought I'd met you before somewhere. No, I haven't been seeing them. I found out Eleanor had said a very unkind thing about me. I thought she was a friend, but I see I made a mistake.'

'Look here,' said Jeavons, who had cast off inertia and was now in his most lively mood. 'Do you remember how that song used to go:

"He ran a pin
In Gwendolyn,
In Lower Grosvenor Place . . ."

I can't remember the exact words.'

By this time I was becoming tired of Umfraville's night club. Like Widmerpool, I wished to go home. Jeavons's companionship demanded an almost infinite capacity for adaptation to changed moods and circumstances. In many ways sympathetic, he lacked any of that familiar pattern of behaviour to be found, say, in Quiggin, so that in the last resort his company was exhausting rather than stimulating. Umfraville went off to attend to the club's administration. Discussion began once more as to whether the party should move elsewhere.

'I'll tell you what,' said Mrs. Haycock. 'If you all want to go to the Slip-in, why not leave me here with Ted. He and I will talk about old times for a bit. Then he can see me home.'

That was agreed. There was still a lot of talk. I left before the final plan was put into execution. Out in the passage, Umfraville was instructing the villainous, blue-nosed custodian as to who could, and who could not, wisely be admitted to the club.

'Not going?' he said. 'It's early yet.'

'I've got to get up early tomorrow and write filmscripts.'

'Good God,' he said. 'But, look here, just before you go, what's happened to Mildred Haycock these days? I hadn't seen her in an age. She seems to be holding up pretty well. I know Peter Templer, but who was the other chap who left the party early on?'

'He is called Widmerpool. She is engaged to him.'

'Is she, indeed? What does he do?'

'A bill-broker.'

Umfraville nodded his head sagely.

'Come again,' he said. 'Now that you know the way.'

I passed through empty streets, thinking that I, too, should be married soon, a change that presented itself in terms of action rather than reflection, the mood in which even the most prudent often marry: a crisis of delight and anxiety, excitement and oppression.

5.

A BACKGROUND of other events largely obscured the steps leading up to my engagement to Isobel Tolland. Of this crisis in my life, I remember chiefly a sense of tremendous inevitability, a feeling that fate was settling its own problems, and too much reflection would be out of place. Marriage, as I have said, is a form of action, of violence almost: an assertion of the will. Its orbit is not to be charted with precision, if misrepresentation and contrivance are to be avoided. Its facts can perhaps only be known by implication. It is a state from which all objectivity has been removed. I shall say something, however, of the incident which at this juncture chiefly distracted attention from my own affairs.

Although that evening when we had dined at Thrubworth had been by no means the sole occasion when Quiggin had announced that he wanted to 'see China and judge for himself', no one among his acquaintances supposed him at all likely to set sail at once for the Far East. The words were generally—and, as it turned out, correctly—assumed to be in the main rhetorical: merely buttressing opinions already propagated by him about the ominous situation in Asia. There was, for example, the matter of fare. High as his reputation stood as a critic, it was doubtful whether any publisher would be prepared to advance enough on a projected travel book, with a political bias, to transport Quiggin so far; while Erridge, sympathetic to the wish, had at the same time shown no impulse to foot the bill. Doubts had been maliciously expressed by Mark Members, just returned from his lecture tour in America, as to whether, when it came to the point, Quiggin would be impatient to enter an area in which the Japanese Army was at that time engaged in active operations. Members may have been unjust. He was certainly applying to Quiggin the heartless criticism of an old friend. All the same, I should have been surprised to hear that Quiggin had set out upon that journey.

On the other hand, when Erridge for the same reason—'to see for himself'—turned out to be on his way to China, there was less to wonder at. Erridge had already shown himself prepared to undergo uncomfortable forms of travel; he was undoubtedly in a restless state of mind; he was interested in the political implications of the situation: finally, he could afford to buy a ticket for himself. The enterprise might be the result of Quiggin's advocacy, or his own gnawing sense of moral obligation. The motive was almost immaterial. There was another far more absorbing aspect of his departure when it came about. He did not go alone. He took Mona with him.

Naturally this affair was discussed at great length at such houses as the Jeavonses', where no details were available, beyond the fact that Erridge and Mona were together on a P. & O. liner bound for the East; while Quiggin had been left in England. Even their precise destination was unknown. The immediate Tolland family were, naturally, in a ferment of interest. Even so, the story made on the whole less stir than might be thought; for Erridge had by then so firmly established a reputation for eccentricity that those who knew him personally were prepared for anything. Since he inhabited no particular social milieu, his doings affected few individuals directly. Such persons were chiefly a small group of hangers-on, like Quiggin or Howard Craggs, the Left Wing publisher, and the members of some of Erridge's committees. For the rest of the world, those to whom his name alone was familiar, his behaviour as usual took on the unsubstantial shape of a minor paragraph in the newspaper, momentarily catching the attention, without at the same time giving a conviction of its subject's existence in 'real life'. Uncle Giles, with his very different circumstances, was in much the same case, in that no one knew, or, for that matter, greatly cared what he would do next, provided he made no disastrous marriage and kept out of prison. In Erridge's position, the question of marriage now loomed steeply for his relations, a matter of keen speculation, particularly since this was the first occasion when he was known to have been closely associated with any woman.

All this had considerable bearing on my own life at the time, because my engagement was made public in the same week that the Erridge–Mona story broke, and was naturally overshadowed—especially upon my first meeting with Katherine, Lady Warminster—by this far more striking family convulsion. Some people considered Mona's abandonment of Quiggin less remarkable than the fact that she should have stayed with him for several years. Others took the opportunity to recall that, after crossing the Rubicon of leaving Templer, further changes of partner were inevitable. That was all very well, but I had to admit to myself that, when I had seen them together at Thrubworth, I had never guessed they were about to run away together. Erridge had shown no sign whatever of having any so desperate a plan in view, while Mona's interest in him had appeared to be no more than the natural product of her own boredom at the cottage. Possibly at that time neither had contemplated any such development. Suddenly the urgency of action had swept irresistibly down upon them: a sudden movement that altered the value of every piece on the board. This would be a serious blow to

Quiggin. Even if he had never gone through the ceremony of marriage with Mona (which now seemed probable), his close relations with Erridge would scarcely survive such conduct; or would, at best, take some little time to repair on Erridge's return from China.

This escapade of Erridge's—at present it was spoken of merely as an escapade, because any question of marriage must in the first instance depend upon whether or not Mona was already Quiggin's wife—very considerably magnetised the atmosphere when for the first time I came to see his stepmother. No one yet knew how much Lady Warminster, on the whole alarmingly well informed on all topics connected with her relations, had up to that time been able to discover about Erridge and Mona. She was suspected, as usual, of possessing more information than she was prepared to admit. Like a foreign statesman, who, during important international negotiations, insists upon the medium of an interpreter in spite of his own familiarity with the language in which discussion is being conducted, she preferred every approach to be devious, and translated into her own idiom.

Although, by then, I had often visited the house in Hyde Park Gardens, she and I had not met on those earlier occasions, chiefly because Lady Warminster's health kept her for weeks at a time confined to her room. Views differed as to the extent to which hypochondria governed her life, some alleging that no one enjoyed better health, others taking her side in insisting that, delicate since childhood, she bore her ailments courageously. Smaller, older, quieter in manner and more handsome than Molly Jeavons, she was also much more awe-inspiring. Something of the witch haunted her delicate, aquiline features and transparent ivory skin: a calm, autumnal beauty that did not at all mask the amused, malicious, almost insane light that glinted all the time in her infinitely pale blue eyes. When young, she must have been very good-looking indeed.

Unlike her sister, who was entirely detached from intellectual interests of any sort, Lady Warminster lived largely in a world of the imagination. Her house, a complete contrast to the Jeavonses', reflected the more ordered side of her nature, surprising by the conventionality of its taste and air of stylised repose; at least until the rooms given over to her stepchildren were reached. These quiet, rich, rather too heavy decorations and furniture were deceptive. Little about the house could be thought quiet, or conventional, when closely examined. Perhaps, after all, when closely examined, no sort of individual life can truly be so labelled. However, against this formal background, when her health allowed, Lady Warminster wrote her books, historical studies of the dominating women of the past: Catherine the Great: Christina of Sweden: Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough: volumes rarely mentioned in the press, though usually kindly treated by such critics as noticed them, on account of their engaging impetuosity of style and complete lack of pretension to any serious scholarship.

This literary preoccupation with feminine authority had come to Katherine Warminster, so it appeared, only after her second widowhood. Like her sister, Molly, she had no child by either husband, the first of whom had been one of those 'well-born' City men for whom Peter Templer used to express such aversion. He had been a fairly successful stockbroker, fond of hunting and shooting, a man, so far as could be judged, with no salient characteristic. His wife had spent most of her time with friends who belonged to a world quite other than his own; latterly submitting to him in their marriage only to the extent of living in the country, where she was bored to death. She can have seen little more of Lord Warminster, when married to him, much of whose time was spent abroad unaccompanied by his wife, fishing in Iceland or pig-sticking in Bengal. This status of having twice married, without, so it might seem, great attachment to either husband, perhaps gave Lady Warminster the mysterious, witch-like quality she dispensed so pervasively about her.

The second marriage was said—quite unexpectedly—to have improved, on the whole, Erridge's relations with his father, with whom, without any open quarrel, he had never been on good terms. Lord Warminster had accepted his son's idiosyncrasies stoically, together with anything else of which he disapproved in his children, attributing everything to their mother's Alford blood. The rest of the Tolland brothers and sisters had lived—Norah was an exception—amicably with their stepmother: the younger ones entirely brought up by her. Lady Warminster, eccentric herself, showed a decent respect for eccentricity. She had no wish to interfere with other people, her step-children or anyone else, provided her own convenience was not threatened, so that the Tollands were left largely to their own devices. Life at Hyde Park Gardens might be ruthless, but it was played out on a reasonably practical basis, in which every man was for himself and no quarter was given; while at the same time a curtain of relatively good humour was usually allowed to cloak an inexorable recognition of life's inevitable severities.

I was fortunate enough already to have established myself to some small extent in Lady Warminster's good graces by a book written a year or two before which she happened to have enjoyed, so that my own reception might have been a worse one. Even so, with a person of her sort that was not a matter upon which to presume. For a time we discussed affairs personal to Isobel and myself, and then, as soon as these could be politely, and quite kindly, dismissed, Lady

Warminster gave a smile that showed plainly we should turn to more intriguing topics.

'I think you are one of the few people, either in or out of the family, who have met Erridge lately,' she said. 'So that you must now tell me what you think about this trip of his to China.'

I assured her that I knew little or nothing of Erridge and his movements, but that the journey seemed a reasonable one for him to make in the light of his interests and way of life. I admitted that I had heard him discuss a visit to China.

'I agree with you,' she said. 'Erridge is much too much by himself. He will not be alone on the voyage, I think, will he?'

That was not easy to answer. I did not wish, at this early stage in our relationship, to be detected telling, or, indeed, implying, a deliberate lie. I hoped equally to avoid revealing all that was known about Erridge and Mona, scanty as that might be. I said that I knew no details about the arrangements made by Erridge for his journey.

'There are always plenty of people to talk to on boats,' I suggested, with a sense of descending into banality of the most painful kind.

'Of course,' she said, as if that notion had never before been so well presented to her. 'Do you like the sea?'

'Not at all.'

'Nor me,' she said. 'There is nothing I detest more than a sea voyage. But surely he is taking a secretary, or someone of that sort. I think he will. It will be so lonely otherwise. Especially as he is used to living by himself. You are never so lonely as when among a lot of people you do not know.'

It was impossible to tell whether the reference to 'a secretary' designated Mona, or some new figure in Erridge's life;

or was merely a random shot to draw information.

'I don't think I know about a secretary.'

'Perhaps I am mistaken. Someone may have said something of the sort. What did you think of Thrubworth? Erridge does not take much interest in the house, I am afraid. Still less in the grounds.'

I commented on Thrubworth and its surroundings, again aware that banality had not been avoided. Lady Warminster sighed. She moved her thin, pale hands, covered with a network of faint blue veins, lightly over the surface of a cushion.

'You were staying in the neighbourhood, I think.'

'Yes.'

'Not, by any chance, with the writer, J. G. Quiggin?'

'Yes—with J. G. Quiggin. I have known him a long time. Do you read his articles?'

'I was so interested when I heard Erridge had him living in that cottage. I enjoy Mr. Quiggin's reviews so much, even when I do not agree with them. They have not been appearing lately.'

'No. I haven't seen any of them lately.'

'Is there a Mrs. Quiggin?'

'Yes, she——'

'But I do not know why I am asking you this, because Susan and Isobel told me how they met you and the Quiggins, both of them, at Thrubworth. She is a great beauty, is she not?'

'I think she might certainly be called a great beauty.'

'An actress?'

'No, a model. But she thinks of going on the films.'

'Does she? And what does Mr. Quiggin think about that?'

'He seemed quite to like the idea.'

'Did he?' she said. 'Did he? How strange.'

She paused for a moment.

'I like his articles so much,' she went on, after a few seconds. 'He is such—such a broad-minded man. So few critics are broad-minded. You know I want to talk to you about the new book I am writing myself. Will you give me your advice about it?'

For the time being the subject of Erridge was abandoned. I was glad of that. Lady Warminster had either learnt enough, or decided that for the moment, whatever her available knowledge, she would pursue the matter no further. Instead she talked for a time about Frederica, explaining that she had been so named on account of a Tolland great-uncle, a secretary of legation in Prussia, who, sharing an interest in painting, had been on friendly terms with the Empress Frederick. That was how the name had come into the family; that explained why Alfred Tolland had wanted to hear Mrs. Conyers's anecdote about the Empress, the night we had met at the Jeavonses'. Lady Warminster represented to a high degree that characteristic of her own generation that everything may be said, though nothing indecorous discussed openly. Layer upon layer of wrapping, box after box revealing in the Chinese manner yet another box, must conceal all doubtful secrets; only the discipline of infinite obliquity made it lawful to examine the seamy side of life. If these mysteries were observed everything might be contemplated: however unsavoury: however unspeakable. Afterwards, thinking over the interview when I had left the house, I knew something of what Alfred Tolland could feel after one of Molly Jeavons's interrogations. Lady Warminster might be outwardly quieter than her sister: her capacity for teasing was no less highly developed. A long time later, when the subject of Erridge and Mona had become a matter of common talk at the Jeavonses'—gossip which she must have known from her sister, even though they met rather rarely—Lady Warminster continued to refer to the association under enigmatic pseudonyms.

This mannered obscurity of handling the delicate problems of family life had nothing in common with the method of Chips Lovell, who, as I have indicated, spent a good deal of his time at the Studio telling the other script-writers about his relations. It would be easy to imagine a community in which this habit might have given offence, since many people feel disquisitions of that kind in some manner to derogate their own importance, few being interested in how others live. Lovell's material was presented with little or no editing, so it was for the listener to decide for himself whether the assumption in him of a working knowledge of the circles in which Lovell moved, or liked to think he moved, was complimentary or the reverse. Feingold, I think, considered the whole of these Lovell annals a fabrication from start to finish, a dream life legitimate in one exercising the calling of script-writer. He treated Lovell's stories of duchesses and grand parties like brilliantly improvised accounts of a brush with gangsters or Red Indians, narrated as if such florid adventures had not been in the least imaginary. Hegarty, on the other hand, on the rare occasions when he listened to anything anyone else said, would immediately cap all Lovell's anecdotes with stories of his own, sometimes sharp enough in their own way, but at the same time petrified into that strange, lifeless, formalised convention to illustrate human experience, particularly current among persons long associated with films. For my own part, I always enjoy hearing the details of other people's lives, whether imaginary or not, so that I found this side of Lovell agreeable.

When someone repeatedly tells you stories about their relations, pictures begin at last to form in the mind, tinged always in colours used by the narrator; so that after listening day after day to Lovell's recitals, I had become not only well versed in the rôle of each performer, but also involuntarily preoccupied with their individual behaviour. This concern for Lovell's relations had grown into something like a furtive interest in the comic strip of a daily paper, a habit not admitted to oneself. Lovell covered a good deal of ground. He was as ready to contemplate the doings of some distant cousins of his whose only claim to fame seemed to be that they had emigrated to Vancouver and returned to live at Esher, as to recount the more splendid aspects of his ancestral archives, for example, the epic of his mother's elopement with his father at a moment when her parents supposed her all but engaged to his more eligible cousin.

In these sagas, Lovell's 'second Sleaford uncle' (to give him his nephew's initial label) played a surprisingly small part. That was altogether unexpected. Lovell liked talking about Dogdene, but not about his uncle. The fact was that Lord Sleaford lived a very secluded life there, undertaking in the neighbourhood a bare minimum of such duties as were expected of a landowner of his magnitude. He would give a small shooting party from time to time ('shepherd's pie for luncheon,' Lovell said, 'and not enough sprouts'), existing on the whole outside, or at best on the edge of any given world of recognisable social activity; especially that of a kind to be treated at any degree of sensationalism in print. In quite a different way, he sounded almost as much a recluse as Erridge.

Lovell himself was in a manner proud of this honourable, uncorrupted twilight in which Lord Sleaford had his being, infinitely removed from the gossip-column renown so dear to his own heart; but he also felt, perhaps reasonably enough, that the historical and architectural magnificence of Dogdene was all the time being wasted as a setting for great events.

'I know there is a lot to be said for a peer being quiet and well behaved,' he used to say. 'But really Uncle Geoffrey goes too far. When you think of the house parties they used to have at Dogdene, it is a bit depressing. You know, when George IV came to stay, they painted the place white and gold from top to bottom, including the Chinese Chippendale commodes. Even Aunt Molly, who never showed the slightest desire to cut a dash, quite often used to entertain royalty there. Then there was the occasional literary lion too. I believe Henry James was at Dogdene once. Sir John Clarke was there just before the war. It wasn't the complete morgue it is now. The fact is, Uncle Geoffrey is a very dull man. Aunt Alice, though she does her best, isn't much better. If Uncle John hadn't died, I don't believe either of them would have married anybody—Uncle Geoffrey wouldn't have been able to afford a wife, anyway. As it is, they just potter about and read the newspapers and listen to the wireless—and that is the extent of it.'

The general impression of Lord Sleaford that emerged from these fragments of information was certainly that of a person rather unusually lacking in any quality of liveliness or distinction. Dispiriting years as a younger son had destroyed in him any enterprise or geniality he might once have possessed. That was Lovell's theory. Like Alfred Tolland, he had consistently failed to make a career for himself, while at the same time lacking the philosophic detachment which gave Alfred Tolland a certain moral dignity: even a kind of saintliness. Inheritance of Dogdene had come too late to alter his routine, set, no doubt congenially, in an unimaginative mould. Such was the portrait painted by Lovell, in which Lord Sleaford lived in my imagination with a certain rugged reality of his own; although I sometimes wondered whether, in this individual case, the uncompromising monochrome of Lovell's pigment might be tinged by the possibility that Lord Sleaford himself did not greatly care for his nephew: perhaps openly disapproved of him. That was a contingency to be borne in mind.

Lady Sleaford, as depicted by Lovell, possessed for me, on the other hand, none of her husband's clarity of outline. She was given no highlights, except the crumb of praise that she 'did her best'. Lovell had contrived to afford her no separate existence. She was simply the wife of Lord Sleaford. I pictured her as embodying all the unreality of a dowager on the stage: grey-haired: grotesquely dressed: speaking in a stiff, affected manner: possibly gazing through a lorgnette: a figure belonging to Edwardian drawing-room comedy. Armed with this vision of the Sleafords, I could not help wondering how Widmerpool had been asked to their house, according to Lovell, so rarely visited.

'Easy to explain,' said Lovell. 'Aunt Alice, the most conventional woman alive, is also one of those tremendously respectable people who long to know someone they regard as disreputable. To have Mildred Haycock as a friend has been the great adventure of Aunt Alice's life.'

'And she includes Mrs. Haycock's husbands?'

'Not necessarily,' said Lovell. 'You've got something when you ask that. I very much doubt whether Haycock ever reached Dogdene. However, as the Widmerpool engagement took place over here—and Mildred, in any case, coming to England so rarely—I suppose an invitation to both of them was hard to refuse. You see, Mildred almost certainly invited herself. She probably took the opportunity of asking if her young man could come too.'

This was a credible explanation.

'It is just like the Sleafords,' said Lovell, 'that Aunt Alice should disapprove of Molly Jeavons, who is really so frightfully well behaved, in spite of the ramshackle way in which she lives, and take to her bosom someone like Mildred, who has slept with every old-timer between Cannes and St. Tropez.'

'What will the Sleafords think about Widmerpool?'

'He sounds just the sort of chap Uncle Geoffrey will like. Probably talk stocks and shares all day long, and go to bed every night at half-past ten sharp, after one glass of port. The port is quite good at Dogdene, I must admit. Only because no one has ever bothered to drink it. All the same, I am a bit surprised myself by their both getting an invitation. It is not so easy to penetrate Dogdene these days. I know. I've tried.'

I was, naturally, much occupied at this period with my own affairs, so that was all I heard about Widmerpool going to Dogdene before learning from Lovell—quite by chance one day at the Studio—that Mrs. Haycock's engagement had been broken off. Lovell hardly knew Widmerpool. He would have had no particular concern with the engagement had not Dogdene provided the background for this event. He had no details. I learnt more of the story as a result of Molly Jeavons announcing: 'I shall have a few people in next week, Nicholas, a sort of party for yourself and Isobel. Something quite small.'

When I had next been to the Jeavonses' house after the visit to Umfraville's night club, Jeavons himself had made no reference whatever to that excursion. Indeed, he hardly talked at all during the course of the evening, striding aimlessly about the room as if lost in thought. It was possible that his wound was giving him trouble. However, Molly spoke of the matter, pretending to be cross with me.

'You are a very dissipated young man,' she said. 'What do you mean by keeping poor Teddy up till all hours in the way you did? I never heard such a thing. Do you know he had to spend a whole week in bed after going out with you?'

I tried to make some apology, although at the same time feeling not greatly to blame for the way Jeavons behaved when he went out on his own. As a matter of fact, I had not been at all well myself the following day, and was inclined to blame Jeavons for having caused me to sit up so late.

'Just as well he found Mildred Blaides to look after him,' said Molly. 'I always thought they had known each other for ages, but it turned out they had only met once, a long time ago. You know she was a nurse at Dogdene during the war. Lucky she didn't turn up when Teddy was there, or she would have scalded him to death with hot-water-bottles, or something of that sort. She was the worst nurse they ever had there—or in the whole of the V.A.D., for that matter.'

Molly spoke with more than a touch of acrimony, but at the same time it was impossible to guess how much she knew, or suspected, of Jeavons's night out; impossible, if it came to that, to know with any certainty how that night had ended, even though the nostalgic mood of Jeavons's and Mrs. Haycock's impetuous nature might, in unison, give a strong hint.

'If Mildred is not careful,' said Molly, 'she will polish off Mr. Widmerpool before she has time to marry him. I hear he had to go home, he was feeling so ill.'

I thought the sooner the subject of that night was abandoned, the better. While we had been talking, Jeavons had listened in silence, as if he had never before heard of any of the persons under discussion, including himself. I admired his detachment. I wondered, too, whether at that very moment his head was seething with forgotten melodies, for ever stirring him to indiscretion by provoking memories of an enchanted past.

'I can't have all the Tollands at this party,' Molly had said. 'So I had better have none of them. Bound to be jealousy otherwise. Just like Erridge to go to China when one of his sisters gets engaged.'

Smith was again on duty with the Jeavonses on the day of the party. He looked haggard and more out of sorts than ever.

'You're late,' he said, taking my hat. 'It has all started upstairs. Quite a crowd of them arrived already. Hope her ladyship hasn't invited every blessed soul she knows.'

The guests seemed, in fact, to have been chosen even more at random than usual. Certainly there had been no question either of asking people because they were already friends of Isobel or myself; still less, because Molly wanted either of us specifically to meet them. All that was most nondescript in the Jeavons entourage predominated, together with a few exceptional and reckless examples of individual oddity. I noticed that Alfred Tolland had not been included in the general prohibition against the Tolland family of my own generation. He was standing in the corner of the room, wedged behind a table, talking to—of all people—Mark Members, whom I had never before seen at the Jeavonses', and might be supposed, in principle, beyond Molly's normal perimeter, wide as that might stretch; or at least essentially alien to most of what it enclosed. To describe the two of them as standing looking at one another, rather than talking, would have been nearer the truth, as each apparently found equal difficulty in contributing anything to a mutual conversation. At the same time, the table cut them off from contact with other guests.

'I know you are interested in books, Nicholas,' said Molly. 'So I asked a rather nice young man I met the other day. He also writes or something. You will like him. A Mr. Members.'

'I know him of old.'

'Go and talk to him then. I don't think he is getting on very well with Alfred Tolland. It is a great compliment to Isobel that Alfred has come. As you know, he never goes out. At least that is what he says. I always tell him I believe he leads a double life of great wickedness. He tried to get out of coming tonight, but I told him he would never be asked to the house again if he did not turn up. Then he didn't dare refuse. Isobel, dear, there is someone I want you to meet.'

Both Alfred Tolland and Mark Members showed relief at the arrival of a third party to break up their *tête-à-tête*. They had by then reached a conversational standstill. This was the first I had seen of Alfred Tolland since the announcement of my own engagement. I was aware that he could no longer be regarded merely as the embarrassed, conscience-stricken figure, vaguely familiar in the past. Now he fell automatically into place in the profusion of new relationships that follow an organic change of condition. He began at once to mutter incoherent congratulations. Members watched him with something like hatred in his beady eyes.

'Expect you've heard that Erridge has gone East,' said Alfred Tolland. 'Just heard it myself. Not—a—bad—idea. They are in a mess there. Perhaps the best thing. Might do him a lot of good. Get experience. Good thing to get experience. Ever been East?'

'Never.'

'Got as far as Singapore once,' he said.

It seemed incredible. However, there appeared to be no reason why he should invent such a thing. I said a word to Members, who stood there looking far from pleased.

'I shall have to be going now,' said Alfred Tolland, snatching this offer of release. 'I expect I shall see you at the dinner next . . .'

'I'm not sure yet. Don't know what our circumstances will be.'

'Of course, of course. You can't say. I quite understand. Pity you weren't at the last one. Nice to feel that we . . .'

Exact expression of what it was nice for both of us to feel either evaded him, or was too precarious a sentiment to express in words. He merely nodded his head several times. Then he made for the door. Members sighed. He was in a bad humour.

'What on earth is this party?' he said in a low voice. 'Did that man say something about your being engaged?'

'Yes. I am engaged.'

'To whom?'

'Isobel Tolland—over there.'

'Congratulations,' said Members, without any exaggerated effusiveness, as if he disapproved of any such step in principle. 'Many congratulations. I was stuck with that appalling bore for about twenty minutes. It was impossible to get away. Is he absolutely right in the head? What a strange house this is. I met Lady Molly Jeavons quite a long time ago at the Manaschs'. She asked me to come and see her. I called once or twice, but no one answered the bell, though I rang half a dozen times—and knocked too. Then she suddenly telephoned this invitation to me yesterday. She never mentioned your name. I did not think it would be quite like this.'

'It is often different. You never know what it is going to be.'

'Have you met her husband?' said Members, quite plain-tively. 'I talked to him for a while when I first arrived. He asked me if I ever played snooker. Then he introduced me to the man you found me with.'

By then Members had several jobs of a literary kind which, since he was still a bachelor, must bring him in a respectable income. His American trip was said to have been a success. He no longer wrote verse with Freudian undertones, and he had abandoned anything so extreme as Quiggin's professional 'communism', in the wake of which he had for a while half-heartedly trailed. Now he tended to be associated with German literature. Kleist; Grillparzer: Stifter: those were names to be caught on the echoes of his conversation. Latterly, he was believed to be more taken up with Kierkegaard, then a writer not widely read in this country. Members, no fool, was always a little ahead of the fashion. He was a lively talker when not oppressed, as at that moment, by a party he did not enjoy. His distinguished appearance and terse manner made him a popular spare man at intellectual dinners. 'But one really does not want to eat amateur *paella* and drink Chelsea Médoc for ever,' he used to say: a world into which he felt himself somewhat rudely thrust immediately after losing his job as secretary to St. John Clarke. For a time now Members had been reappearing, so it was said, in the rather more elegant of the circles frequented by the famous novelist before his conversion to Marxism. In the light of this effort to maintain and expand his social life, Members found the Jeavons house a disappointment. He had expected something more grandiose. I tried to explain the household, but was glad when he brushed this aside, because I wanted to ask if he knew further details about Erridge and Mona. Members turned almost with relief to this subject.

'Of course I knew J.G. had got hold of Lord Warminster,' he said impatiently. 'Surely everyone has known that for a long time. We had dinner together before I went to America. J.G. told me about the magazine he hoped to persuade Warminster to start. I saw at once that nothing would come of it.'

'Why not?'

'Warminster is too much of a crank.'

'Do you know him?'

'No, but I know of him.'

'How did the Mona situation arise?'

All at once Members was on his guard.

'But there is every prospect of Warminster becoming your brother-in-law, isn't there?'

'Most certainly there is.'

Members laughed, not in his most friendly manner, and remained silent.

'Come on—out with it,' I said.

We had by then known each other for a long time. It was not an occasion to stand on ceremony, as Members was well aware. He thought for a second or two, pondering whether it would be preferable to circulate a good piece of gossip, or to tease more effectively by withholding any information he might himself possess. In the end he decided that communication of the news would be more pleasurable.

'You know what Mona is,' he said.

He smiled maliciously; for although, so far as I knew, there had never 'been much' between them, he had known Mona years before her association with Quiggin; in fact I had first set eyes on Mona in the company of Members at Mr. Deacon's birthday party.

'She was altogether too much for Erridge, was she?' I asked. 'When she struck.'

'Erridge?'

'For Warminster, I mean—his family call him Erridge.'

'Yes, Mona was too much for him. I don't think things got very far. Some sort of an assignation. J.G. found out about it. The next thing was the two of them had gone off together.'

'How has J.G. taken it?'

'He was full of *gêne* at first. You know she had a stranglehold on him, I am sure. Now that he has cooled down, he is really rather flattered, as well as being furious.'

'Were they married?'

'No.'

'Is that certain?'

'Absolutely.'

I should have liked to hear more, but at that moment Jeavons came up to us. He took an unfamiliar object from his coat pocket, and held it towards me.

'A present?'

'No,' he said. 'That reminds me we'll have to get you one, I suppose. Anyway, that's Molly's job. This is just for you to see. You might even want to buy one for yourself.'

'What is it?'

'Guess.'

'I don't like to say the word in company.'

Jeavons extended his clasped fist towards Members, who shook his head angrily and turned away.

'For your car,' urged Jeavons.

'I haven't got a car,' said Members.

He was thoroughly cross.

'What do you really do with it?' I asked

'Fix it on to the carburettor—then you use less petrol.'

'What's the point?'

'Save money, of course. Are you a bloody millionaire, or what?'

Molly drew near our group as she crossed the room to refill one of the jugs of drink. She saw what Jeavons was doing and laid a hand on his arm.

'You'll never sell Nicholas one of those things,' she said. 'Nor Mr. Members, either, I'm sure. I don't myself think you will sell it to anyone, darling.'

She moved on.

'It is called an atomiser,' said Jeavons, slowly, as if he were about to lecture troops upon some mechanical device. 'It saves thirty-three and a third consumption per mile. I don't expect it really saves you that for a moment, as a matter of fact. Why should it? Everybody would have one otherwise. It stands to reason. Still, you never know. It might do some good. Worth trying, I suppose.'

He spoke without great conviction, gazing for a time at the object in his open palm. Then he returned it to his coat pocket, fumbling about for some time, and at last bringing out a tattered packet of Gold Flake. He nicked up one of the cigarettes with his thumb, and offered it to each of us in turn.

'Well,' he said to me, 'so you are going to get married.'

Members watched him with absolute horror. Jeavons, I was sure, was wholly unaware of the poor impression he was making. Members could stand it no longer.

'I think I must go now,' he said. 'I have another party I have to look in on. It was kind of Lady Molly and yourself to ask me.'

'Not at all,' said Jeavons. 'Glad to see you. Come again.'

He watched Members leave the room, as if he had never before seen anyone at all like him. His cigarette remained unlighted in his mouth.

'Odd bloke,' he said. 'I feel shocking this afternoon. Had too much lunch. Red in the face. Self-inflicted wounds, of course.'

We talked together for a minute or two. Then Jeavons wandered off among the guests. By then General and Mrs. Conyers had arrived. I went across the room to speak to them.

They had come up from the country the day before. After making the conventional remarks about my engagement, Mrs. Conyers was removed by Molly to be introduced to some new acquaintance of hers. I was left with the General. He seemed in excellent form, although at the same time giving the impression that he was restless about something: had a problem on his mind. All at once he took me by the arm. 'I want a word with you, Nicholas,' he said, in his deep, though always unexpectedly mild, voice. 'Can't we get out of this damned, milling crowd of people for a minute or two?'

The Jeavonses' guests habitually flowed into every room in the house, so that to retire to talk, for example in Molly's bedroom, or Jeavons's dressing-room, would be considered not at all unusual. We moved, in fact, a short way up the stairs into a kind of boudoir of Molly's, constricted in space and likely to attract only people who wanted to enjoy a heart-to-heart talk together: a place chiefly given over to cats, two or three of which sat in an ill-humoured group at angles to one another, stirring with disapproval at this invasion of their privacy. I had no idea what the General could wish to say, even speculating for an instant as to whether he was about to offer some piece of advice—too confidential and esoteric to risk being overheard—regarding the conduct of married life. The period of engagement is one when you are at the mercy of all who wish to proffer counsel, and experience already prepared me for the worst. The truth turned out to be more surprising.

As soon as we were alone together, the General sat down on a chair in front of the writing-table, straightening out his leg painfully. It still seemed to be giving him trouble. Alone with him, I became aware of that terrible separateness which difference of age imposes between individuals. Perhaps feeling something of this burden himself, he began at first to speak of his own advancing years.

'I'm beginning to find all this standing about at Buck House a bit of a strain,' he said. 'Not so young as I was. Dropped my eyeglass not so long ago in one of the anterooms at St. James's and had to get a fellow who was standing beside me to pick it up for me. Secretary from the Soviet Embassy. Perfectly civil. Just couldn't get down that far myself. Afraid I'd drop my axe too, if I tried. Still, although I'm getting on in life, I've had a good run for my money. Seen some odd things at one time or another.'

He moved his leg again, and groaned a bit. I always had the impression that he liked talking about his appearances at Court.

'I'm a great believer in people knowing the truth,' he said. 'Always have been.'

Without seeing at all clearly where this maxim would lead us, I agreed that truth was best.

'Something happened the other day,' said the General, 'that struck me as interesting. Damned interesting. Got on my mind a bit, especially as I had been reading about that kind of thing. Odd coincidence, I mean. The fact is, you are the only fellow I can tell.'

By that time I began to feel even a little uneasy, having no idea at all what might be coming next.

'When you came to tea with us not so long ago, I told you I had been reading about this business of psychoanalysis. Don't tie myself down to Freud. Jung has got some interesting stuff too. No point in an amateur like myself being dogmatic about something he knows little or nothing about. Just make a fool of yourself. Don't you agree?'

'Absolutely.'

'Well, a rather interesting illustration of some of the points I'd been reading about happened to come my way the other day. Care to hear about it?'

'I should like to very much indeed.'

'In connexion with this fellow you say you were at school with—this fellow Widmerpool—who wanted to marry my sister-in-law, Mildred.'

'I hear the engagement is off.'

'You knew that already?'

'I was told so the other day.'

'Common knowledge, is it?'

'Yes.'

'Know why it's off?'

'No. But I wasn't altogether surprised.'

'Nor was I, but it is an odd story. Not to be repeated, of course. Happened during their stay at Dogdene. Perhaps you've heard about that too?'

'I knew they were going to Dogdene.'

'Ever stopped there yourself?'

'No. I've never met either of the Sleafords.'

'I was once able to do Geoffrey Sleaford a good turn in South Africa,' said the General. 'He was A.D.C. to the Divisional Commander, and a more bone-headed fellow I never came across. Sleaford—or Fines, as he was then—had landed in a mess over some mislaid papers. I got him out of it. He is a stupid fellow, but always grateful. Made a point of trying out our poodle dogs at his shoots. Then Bertha knew Alice Sleaford as a girl. Went to the same dancing class. Bertha never much cared for her. Still, they get on all right now. Long and the short of it is that we stop at Dogdene from time to time. Uncomfortable place nowadays. Those parterres are very fine, of course. Alice Sleaford takes an interest in the garden. Wonderful fruit in the hot-houses. Then there is the Veronese. Geoffrey Sleaford has been advised to have it cleaned, but won't hear of it. Young fellow called Smethyck told him. Smethyck saw our Van Troost and said it was certainly genuine. Nice things at Dogdene, some of them, but I could name half a dozen houses in England I'd rather stop at.'

None of this seemed to be getting us much further so far as Widmerpool was concerned. I waited for development. General Conyers did not intend to be hurried. I suspected that he might regard this narrative he was unfolding in so leisurely a manner as the last good story of his life; one that he did not propose to squander in the telling. That was reasonable enough.

'I was not best pleased,' he said, 'when Bertha told me we had been asked to Dogdene at the same time as Mildred and her young man. I know the Sleafords don't have many people to stop. All the same it would have been quite easy to have invited some of their veterans. Even had us there by ourselves. Just like Alice Sleaford to arrange something like that. Hasn't much tact. All the same, I thought it would be a chance to get to know something about Widmerpool. After all, he was going to be my brother-in-law. Got to put up with your relations. Far better know the form from the beginning.'

'I've been seeing Widmerpool on and off for ages,' I said, hoping to encourage the General's flow of comment. 'I really know him quite well.'

'You do?'

'Yes.'

'Now, look here,' he said. 'Have you ever noticed at all how Widmerpool gets on with women?'

'He never seemed to find them at all easy to deal with. I was surprised that he should be prepared to take on someone like Mrs. Haycock.'

We had plunged into an intimacy of discussion that I had never supposed possible with an older man of the General's sort.

'You were?'

'Yes.'

'So was I,' he said. 'So was I. Very surprised. And I did not take long to see that they were getting on each other's nerves when they arrived at Dogdene. She was being very crisp with him. Very crisp. Nothing much in that, of course. Engaged couples bound to have their differences. Now I know Mildred pretty well by this time, and, although I did not much take to Widmerpool when I first met him, I thought she might do worse at her age. What?'

'So I should imagine.'

'Not every man would want to take her on. Couple of step-children into the bargain.'

'No.'

'All the same Widmerpool seemed to me rather a trying fellow. Half the time he was being obsequious, behaving as if he was applying for the job as footman, the other half, he was telling Geoffrey Sleaford and myself how to run our own affairs. It was then I began to mark down his psychological type. I had brought the book with me.'

'How did he get on with Lord Sleaford?'

'Pretty well,' said the General. 'Pretty well. Better than you might think. You know, Widmerpool talks sense about business matters. No doubt of it. Made some suggestions about developing the home farm at Dogdene which were quite shrewd. It was with Mildred there was some awkwardness. Mildred is not a woman to hang about with. If he wanted to marry her, he ought to have got down to matters and have done it. No good delaying in things of that sort.'

'He has been having jaundice.'

'I knew he'd been ill. He made several references to the fact. Seemed rather too fond of talking about his health. Another sign of his type. Anyway, his illness was beside the point. The fact was, Mildred did not think he was paying her enough attention. That was plain as a pikestaff. Mildred is a woman who expects a good deal of fuss to be made over her. I could see he was in for trouble.'

'What form did it take?'

'First of all, as I told you, she was a bit short with him. Then she fairly told him off to his face. That was on Saturday afternoon. Thought there was going to be a real row between them. Alice Sleaford never noticed a thing. In the evening they seemed to have made it up. In fact, after dinner, they were more like an engaged couple than I'd ever seen 'em. Now, look here, where would you put his type? Psychologically, I mean.'

'Rather hard to say in a word—I know him so well——'

'It seems to me,' said the General, 'that he is a typical intuitive extrovert—classical case, almost. Cold-blooded. Keen on a thing for a moment, but never satisfied. Wants to get on to something else. Don't really know about these things, but Widmerpool seems to fit into the classification. That's the category in which I'd place him, just as if a recruit turns up with a good knowledge of carpentry and you draft him into the Sappers. You are going to say you are a hard-bitten Freudian, and won't hear of Jung and his ideas. Very well, I'll open another field of fire.'

'But——'

'You haven't heard the rest of the story yet. I came down to breakfast early on Sunday morning. I thought I'd have a stroll in the garden, and have another look at those hothouses. What do you think I found? Widmerpool in the hall, making preparations to leave the house. Some story about a telephone call, and being summoned back to London. Fellow looked like death. Shaking like a jelly and the colour of wax. Told me he'd slept very badly.

Hardly closed his eyes. I'm quite prepared to believe that. Alice Sleaford won't use the best bedrooms for some reason. Never know where you are going to be put.'

'And did he go back to London?'

'Drove off, there and then, under my eyes. Whole house had been turned upside down to get him away at that hour on Sunday morning. Left a message for the host and hostess to say how sorry he was, neither of them having come down yet. Never saw a man more disgruntled than the Sleafords' chauffeur.'

'But what had happened? Had there really been a telephone call? I don't understand.'

'There had been some telephoning that morning, but the butler said it had been Widmerpool putting the call through. Only heard the true story that afternoon from Mildred when we were walking together in the Dutch garden. She didn't make any bones about it. Widmerpool had been in her room the night before. Things hadn't gone at all well. Made up her mind he wasn't going to be any use as a husband. Mildred can be pretty outspoken when she is cross.'

The General said these things in a manner entirely free from any of those implied comments which might be thought inseparable from such a chronicle of events. That is to say he was neither shocked, facetious, nor caustic. It was evident that the situation interested, rather than surprised him. He was complete master of himself in allowing no trace of ribaldry or ill nature to colour his narrative. For my own part, I felt a twinge of compassion for Widmerpool in his disaster, even though I was unable to rise to the General's heights of scientific detachment. I had known Widmerpool too long.

'Mildred told me in so many words. Doesn't care what she says, Mildred. That's what young people are like nowadays. Of course, I don't expect Mildred appears young to you, but I always think of her as a young woman.'

I did not know what comment to make. However, General Conyers did not require comment. He wished to elaborate his own conception of what had happened.

'Widmerpool's trouble is not as uncommon as you might think,' he said. 'I've known several cases. Last fellows in the world you'd expect. I don't expect the name Peploe-Gordon means anything to you?'

'No.'

'Dead now. Had a heart attack in the Lebanon. I remember it happened in the same week Queen Draga was murdered in Belgrade. At Sandhurst with me. Splendid rider. First-class shot. Led an expedition into Tibet. Married one of the prettiest girls I've ever seen. Used to see her out with the Quorn. He had the same trouble. Marriage annulled. Wife married again and had a string of children. This is the point I want to make. I saw Peploe-Gordon about eighteen months later at the yearling sales at Newmarket with another damned pretty girl on his arm. Do you know, he looked as pleased as Punch. Didn't give a damn. Still, you don't know what neuroses weren't at work under the surface. That is what you have got to remember. Looking back in the light of what I have been reading, I can see the fellow had a touch of exaggerated narcissism. Is that Widmerpool's trouble?'

'It wouldn't surprise me. As I said before, I've only dipped into these things.'

'I don't set up as an expert myself. Last thing in the world I'd pretend to do. But look here, something I want to ask—do you know anything of Widmerpool's mother?'

'I've met her.'

'What is she like?'

I felt as usual some difficulty in answering directly the

General's enquiry, put in his most pragmatical manner.

'Rather a trying woman, I thought.'

'Domineering?'

'In her way.'

'Father?'

'Dead.'

'What did he do?'

'Manufactured artificial manure, I believe.'

'Did he . . .' said the General. 'Did he . . .'

There was a pause while he thought over this information. It was undeniable that he had been setting the pace. I felt that I must look to my psycho-analytical laurels, if I was not to be left far behind.

'Do you think it was fear of castration?' I asked.

The General shook his head slowly.

'Possibly, possibly,' he said. 'Got to be cautious about that. You see this is how I should approach the business, with the greatest humility—with the *greatest* humility. Widmerpool strikes me as giving himself away all the time by his—well, to quote the text-book—purely objective orientation. If you are familiar with tactics, you know you can be up against just that sort of fellow in a battle. Always trying to get a move on, and bring off something definite. Quite right too, in a battle. But in ordinary life a fellow like that may be doing himself no good so far as his own subjective emotions are concerned. No good at all. Quite the reverse. Always leads to trouble. No use denying subjective emotions. Just as well to face the fact. All of us got a lot of egoism and infantilism to work off. I'd be the last to deny it. I can see now that was some of Peploe-Gordon's trouble, when I look back.'

'I'm sure Widmerpool thought a lot about this particular matter. Indeed, I know he did. He spoke to me about it quite soon after he became engaged to Mrs. Haycock.'

'Probably thought about it a great deal too much. Doesn't do to think about anything like that too much. Need a bit of relaxation from time to time. Everlastingly talks about his work too. Hasn't he any hobbies?'

'He used to knock golf balls into a net at Barnes. But he told me he had given that up.'

'Pity, pity. Not surprised, though,' said the General, 'Nothing disturbs feeling so much as thinking. I'm only repeating what the book says, but I didn't spend thirty odd years in the army without discovering that for myself. Got to have a plan, of course, but no use knotting yourself up in it too tight. Must have an instinct about the man on the other side—and the people on your own side too. What was it Foch said? War not an exact science, but a terrible and passionate drama? Something like that. Fact is, marriage is rather like that too.'

'But surely that was what Widmerpool was trying to make it? To some extent he seems to have succeeded. What happened sounded terrible and dramatic enough in its own way.'

'I'll have to think about that,' said the General. 'I see what you mean. I'll have to think about that.'

All the same, although I had raised this objection, I agreed with what he said. Marriage was a subject upon which it was hard to obtain accurate information. Its secrets, naturally, are those most jealously guarded; never more deeply concealed than when apparently most profusely exhibited in public. However true that might be, one could still be sure that even those marriages which seem outwardly dull enough are, at one time or another, full of the characteristics of which he spoke. Was it possible to guess, for example, what lay behind the curtain of his own experience? As I had never before conceived of exchanging such a conversation with General Conyers, I thought this an opportunity to enquire about a matter that had always played some part in my imagination since mentioned years earlier by Uncle Giles. The moment particularly recommended itself, because the General rarely spoke either of the practice or theory of war. The transient reference he had just made to Foch now caused the question I wanted to ask to sound less inept.

'Talking of the army,' I said. 'What did it feel like when you were in the charge?'

'In where?'

'The charge—after French's cavalry brigades crossed the Modder River.'

The General looked perplexed for a moment. Then his expression altered. He grasped the substance of my enquiry.

'Ah, yes,' he said. 'When the whole cavalry division charged. Unusual operation. Doubted the wisdom of it at the time. However, it came off all right. Extraordinary that you should have known about it. That was the occasion you mean? Of course, of course. What was it like? Just have to think for a moment. Long time ago, you know. Have to collect my thoughts. Well, I think I can tell you exactly. The fact was there had been some difficulty in mounting me, as I wasn't officially attached to the formation. Can't remember why not at this length of time. Some technicality. Ride rather heavy, you know. As far as I can remember, I had the greatest difficulty in getting my pony out of a trot. I'm sure that was what happened. Later on in the day, I shot a Boer in the shin. But why do you ask?'

'I don't know. I've always wanted to ask, for some reason. Infantilism, perhaps. A primordial image.'

The General agreed, cordially.

'You are an introvert, of course,' he said.

'I think undoubtedly.'

'Introverted intuitive type, do you think? I shouldn't wonder.'

'Possibly.'

'Anyway,' said the General, 'keep an eye on not overcompensating. I've been glad to tell that story about Widmerpool to someone who can appreciate the circumstances. Haven't made up my own mind about it yet. I've got a slow reactive rapidity. No doubt about that. Just as well to recognise your own limitations. Can't help wondering about the inhibiting action of the incest barrier though—among other things.'

He moved his leg once more, at the same time shifting the weight of his body, as he pondered this riddle. The angle of his knee and ankle emphasised the beauty of his patent leather boots.

'Well, I mustn't keep you up here away from the others any longer,' he said. 'Lots of people you ought to be meeting. You are going to be a very lucky young man, I am sure. What do you want for a wedding present?'

The change in his voice announced that our fantasy life together was over. We had returned to the world of everyday things. Perhaps it would be truer to say that our real life together was over, and we returned to the world of fantasy. Who can say? We went down the stairs once more, the General leading. Chips Lovell was talking to Miss Weedon, perhaps tiring of her company, because he slipped away at once when I came up to them, making for the drink-tray. Miss Weedon gave her glacial smile and congratulated me. We began to talk. Before we had progressed very far, Molly Jeavons, whose absence from the room I had not previously noticed, came hurriedly towards us.

'Oh, Tuffy, dear,' she said. 'Do go down and see what is happening in the basement. A policeman has just arrived to interview Smith about a postal-order. I don't think he can have come to arrest him, but it would be saintly of you if you could clear it all up.'

Miss Weedon did not look very anxious to investigate this intrusion, but she went off obediently.

'Smith really is a dreadful nuisance,' said Molly. 'I don't mind him drinking more than he should, because he carries it pretty well, but I don't like some of the people who come to see him. I hope he hasn't got into trouble with one of them.'

Jeavons joined us.

'What's the matter now?' he asked.

'A policeman has come to see Smith.'

'Is Smith off to the Scrubs?'

'Don't be silly,' she said; and to me: 'What on earth were you talking to General Conyers about? I thought you were going to spend the rest of the evening together in my little room. I suppose you have heard your friend Mr. Widmerpool's engagement is off. Just as well, I should think. Mildred really goes too far. I've asked him tonight. I thought it might cheer him up.'

'You have?'

'You speak as if you didn't want to meet him. Have you both had a row? Here he is, in any case.'

After so recently hearing an account of his departure from Dogdene, I almost expected Widmerpool to display, morally, if not physically, the dishevelled state described by the General. On the contrary, as he pushed his way through the people in the room, I thought I had never seen him look more pleased with himself. His spectacles glistened. Wearing a short black coat and striped trousers, his manner suggested that he was unaware that such a thing as failure could exist: certainly not for himself. He came up to me at once.

'The door was open and I walked in,' he said. 'I think that is what Lady Molly likes. Various people were talking to a policeman in the hall. I hope nothing has gone wrong.'

'Selling tickets for the police sports, I expect.'

'I expect so,' he said. 'Curious how our situations have been reversed. You are getting married, while Mildred and I decided in the end it would be better not. We talked things over quietly, and came to the same conclusion. I think it was all for the best. She has returned to France. She prefers to live there. That was one of the bones of contention. Then, of course, there was also the disparity in age. Between you and me, I was not anxious to take on those two sons of hers. They sound an unsatisfactory couple.'

Miss Weedon now returned from her scrutiny of Smith and the policeman. With her accustomed efficiency, she appeared to have mastered the essential points of this entanglement. She spoke severely, as if she were once more a governess reporting unsatisfactory behaviour on the part of her charges.

'Smith had his name given as a reference,' she said. 'Some man he knows has been arrested. A small embezzlement. Smith is very upset about it. In tears, as a matter of fact.'

'Oh, bless the man,' said Molly. 'Why did I ever say I would take him on again, when Erridge left England? I swore he should never again enter the house after he broke the Dresden coffee-pot. Do go and see, Teddy.'

'The bloke must have been hard up for a reference, if he had to give Smith's name,' said Jeavons, thoughtfully.

He moved off without undue haste, accompanied by Miss Weedon, whose demeanour was grave. Jeavons's face implied no hope of setting right any moral mishap of Smith's.

'My mother agrees that my decision is for the best,' said Widmerpool.

'She does?'

'She liked Mildred. Thoroughly approved of her from the family point of view, for example,' said Widmerpool. 'At the same time there are sides of Mildred she felt doubtful about. My mother never attempted to hide that from me. You know, Nicholas, it is wise to take good advice about such a thing as marriage. I hope you have done so yourself. I have thought about the subject a good deal, and you are always welcome to my views.'

Casanova's Chinese Restaurant

for

Harry and Rosie

1

CROSSING THE ROAD by the bombed-out public house on the corner and pondering the mystery which dominates vistas framed by a ruined door, I felt for some reason glad the place had not yet been rebuilt. A direct hit had excised even the ground floor, so that the basement was revealed as a sunken garden, or site of archæological excavation long abandoned, where great sprays of willow herb and ragwort flowered through cracked paving stones; only a few broken milk bottles and a laceless boot recalling contemporary life. In the midst of this sombre grotto five or six fractured steps had withstood the explosion and formed a projecting island of masonry on the summit of which rose the door. Walls on both sides were shrunk away, but along its lintel, in niggling copybook handwriting, could still be distinguished the word *Ladies*. Beyond, on the far side of the twin pillars and crossbar, nothing whatever remained of that promised retreat, the threshold falling steeply to an abyss of rubble; a triumphal arch erected laboriously by dwarfs, or the gateway to some unknown, forbidden domain, the lair of sorcerers.

Then, all at once, as if such luxurious fantasy were not already enough, there came from this unexplored country the song, strong and marvellously sweet, of the blonde woman on crutches, that itinerant prima donna of the highways whose voice I had not heard since the day, years before, when Moreland and I had listened in Gerrard Street, the afternoon he had talked of getting married;

when we had bought the bottle labelled *Tawny Wine* (*port flavour*) which even Moreland had been later unwilling to drink. Now once more above the rustle of traffic that same note swelled on the grimy air, contriving a transformation scene to recast those purlieus into the vision of an oriental dreamland, artificial, if you like, but still quite alluring under the shifting clouds of a cheerless Soho sky.

> 'Pale hands I loved beside the Shalimar,
> Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell?'

In the end most things in life – perhaps all things – turn out to be appropriate. So it was now, for here before me lay the vestigial remains of the Mortimer where we had first met, the pub in which our friendship had begun. As an accompaniment to Moreland's memory music was natural, even imperative, but the repetition of a vocal performance so stupendously apt was scarcely to be foreseen. A floorless angle of the wall to which a few lumps of plaster and strips of embossed paper still adhered was all that remained of the alcove where we had sat, a recess which also enclosed the mechanical piano into which, periodically, Moreland would feed a penny to invoke one of those fortissimo tunes belonging to much the same period as the blonde singer's repertoire. She was closer now, herself hardly at all altered by the processes of time – perhaps a shade plumper – working her way down the middle of the empty street, until, framed within the rectangle of the doorway, she seemed to be gliding along under the instrumentality of some occult power and about to sail effortlessly through its enchanted portal:

> 'Pale hands, pink-tipped, like lotus buds that float
> On those cool waters where we used to dwell . . .'

Moreland and I had afterwards discussed the whereabouts of the Shalimar, and why the locality should have been the haunt of pale hands and those addicted to them.

'A nightclub, do you think?' Moreland had said. 'A bordel, perhaps. Certainly an establishment catering for exotic tastes – and I expect not very healthy ones either. How I wish there were somewhere like that where we could spend the afternoon. That woman's singing has unsettled me. What nostalgia. It was really splendid. "Whom do you lead on Rapture's roadway far?" What a pertinent question. But where can we go? I feel I must be amused. Do have a brilliant idea. I am in the depths of gloom to be precise. Let's live for the moment.'

'Tea at Casanova's Chinese Restaurant? That would be suitably oriental after the song.'

'What do you think? I haven't been there for ages. It wasn't very exciting on my last visit. Besides, I never felt quite the same about Casanova's after that business of Barnby and the waitress. It would be cheaper to drink tea at home – and no less Chinese as I have a packet of Lapsang.'

'As you like.'

'But why did they dwell *on* the cool waters? I can't understand the preposition. Were they in a boat?'

A habit of Moreland's was to persist eternally with any subject that caught his fancy, a characteristic to intensify in him resolute approach to a few things after jettisoning most outward forms of seriousness; a love of repetition sometimes fatiguing to friends, when Moreland would return unmercifully to some trivial matter less amusing to others than to himself.

'Do you think they *were* in a boat?' he went on. 'The poem is called a Kashmiri Love Song. My aunt used to sing it. Houseboats are a feature of Kashmir, aren't they?'

'Kipling characters go up there to spend their leave.'

'When we lived in Fulham my aunt used to sing that song to the accompaniment of the pianoforte.'

He paused in the street and offered there and then a version of the piece as loudly trilled by his aunt, interrupting himself once or twice to emphasise contrast with the rendering we had just heard. Moreland's parents had died when he was a child. This aunt, who played a large part in his personal mythology, had brought him up. Oppressed, no doubt, by her nephew's poor health and by thought of the tubercular complaint that had killed his father (who had some name as teacher of music), she was said to have 'spoiled' Moreland dreadfully. There were undeniable signs of something of the sort. She had probably been awed, too, by juvenile brilliance; for although Moreland had never been, like Carolo, an infant prodigy – that freakish, rather uncomfortable humour of only musical genius – he showed alarming promise as a boy. The aunt was also married to a musician, a man considerably older than herself whose generally impecunious circumstances had not prevented shadowy connexions with a more sublime world than that in which most of his daily life was spent. He had heard Wagner conduct at the Albert Hall; Liszt play at the Crystal Palace, seen the Abbé's black habit and shock of iron-grey hair pass through Sydenham; drunk a glass of wine with Tchaikowsky at Cambridge when the Russian composer had come to receive an honorary degree. These peaks are not to be exaggerated. Moreland had been brought up impecuniously too, but in a tradition of hearing famous men discussed on familiar terms; not merely prodigies read of in books, but also persons having to knock about the world like everyone else. The heredity was not unlike Barnby's, with music taking the place of the graphic arts.

'Perhaps this was a houseboat of ill fame.'

'What an enjoyable idea,' Moreland said. 'At the rapturous moments referred to in the lyric one would hear the water, if I may be so nautical, lapping beneath the keel. An overwhelming desire for something of the sort besets me this afternoon. Active emotional employment – like chasing an attractive person round some wet laurels.'

'Out of the question, I'm afraid.'

'What a pity London has not got a Luna Park. I should like to ride on merry-go-rounds and see freaks. Do you remember when we went on the Ghost Railway – when you dash towards closed doors and tear down hill towards a body across the line?'

In the end we decided against Casanova's Chinese Restaurant that day, instead experimenting, as I have said, with the adventitious vintages of Shaftesbury Avenue, a thoroughfare traversed on the way to Moreland's flat, which lay in an undistinguished alley on the far side of Oxford Street, within range of Mr Deacon's antique shop. Once there, after climbing an interminable staircase, you found an unexpectedly neat room. Unconformist, without discipline in many ways, Moreland had his precise, tidy side, instilled in him perhaps by his aunt; mirrored – so Maclintick used to say – in his musical technique. The walls were hung with framed caricatures of dancers in Diaghilev's early ballets, coloured pictures drawn by the Legat brothers, found by Moreland in a portfolio outside a second-hand book shop; Pavlova; Karsavina; Fokine; others, too, whom I have forgotten. The few books in a small bookcase by the bed included a tattered paper edition of Apollinaire's *Alcools*; one of the Sherlock Holmes volumes; Grinling's *History of the Great Northern Railway*. An upright piano stood against one wall, although Moreland, so he always insisted, was no great performer on that instrument. There were always flowers in the vase on the table when Moreland could afford them, which in those days was not often.

'Do you mind drinking wine from teacups, one of them short of a handle? Rather sordid, I'm afraid. I managed to break my three glasses the other night when I came home from a party and was trying to put them away so that the place might look more habitable when I woke up in the morning.'

Following a preliminary tasting, we poured the residue of the bottle down the lavatory.

'If you were legally allowed three wives,' asked Moreland, as we watched the cascade of amber foam gush noisily away, 'whom would you choose?'

Those were the days when I loved Jean Duport. Moreland knew nothing of her, nor did I propose to tell him. Instead, I offered three names from the group of female acquaintances we enjoyed in common, speaking without undue concern in making this triple decision. To tell the truth, in spite of what I felt for Jean, marriage, although looming up on all sides, still seemed a desperate venture to be postponed almost indefinitely.

'And you?'

Moreland possessed that quality, rather rare among men, of not divulging names. At the same time, the secretiveness he employed where his own love affairs were concerned was not without an element of exhibitionism. He was always willing to arouse a little unsatisfied curiosity.

'I am going to marry,' said Moreland, 'I have decided that. To make up my mind is always a rare thing with me, but the moment for decision has arrived. Otherwise I shall become just another of those depressed and depressing intellectual figures who wander from party to party, finding increasing difficulty in getting off with anyone – and in due course suspected of auto-erotic habits. Besides, Nietzsche advocates living dangerously.'

'If you have decided to base your life on the philosophy of writers of that period, Strindberg considered even the worst marriage better than no marriage at all.'

'And Strindberg earned the right to speak on that subject. As you probably know, his third wife kept a nightclub, within living memory, not a thousand miles from this very spot. Maclintick, of all people, was once taken there.'

'But you haven't told me who your wife – your three wives – will be.'

'There is only one really. I don't know whether she will accept me.'

'Oh, come. You are talking like a Victorian novel.'

'I will tell you when we next meet.'

'This is intolerable after I offered my names.'

'But I am serious.'

I dismissed the notion that Moreland could be contemplating marriage with the heroine of a recent story of Barnby's about one of Mr Cochran's Young Ladies.

'Moreland pawned the gold cigarette case Sir Magnus Donners gave him after writing the music for that film,' Barnby had said, 'just in order to stand her dinner at the Savoy. The girl had a headache that night – curse, too, I expect – and most of the money went on taking her back to Golders Green in a taxi.'

Even if that story were untrue, the toughness of Moreland's innate romanticism in matters of the heart certainly remained unimpaired by gravitating from one hopeless love affair to another. That fact became clear after knowing him for even a few months. Wit, shrewdness about other aspects of life, grasp of the arts, fundamental good nature, none seemed any help in solving his emotional problems; to some extent these qualities, as displayed by him, were even a hindrance. Women found him amusing, were intrigued by his unusual appearance and untidy clothes, heard that he was brilliant, so naturally he had his 'successes'; but these, on the whole, were ladies with too desperate an enthusiasm for music. Moreland did not care for that. He liked wider horizons. His delicacy in coping with such eventualities need not be exaggerated. Undoubtedly, he allowed himself reasonable latitude with girls of that sort. Even so, the fact remained that, although fully aware of the existence, the greater effectiveness, of an attitude quite contrary to his own, he remained a hopeless addict of what he used to call, in the phrase of the day, a '*princesse lointaine* complex'. This approach naturally involved him in falling in love with women connected in one way or another with the theatre.

'It doesn't matter whether it is the Leading Lady or Second Slave,' he said, 'I myself am always cast as a stage-door johnny of thirty or forty years back. As a matter of fact the hours I have to keep in my profession compel association with girls who have to stay up late – by which I do not necessarily mean tarts.'

All this was very alien to Barnby, himself enjoying to such a high degree the uncomplicated, direct powers of attack that often accompany a gift for painting or sculpture.

'Barnby never has to be in the mood to work,' Moreland used to say. 'The amount of material he can get through is proportionate to the hour he rises in the morning. In much the same way, if he sees a girl he likes, all he has to do is to ask her to sleep with him. Some do, some don't it is one to him.'

Barnby would not in the least have endorsed this picture of himself. His own version was that of a man chronically overburdened, absolutely borne down by sensitive emotional stresses. All the same, in contrasting the two of them, there was something to be said for Moreland's over-simplification. Their different methods were, as it happened, displayed in high relief on the occasion of my first meeting with Moreland.

The Mortimer (now rebuilt in a displeasingly fashionable style and crowded with second-hand-car salesmen) was even in those days regarded by the enlightened as a haunt of 'bores'; but, although the beer was indifferent and the saloon bar draughty, a sprinkling of those connected with the arts, especially musicians, was usually to be found there. The chief charm of the Mortimer for Moreland, who at that time rather prided himself on living largely outside that professionally musical world which, towards the end of his life, so completely engulfed him, was provided by the mechanical piano. The clientèle was anathema; this Moreland always conceded, using that very phrase, a favourite one of his.

For my own part, I never cared for the place either. I had been introduced there by Barnby (met for the first time only a few weeks before) who was coming on to the Mortimer that evening after consultation with a frame-maker who lived in the neighbourhood. Barnby was preparing for a show in the near future. Those were the days when his studio was above Mr Deacon's antique shop; when he was pursuing Baby Wentworth and about to paint those murals for the Donners-Brebner Building, which were destroyed, like the Mortimer, by a bomb during the war. I had recently returned, I remember, from staying in the country with the Walpole-Wilsons. It must, indeed, have been only a week before Mr Deacon injured himself fatally by slipping on the stair at the Bronze Monkey (disqualified as licensed premises the same month as the result of a police raid), and died in hospital some days later, much regretted by the many elements – some of them less than tolerable –

who made his antique shop their regular port of call.

It was pouring with rain that night and the weather had turned much colder. Barnby had not yet arrived when I came into the bar, which was emptier than usual. Two or three elderly women dressed in black, probably landladies off duty, were drinking Guinness and grumbling in one corner. In the other, where the mechanical piano was situated, sat Mr Deacon himself, hatless as usual, his whitening hair hanging lankly over a woollen muffler, the coarse mesh of which he might himself have knitted. His regular autumn exhalation of eucalyptus, or some other specific against the common cold (to which Mr Deacon was greatly subject), hung over that end of the room. He was always preoccupied with his health and the Mortimer's temperature was too low for comfort. His long, arthritic fingers curled round half a pint of bitter, making an irregular mould or beading about the glass, recalling a medieval receptacle for setting at rest a drinking horn. The sight of Mr Deacon always made me think of the Middle Ages because of his resemblance to a pilgrim, a mildly sinister pilgrim, with more than a streak of madness in him, but then in every epoch a proportion of pilgrims must have been sinister, some mad as well. I was rather snobbishly glad that the streets had been too wet for his sandals. Instead, his feet were encased in dark blue felt snowboots against the puddles. That evening Barnby and I had planned to see a von Stroheim revival – was it *Foolish Wives*? Possibly Barnby had suggested that Mr Deacon should accompany us to the cinema, although as a rule he could be induced to sit through only Soviet films, and those for purely ideological reasons. Mr Deacon was in the best of form that night. He was surrounded by a group of persons none of whom I knew.

'Good evening, Nicholas,' he said, in his deep, deep, consciously melodious voice, which for some reason always made me feel a trifle uneasy, 'what brings you to this humble hostelry? I thought you frequented marble halls.'

'I am meeting Ralph here. We are going to a film. Neither of us had an invitation to a marble hall tonight.'

'The cinema!' said Mr Deacon, with great contempt. 'I am astonished you young men can waste your time in the cinema. Have you nothing else to do with yourselves? I should have thought better of Barnby. Why, I'd as soon visit the Royal Academy. Sooner, in fact. There would be the chance of a good laugh there.'

Although by then many years since he had set brush to canvas, and in spite of equal disdain for all manifestations of 'modern art', Mr Deacon never tired of expressing contempt for Academicians and their works.

'Are cinemas worse than haunting taverns on your part?'

'A just rebuke,' said Mr Deacon, delighted at this duplication of his own sententious tone, 'infinitely just. But, you see, I have come here to transact a little business. Not only to meet *les jeunes*. True, I would much rather be forwarding the cause of international disarmament tonight by selling *War Never Pays!* outside the Albert Hall, but we must all earn our bread and butter. My poor little broadsheet would bring in nothing to me personally. Just a penny for a noble cause. For my goods I have to make a charge. You seem to forget, Nicholas, that I am just a poor *antiquaire* these days.'

Mr Deacon spoke this last sentence rather unctuously. Inclined to mark his prices high, he was thought to make at least a respectable livelihood from his wares. The fact that a certain air of transgression still attached to his past added attraction in the eyes of some customers. It was a long time since the days when, as an artist of independent means living at Brighton, he had been acquainted with my parents; days before that unfortunate incident in Battersea

Park had led to Mr Deacon's prolonged residence abroad. A congenital taste for Greco-Roman themes, which had once found expression in his own paintings, now took the form of a pronounced weakness for buying up statuettes and medallions depicting gods and heroes of classical times. These objects, not always easily saleable, cluttered the shop, the fashion for such ornaments as an adjunct to Empire or Regency furniture having by then scarcely begun. Occasionally he would find on his hands some work of art too pagan in its acceptance of sexual licence to be openly displayed. Such dubious items were kept, according to Barnby, in a box under Mr Deacon's bed. In the underworld through which he now moved, business and pleasure, art and politics, life – as it turned out finally – death itself, all had become a shade disreputable where Mr Deacon was concerned. However, even in these morally reduced circumstances, he preferred to regard himself as not wholly cut off from a loftier society. He still, for example, enjoyed such triumphal contacts as the afternoon when Lady Huntercombe (wearing one of her Mrs Siddons hats) had arrived unexpectedly on his doorstep; after an hour bearing away with her an inlaid tea-caddy in Tunbridge-ware, for which, in spite of creditable haggling on her own part, she had been made to pay almost as much as if purchased in Bond Street. She had promised to return – in a phrase Mr Deacon loved to repeat – 'When my ship comes in.'

'Ridiculous woman,' he used to say delightedly, 'as if we did not all know that the Huntercombes are as rich as Crœsus.'

One of the persons surrounding Mr Deacon at the table in the Mortimer, a young man muffled to the ears in a manner which gave him the appearance of a taxi-driver wearing several overcoats, now broke off the energetic conversation he had been carrying on with his neighbour, a fattish person in gold-rimmed spectacles, and tapped Mr

Deacon lightly on the arm with a rolled-up newspaper.

'I should certainly not go near the Albert Hall if I were you, Edgar,' he said. 'It would be too great a risk. Someone might seize you and compel you to listen to Brahms. In fact, after the way you have been talking this evening, you would probably yield to temptation and enter of your own free will. I would not trust you an inch where Brahms is concerned, Edgar. Not an inch.'

Letting go his glass, Mr Deacon lifted a gnarled hand dramatically, at the same time crooking one of his heavily jointed fingers.

'Moreland,' he said, 'I wish to hear no more of your youthful prejudices – certainly no more of your sentiments regarding the orchestration of the Second Piano Concerto.'

The young man began to laugh derisively. Although giving this impression of wearing several overcoats, he was in fact dressed only in one, a threadbare, badly stained garment, from the pockets of which protruded several more newspapers in addition to that with which he had demanded Mr Deacon's attention.

'As I was remarking, Nicholas,' said Mr Deacon, turning once more in my own direction and giving at the same time a smile to express tolerance for youthful extremism of whatever colour, 'I have come to this gin palace primarily to inspect an object of virtu – a classical group in some unspecified material, to be precise. I shall buy it, if its beauty satisfies me. *Truth Unveiled by Time* – in the Villa Borghese, you remember. I must say in the original marble Bernini has made the wench look as unpalatable as the heartless quality she represents. A reproduction of this work was found at the Caledonian Market by a young person with whom I possess a slight acquaintance. He thought I might profitably dispose of same on his behalf.'

'I hope the young person is an object of virtue himself,' said Moreland. 'I presume the sex is masculine. We don't want anything in the nature of Youth, rather than Truth, being unveiled by Time. Can we trust you, Edgar?'

Mr Deacon gave one of his deep, rather stagy chuckles. He lightly twitched his shoulders.

'Nothing could be more proper than my relationship with this young gentleman,' he said. 'I met his mother in the summer when we were both reinvigorating ourselves at the same vegetarian communal holiday – she, I think, primarily as a measure of economy rather than on account of any deeply felt anti-carnivorous convictions on her own part. A most agreeable, sensible woman I found her, quite devoted to her boy. She reminded me in some ways of my own dear Mama, laid to rest in Kensal Green this many a long year. Her lad turned up to meet her at Paddington when we travelled back together. That was how he and I first came to know one another. Does that satisfy your rapacious taste for scandal, Moreland? I hope so.'

Mr Deacon spoke archly, rather than angrily. It was clear from his manner that he liked, even admired Moreland, from whom he seemed prepared to accept more teasing than he would ever have allowed to most of his circle.

'Anyway, the lad was not here when I arrived,' he went on, briskly turning once more towards myself, 'so I joined this little party of music-makers sitting by their desolate stream. I have been having some musical differences with Moreland here who becomes very dictatorial about his subject. I expect you know each other already. What? No? Then I must introduce you. This is Mr Jenkins – Mr Moreland, Mr Gossage, Mr Maclintick, Mr Carolo.'

The revolutionary bent of his political opinions had never modified the formality of Mr Deacon's manners. His companions, on the other hand, with the exception of Gossage who gave a smirk, displayed no outward mark of conventional politeness. In fact none of the rest of them showed the smallest wish to meet anyone outside their own apparently charmed circle. All the same, I immediately liked something about Hugh Moreland. Although I had never seen him in Mr Deacon's shop, nor in Barnby's studio, I knew of him already as a figure of some standing in the musical world: composer: conductor: pianist: I was uncertain of his precise activities. Barnby, talking about Moreland, had spoken of incidental music for a semi-private venture (a film version of *Lysistrata* made in France) which Sir Magnus Donners had backed. Since music holds for me none of that hard, cold-blooded, almost mathematical pleasure I take in writing and painting, I could only guess roughly where Moreland's work – enthusiastically received in some circles, heartily disliked in others – stood in relation to the other arts. In those days I had met no professional musicians. Later, when I ran across plenty of these through Moreland himself, I began to notice their special peculiarities, moral and physical. Several representative musical types were present, as it happened, that evening in addition to Moreland himself, Maclintick and Gossage being music critics, Carolo a violinist.

Only since knowing Barnby had I begun to frequent such society as was collected that night in the Mortimer, which, although it soon enough absorbed me, still at that time represented a world of high adventure. The hiatus between coming down from the university and finding some place for myself in London had comprised, with some bright spots, an eternity of boredom. I used to go out with unexciting former undergraduate acquaintances like Short (now a civil servant); less often with more dashing, if by then more remote, people like Peter Templer. Another friend, Charles Stringham, had recently risen from the earth to take me to Mrs Andriadis's party, only to disappear again;

but that night had nevertheless opened the road that led ultimately to the Mortimer: as Mr Deacon used to say of Barnby's social activities, 'the pilgrimage from the sawdust floor to the Aubusson carpet and back again'. At the time, of course, none of this took shape in my mind; no pattern was apparent of the kind eventually to emerge.

Moreland, like myself, was then in his early twenties. He was formed physically in a 'musical' mould, classical in type, with a massive, Beethoven-shaped head, high forehead, temples swelling outwards, eyes and nose somehow bunched together in a way to make him glare at times like a High Court judge about to pass sentence. On the other hand, his short, dark, curly hair recalled a dissipated cherub, a less aggressive, more intellectual version of Folly in Bronzino's picture, rubicund and mischievous, as he threatens with a fusillade of rose petals the embrace of Venus and Cupid; while Time in the background, whiskered like the Emperor Franz-Josef, looms behind a blue curtain as if evasively vacating the bathroom. Moreland's face in repose, in spite of this cherubic, humorous character, was not without melancholy too; his flush suggesting none of that riotously healthy physique enjoyed by Bronzino's – and, I suppose, everyone else's – Folly. Moreland had at first taken little notice of Mr Deacon's introduction; now he suddenly caught my eye, and, laughing loudly, slapped the folded newspaper sharply on the table.

'Tell us more about your young friend, Edgar,' he said, still laughing and looking across at me. 'What does he do for a living? Are we to understand that he wholly supports himself by finding junk at the Caledonian Market and vending it to connoisseurs of beauty like yourself?'

'He has stage connexions, Moreland, since you are so inquisitive,' said Mr Deacon, still speaking with accentuated primness. 'He was trained to dance – as he quaintly puts it – "in panto". Drury Lane was the peg upon which he hung his dreams. Now he dares to nourish wider ambitions. I am told, by the way, that the good old-fashioned harlequinade which I used so much to enjoy as a small boy has become a thing of the past. This lad would have made a charming Harlequin. Another theatrical friend of mine – rather a naughty young man – knows this child and thinks highly of his talent.'

'Why is your other friend naughty?'

'You ask too many questions, Moreland.'

'But I am intrigued to know, Edgar. We all are.'

'I call him naughty for many reasons,' said Mr Deacon, giving a long-drawn sigh, 'not the least of them because some years ago at a party he introduced me to an Italian, a youth whose sole claim to distinction was his alleged profession of gondolier, who turned out merely to have worked for a short time as ticket-collector on the *vaporetto*. A delightfully witty pleasantry, no doubt.'

There was some laughter at this anecdote, in which Maclintick did not join. Indeed, Maclintick had been listening to the course of conversation with unconcealed distaste. It was clear that he approved neither of Mr Deacon himself, nor of the suggestions implicit in Moreland's badinage. Like Moreland, Maclintick belonged to the solidly built musical type, a physical heaviness already threatening obesity in early middle age. Broad-shouldered, yet somehow narrowing towards his lower extremities, his frontal elevation gave the impression of a large triangular kite about to float away into the sky upon the fumes of Irish whiskey, which, even above the endemic odours of the Mortimer and the superimposed insistence of Mr Deacon's eucalyptus, freely emanated from the quarter in which he sat. Maclintick's calculatedly humdrum appearance, although shabby, seemed aimed at concealing bohemian affiliations.

The minute circular lenses of his gold-rimmed spectacles, set across the nose of a pug dog, made one think of caricatures of Thackeray or President Thiers, imposing upon him the air of a bad-tempered doctor. Maclintick, as I discovered in due course, was indeed bad-tempered, his manner habitually grumpy and disapproving, even with Moreland, to whom he was devoted; a congenital lack of amiability he appeared perpetually, though quite unsuccessfully, attempting to combat with copious draughts of Irish whiskey, a drink always lauded by him to the disadvantage of Scotch.

'I should be careful what you handle from the Caledonian Market, Deacon,' Maclintick said, 'I'm told stolen goods often drift up there. I don't expect you want a stiff sentence for receiving.'

He spoke for the first time since I had been sitting at the table, uttering the words in a high, caustic voice.

'Nonsense, Maclintick, nonsense,' said Mr Deacon shortly.

His tone made obvious that any dislike felt by Maclintick for himself – a sentiment not much concealed – was on his own side heartily reciprocated.

'Are you suggesting our friend Deacon is really a "fence"?' asked Gossage giggling, as if coy to admit knowledge of even this comparatively unexotic piece of thieves' jargon. 'I am sure he is nothing of the sort. Why, would you have us take him for a kind of modern Fagin?'

'I wouldn't go as far as that,' said Maclintick speaking more amicably this time, probably not wanting to exacerbate Mr Deacon beyond a certain point. 'Just warning him to take proper care of his reputation which I should not like to see tarnished.'

He smiled a little uneasily at Moreland to show this attack on Mr Deacon (which the victim seemed rather to enjoy) was not intended to include Moreland. I learnt later how much Moreland was the object of admiration, almost of reverence, on the part of Maclintick. This high regard was not only what Maclintick himself – on that rather dreadful subsequent occasion – called 'the proper respect of the poor interpretative hack for the true creative artist', but also because of an affection for Moreland as a friend that surpassed ordinary camaraderie, becoming something protective, almost maternal, if that word could be used of someone who looked like Maclintick. Indeed, under his splenetic exterior Maclintick harboured all kind of violent, imperfectly integrated sentiments. Moreland, for example, impressed him, perhaps rightly, as a young man of matchless talent, ill equipped to face a materialistic world. At the same time, Maclintick's own hag-ridden temperament also punished him for indulging in what he regarded as sentimentality. His tremendous disapproval of sexual inversion, encountered intermittently in circles he chose to frequent, was compensation for his own sense of guilt at this hero-worshipping of Moreland; his severity with Gossage, another effort to right the balance.

'It's nice when you meet someone fresh like that once in a while,' said Gossage.

He was a lean, toothy little man, belonging to another common musical type, whose jerky movements gave him no rest. He toyed nervously with his bow tie, pince-nez and moustache, the last of which carried little conviction of masculinity. Gossage's voice was like that of a ventriloquist's doll. He giggled nervously, no doubt fearing Maclintick's castigation of such a remark.

'Personal charm,' said Mr Deacon trenchantly, 'has unfortunately no connexion with personal altruism. However, I fully expect to be made to wait at my age. Lateness is one of the punishments justly visited by youth upon those who have committed the atrocious crime of coming to riper years. Besides, quite apart from this moral and aesthetic justification, none of the younger generation seem to know the meaning of punctuality even when the practice of that cardinal virtue is in their own interests.'

All this time Carolo, the last member of the party to be introduced, had not opened his mouth. He sat in front of a mixed vermouth with an air of slighted genius. I thought, that evening, Carolo was about the same age as Moreland and myself, but found afterwards he was older than he appeared. His youthful aspect was perhaps in part legacy of his years as a child prodigy.

'Carolo's real name is Wilson or Wilkinson or Parker,' Moreland told me later, 'something rather practical and healthy like that. A surname felt to ring too much of plain common sense. Almost the first public performance of music I remember being taken to by my aunt was to hear Carolo play at the Wigmore Hall. I never thought then that one of these days Carolo and I would rub shoulders in the Mortimer.'

Carolo's face was pale and drawn, his black hair arranged in delicate waves, this consciously 'romantic' appearance and demeanour altogether misrepresenting his character, which was, according to Moreland, far from imaginative.

'Carolo is only interested in making money,' Moreland said, 'and who shall blame him? Unfortunately, he doesn't seem much good at getting it these days. He also likes the girls a bit.'

Daydreams of wealth or women must have given Carolo that faraway look which never left him; sad and silent, he contemplated huge bank balances and voluptuous revels.

'Why, there is my young friend,' said Mr Deacon, rising to his feet. 'If you will forgive me, Nicholas . . . Moreland . . . and the rest of you . . .'

On the whole Mr Deacon was inclined to conceal from his acquaintances such minor indiscretions in which he might still, in this his later life, indulge. He seemed to regret having allowed himself to give the impression that one of his '*petites folies*', as he liked to term them, was on foot that night. The temptation to present matters by implication in such a light had been too much for his vanity. Now, too late, he tried to be more guarded, striding forward hastily and blocking the immediate advance of the young man who had just entered the Mortimer, carrying in his arms, as if it were a baby, a large brown paper parcel.

'Why,' said Moreland, 'after all that, Edgar's mysterious friend turns out to be Norman. Did you ever hear such a thing?'

By suddenly sidestepping with an artificial elegance of movement, the young man bearing the parcel avoided Mr Deacon's attempt to exclude him from our company, and approached the table. He was lightly built, so thin that scarcely any torso seemed to exist under his coat. It was easy to see why Mr Deacon had assigned him the rôle of Harlequin. Sad-eyed and pert, he was an urchin with good looks of that curiously puppet-like formation which designate certain individuals as actors or dancers; anonymity of feature and flexibility of body fitting them from birth to play an assumed part.

'Hullo, my dear,' he said, addressing himself to Moreland. 'I hear you saw the new Stravinsky ballet when you were in Paris.'

His voice came out in a drawl, half cockney, half drawing-room comedy, as he changed the position of his feet, striking a pose that immediately proclaimed a dancer's professional training.

'Speaking choreographically——' Moreland began.

Mr Deacon, put out at finding his 'young friend' already known to most of the company, once more made an effort to intervene and keep the boy to himself, determined that any negotiations conducted between them should be transacted in at least comparative privacy.

'What?' he said, scarcely trying to hide his annoyance. 'You know each other, do you? How nice we should all be friends. However, Norman and I must discuss business of our own. The sacred rites of bargaining must not be overheard.'

He tittered angrily, and laid one of those gothic hands of his on the shoulder of the young man called Norman, who, as if to indicate that he must bow to the inevitable, waved dramatically to Moreland, as he allowed himself to be shepherded to the far end of the bar. There, he and Mr Deacon untied the parcel between them, at the same time folding the brown paper round it, so that they themselves should be, if possible, the sole persons to observe the contents. Mr Deacon must have felt immediately satisfied that he wanted to buy the cast (which reached his shop, although, as it turned out, only for a brief moment), because, after a muttered conversation, they wrapped up the parcel again and left the Mortimer together. As they went through the door Moreland shouted goodnight, a farewell to which only the young man responded by giving another wave of his hand.

'Who is the juvenile lead?' asked Gossage.

He smiled vigorously, at the same time removing his pince-nez to polish them, as if he did not wish Maclintick to think him unduly interested in Mr Deacon and his friend.

'Don't you know Norman Chandler?' said Moreland. 'I should have thought you would have come across him. He is an actor. Also dances a bit. Rather a hand at the saxophone.'

'A talented young gentleman,' said Gossage.

Moreland took another newspaper from his pocket, flattened it out on the surface of the table, and began to read a re-hash of the Croydon murder. Maclintick's face had expressed the strongest distaste during the conversation with Chandler; now he dismissed his indignation and began to discuss the Albert Hall concert Gossage was attending that night. I caught the phrases 'rhythmic ensemble' and 'dynamic and tonal balance'. Carolo sat in complete silence, from time to time tasting his vermouth without relish. Maclintick and Gossage passed on to the Delius Festival at the Queen's Hall. All this musical 'shop', to which Moreland, without looking up from his paper, would intermittently contribute comment, began to make me feel rather out of it. I wished I had been less punctual. Moreland came to the end of the article and pushed the paper from him.

'Edgar was rather cross at my turning out to know Norman,' he said to me, speaking in a detached, friendly tone. 'Edgar loves to build up mystery about any young man he meets. There was a lot of excitement about an "ex-convict from Devil's Island" he met at a fancy dress party the other day dressed as a French *matelot*.'

He leaned forward and deftly thrust a penny into the slot of the mechanical piano, which took a second or two to digest the coin, then began to play raucously.

'Oh, good,' said Moreland. '*The Missouri Waltz*.'

'Deacon is probably right in assuming some of the persons he associates with are sinister enough,' said Maclintick sourly.

'It is the only pleasure he has left,' said Moreland. 'I can't imagine what Norman was selling. It looked like a bed-pan from the shape of the parcel.'

Gossage sniggered, incurring a frown from Maclintick.

Probably fearing Maclintick might make him a new focus of disapproval, he remarked that he must be 'going soon'.

'Deacon will be getting himself into trouble one of these days,' Maclintick said, shaking his head and speaking as if he hoped the blow would fall speedily. 'Don't you agree, Gossage?'

'Oh, couldn't say, couldn't say at all,' said Gossage hurriedly. 'I hardly know the man, you see. Met him once or twice at the Proms last year. Join him sometimes over a mug of ale.'

Maclintick ignored these efforts to present a more bracing picture of Mr Deacon's activities.

'And it won't be the first time Deacon got into trouble,' he said in his grim, high-pitched voice.

'Well, I shall really have to go,' repeated Gossage, in answer to this further rebuke, speaking as if everyone present had been urging him to stay in the Mortimer for just a few minutes longer.

'You will read my views on Friday. I am keeping an open mind. One has to do that. Goodbye, Moreland, goodbye . . . Maclintick, goodbye . . .'

'I must be going too,' said Carolo unexpectedly.

He had a loud, harsh voice, and a North Country accent like Quiggin's. Tossing back the remains of his vermouth as if to the success of a desperate venture from which he was unlikely to return with his life, he finished the dregs at a gulp, and, inclining his head slightly in farewell to the company with an unconcerned movement in keeping with this devil-may-care mood, he followed Gossage from the saloon bar.

'Carolo wasn't exactly a chatterbox tonight,' said Moreland.

'Never has much to say for himself,' Maclintick agreed.

'Always brooding on the old days when he was playing Sarasate up and down the country clad as Little Lord Fauntleroy.'

'He must have been at least seventeen when he last appeared in his black velvet suit and white lace collar,' said Moreland. 'The coat was so tight he could hardly draw his bow across the fiddle.'

'They say Carolo is having trouble with his girl,' said Maclintick. 'Makes him even gloomier than usual.'

'Who is his girl?' asked Moreland indifferently.

'Quite young, I believe,' said Maclintick. 'Gossage was asking about her. Carolo doesn't find it as easy to get engagements as he used – and he won't teach.'

'Wasn't there talk of Mrs Andriadis helping him?' said Moreland. 'Arranging a performance at her house or something.'

I listened to what was being said without feeling – as I came to feel later – that I was, in one sense, part and parcel of the same community; that when people gossiped about matters like Carolo and his girl, one was listening to a morsel, if only an infinitesimal morsel, of one's own life. However, I heard no more about Carolo at that moment, because Barnby could now be seen standing in the doorway of the saloon bar, slowly apprising himself of the company present, the problem each individual might pose. By that hour the Mortimer had begun to fill. A man with a yellowish beard and black hat was buying drinks for two girls drawn from that indeterminate territory eternally disputed between tarts and art students; three pimply young men were arguing about economics; a couple of taxi-drivers conferred with the barmaid. For several seconds Barnby stared about him, viewing the people in the Mortimer with apparent disapproval. Then, thickset, his topcoat turned up to his ears, he moved slowly forward, at the same time casting an expert, all-embracing glance at the barmaid and the two art girls. Reaching the table at last by these easy stages, he nodded to the rest of us, but did not sit down. Instead, he regarded the party closely. Such evolutions were fairly typical of Barnby's behaviour in public; demeanour effective with most strangers, on whom he seemed ultimately to force friendliness by at first withholding himself. Later he would unfreeze. With women, that apparently negative method almost always achieved good results. It was impossible to say whether this manner of Barnby's was unconscious or deliberate. Moreland, for example, saw in Barnby a consummate actor.

'Ralph is the Garrick of our day,' Moreland used to say, 'or at least the Tree or Irving. Barnby never misses a gesture with women, not an inflection of the voice.'

The two of them, never close friends, used to see each other fairly often in those days. Moreland liked painting and held stronger views about pictures than most musicians.

'I can see Ralph has talent,' he said of Barnby, 'but why use combinations of colour that make you think he is a Frenchman or a Catalan?'

'I know nothing of music,' Barnby had, in turn, once remarked, 'but Hugh Moreland's accompaniment to that film sounded to me like a lot of owls quarrelling in a bicycle factory.'

All the same, in spite of mutual criticism, they were in general pretty well disposed to one another.

'Buy us a drink, Ralph,' said Moreland, as Barnby stood moodily contemplating us.

'I'm not sure I can afford that,' said Barnby. 'I'll have to think about it.'

'Take a generous view,' said Moreland, who liked being stood plenty of drinks.

After a minute or two's meditation Barnby drew some money from his pocket, glanced at the coins in the palm of his hand, and laid some of them on the bar. Then he brought the glasses across to the table.

'Had a look at the London Group this afternoon,' he said.

Barnby sat down. He and Moreland began to talk of English painting. The subject evidently bored Maclintick, who seemed to like Barnby as little as he cared for Mr Deacon. Conversation moved on to painting in Paris. Finally, the idea of going to a film was abandoned. It was getting late in the evening. The programme would be too far advanced. Instead, we agreed to dine together. Maclintick went off upstairs to telephone to his wife and tell her he would not be home until later.

'There will be a row about that,' said Moreland, after Maclintick had disappeared.

'Do they quarrel?'

'Just a bit.'

'Where shall we dine?' said Barnby. 'Foppa's?'

'No, I lunched at Foppa's,' Moreland said. 'I can't stand Foppa's twice in a day. It would be like going back to one's old school. Do you know Casanova's Chinese Restaurant? It hasn't been open long. Let's eat there.'

'I am not sure my stomach is up to Chinese food,' said Barnby. 'I didn't get to bed until three this morning.'

'You can have eggs or something like that.'

'Won't the eggs be several hundred years old? Still, we will go there if you insist. Anything to save a restaurant argument. Where is the place?'

Maclintick returned from telephoning. He bought himself a final Irish whiskey and drank it off. Conversation with his wife had been, as Moreland predicted, acrimonious. When told our destination was Casanova's Chinese Restaurant Maclintick made a face; but he failed to establish any rival claim in favour of somewhere he would prefer to eat, so the decision was confirmed. I asked how such a recklessly hybrid name had ever been invented.

'There used to be the New Casanova,' said Moreland, 'where the cooking was Italian and the decoration French eighteenth century – some way, some considerable way, after Watteau. Further up the street was the Amoy, called by some Sam's Chinese Restaurant. The New Casanova went into liquidation. Sam's bought it up and moved over their pots and pans and chopsticks, so now you can eat eight treasure rice, or bamboo shoots fried with pork ribbons, under panels depicting scenes from the career of the Great Lover.'

'What are prices like?' asked Barnby.

'One might almost say cheap. On Sunday there is an orchestra of three and dainty afternoon tea is served. You can even dance. Maclintick has been there, haven't you, Maclintick?'

'Must it be Chinese food tonight?' said Maclintick peevishly. 'I've a touch of enteritis as it is.'

'Remember some of the waitresses are rather attractive,' said Moreland persuasively.

'Chinese?' I asked.

'No,' said Moreland, 'English.'

He laughed a little self-consciously.

'Bet you've got your eye on one,' said Barnby.

I think Barnby made this remark as a matter of routine, either without bothering to consider the matter at all carefully, or on the safe assumption that no one would take the trouble to mention the fact that any given group of girls was above the average in looks without having singled out at least one of them for himself. That would unquestionably have been Barnby's own procedure. Alternatively, Moreland may have spoken of Casanova's on an earlier occasion, thereby giving Barnby reason to suspect there must be something special that attracted Moreland personally to the place. In any case, the imputation was not surprising, although Barnby's own uninterrupted interest in the subject always made him perceptive where the question of a woman, or women, was concerned. However, Moreland went red at the enquiry. He was in one sense, easily embarrassed about any matter that touched him intimately; although, at the same time, his own mind moved too quickly for him to be placed long at a disadvantage by those who hoped to tease. In such situations he was pretty adept at turning the tables.

'I had my eye on a girl there formerly,' he said, 'I admit that. It wasn't entirely the excellent pig's trotter soup that brought me back to Casanova's. However, I can visit that restaurant now without a tremor – not a concupiscent thought. My pleasure in the place has become purely that of *gourmet* of Cathay. A triumph of self-mastery. I will point the girl out to you, Ralph.'

'What happened?' asked Barnby. 'Did she leave you for the man who played the trombone?'

'One just wasn't a success,' said Moreland, reddening again. 'Anyway, I will show you the problem as it stood – no doubt as it stands. Nothing altered, so far as I know, except my own point of view. But let's be moving. I'm famished.'

The name Casanova's Chinese Restaurant offered one of those unequivocal blendings of disparate elements of the imagination which suggest a whole new state of mind or way of life. The idea of Casanova giving his name to a Chinese restaurant linked not only the East with the West, the present with the past, but also, more parochially, suggested by its own incongruity an immensely suitable place for all of us to have dinner that night. We arrived in two large rooms, in which most of the tables were filled. The clientèle, predominantly male and Asiatic, had a backbone of Chinese businessmen and Indian students. A few negroes sat with very blonde white girls; a sprinkling of diners belonged to those ethnically indefinable races which colonise Soho and interbreed there. Along the walls frescoes tinted in pastel shades, executed with infinite feebleness of design, appealed to Heaven knows what nadir of aesthetic degradation. Almost as soon as we found a table, I marked down Moreland's waitress. She was tall, very thin, fair-haired and blue-eyed, at that moment carrying a lot of glasses on a tray. The girl was certainly noticeable in her white lace cap and small frilled white apron above a black dress and black cotton stockings, the severity of this uniform, her own pale colouring, lending a curious exoticism to her appearance in these pseudo-oriental surroundings. There was an air of childlike innocence about her that could easily be deceptive. Indeed, when more closely observed, she had some of the look of a very expensive, rather wicked little doll. Moreland's answer to Barnby's almost immediate request to have 'the girl we have come to see' pointed out to him, confirmed the correctness of this guess. Barnby took one of his lingering, professional stares.

'Rather an old man's piece, isn't she?' he said. 'Still, I see your point. Poorish legs, though.'

'You mustn't concentrate on legs if your interest is in waitresses,' said Moreland. 'The same is true of ballet dancers, I'm afraid.'

'She looks as if she might well be a nymphomaniac,' said Maclintick, 'those very fair, innocent-looking girls often are. I think I mentioned that to Moreland when he brought me here before.'

Maclintick had hardly spoken since we left the Mortimer. Now he uttered these words in a tone of deep pessimism, as if, so far, he had resented every moment of the evening. He greatly disapproved of Barnby, whose inclination for women was as irksome to him as Mr Deacon's so downright repudiation of the opposite sex. Maclintick possibly thought Barnby had a bad influence on Moreland.

'She showed no sign of being a nympho,' Moreland said. 'On the contrary. I could have done with a little nymphomania – anyway at the start.'

'What are we going to eat?' said Barnby. 'I can't make head or tail of this menu.'

Maclintick and Barnby ordered something unadventurous from the dishes available; under Moreland's guidance, I embarked upon one of the specialities of the house. Moreland's waitress came to take our order for drinks. Although a restaurant of some size, Casanova's had no licence, so that a member of the staff collected beer from the pub opposite, or wine from the shop round the corner. When she came up to the table the waitress gave Moreland a cold, formal smile of recognition, which freely acknowledged him as a regular customer, but suggested no more affectionate relationship. Close up, she looked, I thought, as hard as nails; I did not feel at all tempted to enter into competition. Barnby eyed her. She took no notice of him whatever, noting our orders in silence and disappearing.

'Too thin for my taste,' said Barnby. 'I like a good armful.'

'This lascivious conversation is very appropriate to the memory of the distinguished Venetian gentleman after whom the restaurant is named,' said Maclintick harshly. 'What a bore he must have been.'

He leant across the table, and, like an angry woodpecker, began to tap out his pipe against the side of a large Schweppes ashtray.

'Do you suppose one would have known Casanova?' I said.

'Oh, but of course,' said Moreland. 'In early life, Casanova played the violin – like Carolo. Casanova played in a band – I doubt if he would have been up to a solo performance. I can just imagine what he would have been like to deal with if one had been the conductor. Besides, he much fancied himself as a figure at the opera and musical parties. One would certainly have met him. At least I am sure I should.'

'Think of having to listen to interminable stories about his girls,' said Maclintick. 'I could never get through Casanova's Memoirs. Why should he be considered a great man just because he had a lot of women? Most men would have ended by being bored to death.'

'That is why he was a great man,' said Moreland. 'It wasn't the number of women he had, it was the fact that he didn't get bored. But there are endless good things there apart from the women. Do you remember when in London he overhears someone remark: "Tommy has committed suicide and he did quite right" – to which another person replies: "On the contrary, he did a very foolish thing, for I am one of his creditors and know that he need not have made away with himself for six months".'

Barnby and I laughed at this anecdote. Maclintick did not smile. At the same time he seemed struck by the story. He was silent for some moments. When he spoke again it was in a manner at once more serious, more friendly, than any tone he had previously employed that evening.

'I see nothing particularly funny in their conversation,' he said. 'That is how I propose to behave myself when the time comes. But I agree that Tommy was a fool to misjudge his term of days. I shall not do that. I give myself at least five more years at the present rate. That should allow me time to finish my book.'

'Still,' said Moreland, 'however bent one may be on the idea of eventual suicide oneself, you must admit, Maclintick, that such sentiments must have sounded odd to a man of Casanova's *joie de vivre*. Anyway, professional seducers never commit suicide. They haven't time.'

'The notable thing about professional seducers,' said Maclintick, now returning to his former carping tone of voice, 'is the rot they talk when they are doing their seducing. There is not a single cliché they leave unsaid.'

'Although by definition the most egotistical of men,' said Moreland, 'they naturally have to develop a certain anonymity of style to make themselves acceptable to all women. It is the case of the lowest common factor – or is it the highest common denominator? If you hope to rise to the top class in seducing, you must appeal to the majority. As the majority are not very intelligent, you must conceal your own intelligence – if you have the misfortune to possess such a thing – in order not to frighten the girls off. There is inevitably something critical, something alarming to personal vanity, in the very suggestion of intelligence in another. That is almost equally true of dealing with men, so don't think I hold it against women. All I say is, that someone like myself ought to restrict themselves to intelligent girls who see my own good points. Unfortunately, they are rarely the sort of girls I like.'

Barnby grunted, no doubt feeling some of these strictures in part applicable to himself.

'What do you expect to do?' he asked. 'Give readings from *The Waste Land*?'

'Not a bad idea,' said Moreland.

'In my experience,' Barnby said, 'women like the obvious.'

'Just what we are complaining about,' said Maclintick, 'the very thing.'

'Seduction is to do and say/The banal thing in the banal way,' said Moreland. 'No one denies that. My own complaint is that people always talk about love affairs as if you spent the whole of your time in bed. I find most of my own emotional energy – not to say physical energy – is exhausted in making efforts to get there. Problems of Time and Space as usual.'

The relation of Time and Space, then rather fashionable, was, I found, a favourite subject of Moreland's.

'Surely we have long agreed the two elements are identical?' said Maclintick. 'This is going over old ground – perhaps I should say old hours.'

'You must differentiate for everyday purposes, don't you?' urged Barnby. 'I don't wonder seduction seems a problem, if you get Time and Space confused.'

'I suppose one might be said to be true to a woman in Time and unfaithful to her in Space,' said Moreland. 'That is what Dowson seems to have thought about Cynara – or is it just the reverse? The metaphysical position is not made wholly clear by the poet. Talking of pale lost lilies, how do you think Edgar and Norman are faring in their deal?'

'Remember Lot's wife,' said Maclintick sententiously. 'Besides, we have a cruet on the table. Here are the drinks at last, thank God. You know Pope says every woman is at heart a rake. I'd be equally prepared to postulate that every rake is at heart a woman. Don Juan – Casanova – Byron – the whole bloody lot of them.'

'But Don Juan was not at all the same as Casanova,' said Moreland. 'The opera makes that quite clear. Ralph here sometimes behaves like Casanova. He isn't in the least like Don Juan – are you, Ralph?'

I was myself not sure this assessment of Barnby's nature was wholly accurate; but, if distinction were to be drawn between those two legendary seducers, the matter was at least arguable. Barnby himself was now showing signs of becoming rather nettled by this conversation.

'Look here,' he said. 'My good name keeps on being bandied about in a most uncalled for manner. Perhaps you wouldn't mind defining the differences between these various personages with whom I am being so freely compared. I had better be told for certain, otherwise I shall be behaving in a way that is out of character, which would never do.'

'Don Juan merely liked power,' said Moreland. 'He obviously did not know what sensuality was. If he knew it at all, he hated it. Casanova, on the other hand, undoubtedly had his sensual moments, even though they may not have occurred very often. With Henriette, for example, or those threesomes with the nun, M.M. Of course, Casanova was interested in power too. No doubt he ended as a complete Narcissus, when love naturally became intolerable to him, since love involved him with another party emotionally. Every Narcissus dislikes that. None of us regards Ralph as only wanting power where a woman is concerned. We think too highly of you for that, Ralph.'

Barnby did not appear flattered by this analysis of his emotional life.

'Thanks awfully,' he said. 'But, to get down to more immediate matters, how would you feel, Hugh, if I asked that waitress to sit for me? For reasons of trade, rather than power or sensuality. Of course she is bound to think I am trying to get off with her. Nothing could be further from the case – no, I assure you, Maclintick. Anyway, I don't expect she will agree. No harm in trying, though. I just wanted to make sure you had no objection. To show how little of a Casanova I am – or is it a Don Juan?'

'Take any step you think best,' said Moreland laughing, although perhaps not best pleased by what Barnby had asked. 'I have resigned all claims. I don't quite see her in your medium, but that is obviously the painter's own affair. If I have a passion for anyone, I prefer an academic, even pedestrian, naturalism of portraiture. It is a limitation I share with Edgar Deacon. Nothing I'd care for less than to have my girl painted by Lhote or Gleizes, however much I may admire those painters – literally – in the abstract.'

All the same, although he put a good face on it, Moreland looked a little cast down. No more was said on the subject until the time came to make our individual contributions to the bill. The waitress appeared again. She explained that she had omitted at an earlier stage of the meal to collect some of the money due for what we had drunk. She now presented her final account. At this point Barnby took the opportunity to allow himself certain pleasantries – these a trifle on the ponderous side, as he himself admitted later – to the effect that she was demanding money under false pretences. The waitress received these comments in good part, unbending so far as to hint that she had not levied the charge before, because, having taken one look at Barnby, she had been sure he would give a further order for drink; she had accordingly decided to wait until the account was complete. Barnby listened to this explanation gravely, making no attempt to answer in the breezy manner he had employed a few seconds earlier this imputation of possessing a bibulous appearance. Just as the girl was about to withdraw, he spoke.

'Look here,' he said, 'I'm an artist – I paint people's pictures.'

She did not look at him, or answer, but she stopped giggling, while at the same time making no attempt to move away from the table.

'I'd like to paint you.'

She still did not speak. Her expression changed in a very slight degree, registering what might have been embarrassment or cunning.

'Could you come and be painted by me some time?'

Barnby put the question in a quiet, almost exaggeratedly gentle voice; one I had never before heard him use.

'Don't know that I have time,' she said, very coolly.

'What about one week-end?'

'Can't come Sunday. Have to be here.'

'Saturday, then?'

'Saturday isn't any good either.'

'You can't have to work all the week.'

'Might manage a Thursday.'

'All right, let's make it a Thursday then.'

There was a pause. Maclintick, unable to bear the sight and sound of these negotiations, had taken a notebook from his pocket and begun a deep examination of his own affairs; making plans for the future; writing down great thoughts; perhaps even composing music. Moreland, unable to conceal his discomfort at what was taking place, started a conversation with me designed to carry further his Time-Space theories.

'What about next Thursday?' asked Barnby, in his most wheedling tone.

'I don't know.'

'Say you will.'

'I don't know.'

'Come on.'

'I suppose so, then.'

Barnby reached forward and took Maclintick's pencil from his hand – not without protest on Maclintick's part – and wrote something on the back of an envelope. I suppose it was just the address of his studio, but painters form the individual letters of their handwriting so carefully, so separately, that he seemed to be drawing a picture specially for her.

'It's above a shop,' Barnby said.

Then, suddenly, he crumpled the envelope.

'On second thoughts,' he said, 'I will come and pick you up here, if that is all right.'

'As you like.'

She spoke indifferently, as if all had been decided long before and they had been going out together for years.

'What time?'

She told him; the two of them made some mutual arrangement. Then they smiled at each other, again without any sense of surprise or excitement, as if long on familiar terms, and the waitress retired from the table. Barnby handed the stump of pencil back to Maclintick. We vacated the restaurant.

'Like Glendower, Barnby,' said Maclintick, 'you can call spirits from the vasty deep. With Hotspur, I ask you, will they come?'

'That's to be seen,' said Barnby. 'By the way, what is her name? I forgot to ask.'

'Norma,' said Moreland, speaking without apology.

To complete the story, Barnby (whose personal arrangements were often vague) told me that when the day of assignation came, he arrived, owing to bad timing, three-quarters of an hour late for the appointment. The girl was still waiting for him. She came to his studio, where he began a picture of her, subsequently completing at least one oil painting and several drawings. The painting, which was in his more severe manner, he sold to Sir Magnus Donners; Sir Herbert Manasch bought one of the drawings, which were treated naturistically. Eventually, as might have been foretold, Barnby had some sort of a love affair with his model; although he always insisted she was 'not his type', that matters had come to a head one thundery afternoon when an overcast sky made painting impossible. Norma left Casanova's soon after this episode. She took a job which led to her marrying a man who kept a tobacconist's shop in Camden Town. There was no ill feeling after Barnby had done with her; keeping on good terms with his former mistresses was one of his gifts. In fact he used to visit Norma and her husband (who sometimes gave him racing tips) after they were married. Through them he found a studio in that part of London; he may even have been godfather to one of their children. All that is beside the point. The emphasis I lay upon the circumstances of this assignation at Casanova's Chinese Restaurant is to draw attention to the extreme ease with which Barnby conducted the preliminaries of his campaign. Anyone who heard things being fixed up might have supposed Norma to have spent much of her previous life as an artist's model; she regarded making an engagement for a sitting as a matter of routine regulated only by aspects of her own immediate convenience. Perhaps she had; perhaps she did. In that case Barnby showed scarcely less mastery of the situation in at once assessing her potentialities in that rôle.

'Of course, Ralph is a painter,' said Moreland, afterwards. 'He has a studio. Time, place and a respectable motive for a visit are all at his command. None of these things are to be despised where girls are concerned.'

'Time and Space, as usual.'

'Time and Space,' said Moreland.

The incident was not only an illustration of Barnby's adroitness in that field, but also an example of Moreland's diffidence, a diffidence no doubt in part responsible for the admixture of secretiveness and exhibitionism with which he conducted his love affairs. By exhibitionism, I mean, in Moreland's case, no more than a taste for referring obliquely from time to time to some unrevealed love that possessed him. I supposed that this habit of his explained his talk of marriage the day – five or six years after our first meeting – when we had listened together to the song of the blonde singer; especially when he refused to name the girl – or three girls – he might be considering as a wife. It was therefore a great surprise to me when his words turned out to be spoken seriously. However, I did not at first realise how serious they were; nor even when, some weeks later, more about the girl herself was revealed.

He suggested one day that we should go together to *The Duchess of Malfi*, which was being performed at a small theatre situated somewhat off the beaten track; one of those ventures that attempt, by introducing a few new names and effects, momentarily to dispel the tedium of dramatic routine.

'Webster is always a favourite of mine,' Moreland said. 'Norman Chandler has for the moment abandoned dancing and the saxophone, and is playing Bosola.'

'That should be enjoyable. Has he quite the weight?'

Chandler had moved a long way since the day when I had first seen him at the Mortimer, when Mr Deacon had spoken so archly of having acquired his friendship through a vegetarian holiday. Now Chandler had made some name for himself, not only as a dancer, but also as an actor; not in leading rôles, but specialising in smaller, unusual parts suitable to his accomplished, but always intensely personal, style. I used to run across him occasionally with Moreland, whose passion for mechanical pianos Chandler shared; music for which they would search London.

'I also happen to know the Cardinal's mistress,' said Moreland, speaking very casually.

This remark suddenly struck a chord of memory about something someone had said a few days before about the cast of this very play.

'But wasn't she Sir Magnus Donners's mistress too? I was hearing about that. It is Matilda Wilson, isn't it, who is playing that part – the *jolie laide* Donners used to be seen about with a year or two ago? I have always wanted to have a look at her.'

Moreland turned scarlet. I realised that I had shown colossal lack of tact. This must be his girl. I saw now why he had spoken almost apologetically about going to the play, as if some excuse were required for attending one of Webster's tragedies, even though Moreland himself was known by me to be greatly attached to the Elizabethan dramatists. When he made the suggestion that we should see the play together I had suspected no ulterior motive. Now, it looked as if something were on foot.

'She was mixed up with Donners for a time,' he said, 'that is quite true. But several years ago now. I thought we might go round and see her after the performance. Then we could have a drink – even eat if we felt like it – at the Café Royal or somewhere like that.'

To hold a friend in the background at a certain stage of a love affair is a technique some men like to employ; a method which spreads, as it were, the emotional load, ameliorating risks of dual conflict between the lovers themselves, although at the same time posing a certain hazard in the undue proximity of a third party unencumbered with emotional responsibility – and therefore almost always seen to better advantage than the lover himself. Close friends probably fall in love with the same woman less often in life than in books, though the female spirit of emulation will sometimes fix on a husband or lover's friend out of a mere desire to show that a woman can do even better than her partner in the same sphere. Moreland and I used to agree that, in principle, we liked the same kind of girl; but never, so long as I knew him, did we ever find ourselves in competition.

The news that he was involved with Matilda Wilson, might even be thinking of marrying her – for that was the shape things seemed to be taking – was surprising in a number of ways. I had never seen the girl herself, although often hearing about her during her interlude with Sir Magnus, a person round whom gossip accumulated easily, not only because he was very rich, but also on account of supposedly unconventional tastes in making love. Sir Magnus was said to be reasonably generous with his girls, and, provided he was from time to time indulged in certain respects, not unduly demanding. It was characteristic of the situations in which love lands people that someone as sensitive as Moreland to life's grotesque aspects should find himself handling so delicate an affair, where perhaps even marriage was the goal. When we arrived at the theatre we found Mark Members waiting in the foyer. Members was the kind of person who would know by instinct that Moreland was interested in Matilda Wilson, and might be expected to make some reference to her past with Sir Magnus with the object of teasing Moreland with whom he was on prickly terms. However, the subject did not arise. Members had just finished straightening his tie in a large looking-glass. He was now looking disdainfully round him.

'What a shabby lot of highbrows have turned out tonight,' he said, when he saw us. 'It makes me ashamed to be one.'

'Nobody guesses you are, Mark,' said Moreland. 'Not in that natty new suit. They think you are an actuary or an average adjuster.'

Members laughed his tinny laugh.

'How is sweet music?' he asked. 'How are your pale tunes irresolute, Moreland? When is that opera of yours we hear so much about going to appear?'

'I've knocked off work on the opera for the moment,' said Moreland. 'I'm working on something slighter which I think should appeal to music-lovers of your temperament. It is to be called *Music for a Maison de Passe: A Suite*.'

We passed on to where Gossage was standing a short way off by the curtain that screened the foyer from the passage leading to the auditorium. Gossage was talking with a great display of respect to a lady dressed rather too exquisitely for the occasion; the audience that night, as Members had truly remarked, being decidedly unkempt. This lady, slight in figure, I recognised at once as Mrs Foxe, mother of my old friend, Charles Stringham. I had not seen Stringham since Widmerpool and I had put him to bed after too much to drink at an Old Boy Dinner. Mrs Foxe herself I had not set eyes on for ten years; the day she and Commander Foxe had lunched with Stringham in his rooms in college to discuss whether or not he should 'go down' before taking a degree.

Mrs Foxe was quite unchanged. Beautiful in early middle age, she remained still untouched by time. She was accompanied by a girl of seventeen or eighteen, and two young men who looked like undergraduates. Evidently she was hostess to this party, whom I supposed to be relations; connexions possibly of her first husband, Lord Warrington, or her third husband, Buster Foxe. Stringham, child of the intermediate marriage of this South African millionaire's daughter, used to boast he had no relations; so they were presumably not cousins of his. Gossage, parting now from Mrs Foxe with many smiles and bows, nodded to Moreland with an air of considerable satisfaction as he hurried past. When we reached our seats I saw that Mrs Foxe and her party were sitting a long way away from us. Since I hardly supposed she would remember me, I decided not to approach her during the *entr'actes*. In any case, she and I had little in common except Stringham himself, of whom I then knew nothing except that his marriage had broken up and he was said to be still drinking too much. He had certainly drunk a lot the night Widmerpool and I had put him to bed. Another reason for taking no step in Mrs Foxe's direction was that a stage in my life had been reached when I felt that to spend even a short time with a party of that kind would be 'boring'. For the moment, I had put such things behind me. Perhaps at some future date I should return to them; for the time being I rather prided myself on preferring forms of social life where white ties were not worn. I was even glad there was no likelihood of chance recognition.

Julia, the Cardinal's mistress in *The Duchess of Malfi*, does not come on to the stage until the fourth scene of the first act. Moreland was uneasy until that moment, fidgeting in his seat, giving deep breaths, a habit of his when inwardly disturbed. At the same time, he showed a great deal of enjoyment in Norman Chandler's earlier speeches as Bosola. Chandler had brought an unexpected solidity to this insidious part. The lightness of his build, and general air of being a dancer rather than an actor, had prepared neither Moreland nor myself for the rendering he presented of 'this fellow seven years in the galleys for a notorious murder'.

'Do you think Norman talked like Bosola the night he was bargaining with Edgar Deacon about that statuette?' said Moreland, in an undertone. 'If so, he must have got the best of it. Did I ever tell you that he hadn't been paid when Edgar died, so Norman nipped round to the shop and took the thing away again? That was in the Bosola tradition.'

When at last Matilda Wilson appeared as Julia, Moreland's face took on a look of intensity, almost of strain, more like worry than love. I had been looking forward to seeing her with the interest one feels in being shown for the first time the woman a close friend proposes to marry; for I now had no doubt from the manner in which the evening had been planned that Matilda must be the girl whom Moreland had in mind when he had spoken of taking a wife. When she first came towards the footlights I was disappointed. I have no talent for guessing what an actress will look like off the stage, but, even allowing for an appearance greatly changed by the removal of make-up and the stiffly angled dress in which she was playing the part, she seemed altogether lacking in conventional prettiness. A minute or two later I began to change my mind. She certainly possessed a forceful, enigmatic personality; none of the film-star looks of the waitress in Casanova's, but something, one of those resemblances impossible to put into words, made me recall that evening. Matilda Wilson moved gracefully. Apart from that, and the effectiveness of her slow, clear voice and sardonic enunciation, she was not a very 'finished' actress. Once or twice I was aware of Moreland glancing in my direction, as if he hoped to discover what I thought of her; but he asked no questions and made no comment when the curtain fell. He shuddered slightly when she replied to Bosola's lines: 'Know you me, I am a blunt soldier', with: 'The better; sure there wants fire where there are no lively sparks of roughness'.

When the play was over, we went round to the stage door, penetrating into regions where the habitually cramped accommodation of theatrical dressing-rooms was more than usually in evidence. For a time we wandered about narrow passages filled with little young men who had danced the Masque of Madmen, now dressing, undressing, chattering, washing, playing noisy games of their own, which gave the impression that the action of the play was continuing its course even though the curtain had come down. We found Matilda Wilson's room at last. She was wearing hardly any clothes, removing her make-up, while Norman Chandler, dressed in a mauve dressing-gown of simulated brocade, sat on a stool beside her, reading a book. I never feel greatly at ease 'backstage', and Moreland himself, although by then certainly used enough to such surroundings, was obviously disturbed by the responsibility of having to display his girl for the first time. He need not have worried; Matilda herself was completely at ease. I saw at once, now she was off the stage, how effortless her conquest of Moreland must have been. He possessed, it was true, a certain taste for rather conventional good looks which had to be overcome in favour of beauty of a less obvious kind; in other respects she seemed to have everything he demanded, yet never could find. Barnby always dismissed the idea of intelligence in a woman as no more than a characteristic to be endured. Moreland held different views.

'I don't want what Rembrandt or Cézanne or Barnby or any other painter may happen to want,' he used to say. 'I simply cling to my own preferences. I don't know what's good, but I know what I like – not a lot of intellectual snobbery about fat peasant women, or technical talk about masses and planes. After all, painters have to contend professionally with pictorial aspects of the eternal feminine which are quite beside the point where a musician like myself is concerned. With women, I can afford to cut out the chiaroscuro. Choosing the type of girl one likes is about the last thing left that one is allowed to approach subjectively. I shall continue to exercise the option.'

Matilda Wilson jumped up from her stool as soon as she saw Moreland. Throwing her arms round his neck, she kissed him on the nose. When a woman is described as a '*jolie laide*', the same particular combination of looks is, for some reason, implied; you expect a brunette, small rather than tall, with a face emphasised by eyebrows and mouth, features which would be too insistent if the eyes did not finally control the general effect – in fact what is also known as *beauté de singe*. Matilda Wilson was not at all like that. Off the stage, she was taller and thinner than I had supposed, her hair fairish, with large, rather sleepy green eyes. The upper half of her face was pretty enough; the lower, forcefully, even rather coarsely modelled. You felt the beauty of her figure was in some manner the consequence of her own self-control; that a less intelligent woman might have 'managed' her body without the same effectiveness.

'Oh, darling,' she said, in a voice that at once suggested her interlude in the world of Sir Magnus Donners, 'I am so glad you have turned up at last. Various awful men have been trying to make me go out with them. But I said you were calling for me. I hoped you would not forget as you did last week.'

'Oh, last week,' said Moreland, looking dreadfully put out, and making a characteristic gesture with his hand, as if about to begin conducting. 'That muddle was insane of me. Will you ever forgive me, Matty? It upset me so much. Do let me off further mention of it. I am so hopelessly forgetful.'

He looked rather wildly round him, as if he expected to find some explanation of the cause of bad memory in the furthest recesses of the dressing-room, finally turning to me for support.

'Nick, don't you find it absolutely impossible nowadays to remember anything?' he began. 'Do you know, I was in the Mortimer the other day——'

Up to that time he had made no attempt to tell Matilda Wilson my name, although no doubt she had been warned that I was probably going to join them at the end of the play. He would certainly have launched into a long train of reminiscence about something or other that had happened to him in the Mortimer, if she had not burst out laughing and kissed him again, this time on the ear. She held out her hand to me, still laughing, and Moreland, now red in the face, insisted that the time had passed for introductory formalities. Meanwhile, Norman Chandler had been finishing his chapter without taking any notice of what was going on round him. Now, he put a marker in his book (which I saw to be *Time and Western Man*), and, drawing the billowing robes of his rather too large dressing-gown more tightly round him, he rose to his feet.

'"A lot of awful men"?' he said, speaking in a voice of old-time melodrama. 'What do you mean, Matilda? I offered you a bite with Max and me, if your boy friend did not arrive. That was only because you said he was so forgetful, and might easily think he had made a date for the day after tomorrow. I never heard such ingratitude.'

Matilda put her arm round Chandler's waist and attempted to smoothe his hair with her brush.

'Oh, I didn't mean you, darling, of course I didn't,' she said. 'I don't call you a man. I love you much too much. I mean an awful man who telephoned – and then another awful man who left a note. How could anyone call you awful, Norman, darling?'

'Oh, I don't know so much about that,' said Chandler, now abandoning the consciously sinister, masculine tones of Bosola, and returning to his more familiar chorus-boy drawl. 'I'm not always adored as much as you might think from looking at me. I don't quite know why that is.'

He put his head on one side, forefinger against cheek, transforming himself to some character of ballet, perhaps the Faun from *L'Après-midi*.

'You are adored by me,' said Matilda, kissing him twice before throwing down the hairbrush on the dressing-table. 'But I really must put a few clothes on.'

Chandler broke away from her, executing a series of little leaps in the air, although there was not much room for these *entrechats*. He whizzed round several times, collapsing at last upon his stool.

'Bravo, bravo,' said Matilda, clapping her hands. 'You will rival Nijinsky yet, Norman, my sweetie.'

'Be careful,' said Chandler. 'Your boy friend will be jealous. I can see him working himself up. He can be very violent when roused.'

Moreland had watched this display of high spirits with enjoyment, except when talk had been of other men taking out Matilda, when his face had clouded. Chandler had probably noticed that. So far from being jealous of Chandler, which would certainly have been absurd in the circumstances, Moreland seemed to welcome these antics as relaxing tension between himself and Matilda. He became more composed in manner. Paradoxically enough, something happened a moment later which paid an obvious tribute to Chandler's status as a ladies' man, however little regarded in that rôle by Moreland and the world at large.

'I will be very quick now,' said Matilda, 'and then we will go. I am dying for a bite.'

She retired behind a small screen calculated to heighten rather than diminish the dramatic effect of her toilet, since her long angular body was scarcely at all concealed, and, in any case, she continually reappeared on the floor of the room to rescue garments belonging to her which lay about there. The scene was a little like those depicted in French eighteenth-century engravings where propriety is archly threatened in the presence of an amorous *abbé* or two – powdered hair would have suited Matilda, I thought; Moreland, perhaps, too. However, the picture's static form was interrupted by the sound of some commotion in the passage which caused Chandler to stroll across the room and stand by the half-open door. Some people were passing who must have recognised him, because he suddenly said: 'Why, hullo, Mrs Foxe,' in a tone rather different from that used by him a moment before; a friendly tone, but one at the same time faintly deferential, possibly even a shade embarrassed. There was the sudden suggestion that Chandler was on his best behaviour.

'We were looking for you,' said a woman's voice, speaking almost appealingly, yet still with a note of command in it. 'We thought you would not mind if we came behind the scenes to see you. Such an adventure for us, you know. In fact we even wondered if there was any chance of persuading you to come to supper with us.'

The people in the passage could not be seen, but this was undoubtedly Stringham's mother. She introduced Chandler to the persons with her, but the names were inaudible.

'It would be so nice if you could come,' she said, quite humbly now. 'Your performance was wonderful. We adored it.'

Chandler had left the dressing-room now and was some way up the passage, but his voice could still be heard.

'It is terribly sweet of you, Mrs Foxe,' he said, with some hesitation. 'It would have been quite lovely. But as a matter of fact I was supposed to be meeting an old friend this evening.'

He seemed undecided whether or not to accept the invitation, to have lost suddenly all the animation he had been showing in the dressing-room a minute or two before. Moreland and Matilda had stopped talking and had also begun to listen, evidently with great enjoyment, to what was taking place outside.

'Oh, but if he is an old friend,' said Mrs Foxe, who seemed to make no doubt whatever of the sex of Chandler's companion for dinner, 'surely he might join us too. It would be so nice. What is his name?'

Although she was almost begging Chandler to accept her invitation, there was also in her voice the imperious note of the beauty of her younger days, the rich woman, well known in the world and used to being obeyed.

'Max Pilgrim.'

Chandler's voice, no less than Mrs Foxe's, suggested conflicting undertones of feeling: gratification at being so keenly desired as a guest; deference, in spite of himself, for the air of luxury and high living that Mrs Foxe bestowed about her; determination not to be jockeyed out of either his *gaminerie* or accustomed manner of ordering his own life by Mrs Foxe or anyone else.

'Not *the* Max Pilgrim?'

'He is at the Café de Madrid now. He sings there.'

'But, of course. "I want to dazzle Lady Sybil . . ." What a funny song that one is. Does he mean it to be about Sybil Huntercombe, do you think? It is so like her. We must certainly have Mr Pilgrim too. But will he come? He has probably planned something much more amusing. Oh, I do hope he will.'

'I think——

'But how wonderful, if he would. Certainly you must ask him. Do telephone to him at once and beg him to join us.'

The exact words of Chandler's reply could not be heard, but there could be little doubt that he had been persuaded. Perhaps he was afraid of Max Pilgrim's annoyance if the supper party had been refused on behalf of both of them. In dealing with Mrs Foxe, Chandler seemed deprived, if only temporarily, of some of his effervescence of spirit. It looked as if he might be made her prisoner. This was an unguessed aspect of Mrs Foxe's life, a new departure in her career of domination. The party moved off, bearing Chandler with them; their voices died away as they reached the end of the passage. Moreland and Matilda continued to laugh. I asked what it was all about.

'Norman's grand lady,' said Matilda. 'She is someone called Mrs Foxe. Very smart. She sits on all sorts of committees and she met Norman a week or two ago at some charity performance. It was love at first sight.'

'You don't mean they are having an affair?'

'No, no, of course not,' said Moreland, speaking as if he were quite shocked at the notion, 'how absurd to suggest such a thing. You can have a passion for someone without having an affair with them. That is one of the things no one seems able to understand these days.'

'What is it then?'

'Just one of those fascinating mutual attractions between improbable people that take place from time to time. I should like to write a ballet round it.'

'Norman is interested too? He sounded a bit unwilling to go out to supper.'

'Perhaps not interested in the sense you mean,' said Moreland, 'but everyone likes being fallen in love with. People who pretend they don't are always the ones, beyond all others, to wring the last drop of pleasure – usually sadistic pleasure – out of it. Besides, Norman has begun to live rather a Ritzy life with her, he tells me. Some people like that too.'

'I think Norman is quite keen,' said Matilda, adding some final touches to her face that made completion of her toilet seem promising. 'Did you hear the way he was talking? Not at all like himself. I think the only thing that holds him back is fear of old friends like Max Pilgrim laughing.'

'Norman obviously represents the physical type of the future,' Moreland said, abandoning, as he so often did, the particular aspect of the matter under discussion in favour of a more general aesthetic bearing. 'The great artists have always decided beforehand what form looks are to take in the world, and Norman is pure Picasso – one of those attenuated, androgynous mountebanks of the Blue Period, who haven't had a meal for weeks.'

'Come along, sweetie, and don't talk so much,' said Matilda, closing her bag and getting up from the dressing-table. 'If we don't have something to eat pretty soon we shall become attenuated, androgynous mountebanks ourselves.'

No phrase could have better described what she looked like. She had emerged at last in a purple satin dress and sequin mittens, the ultimate effect almost more exotic than if she had remained in the costume of the play. I found her decidedly impressive. It was evident from the manner in which she had spoken of Mrs Foxe that she was on easy terms with a world which Moreland, in principle, disliked, indeed entered only for professional purposes. A wife who could handle that side of his life would undoubtedly be an advantage to him. Conversationally, too, Matilda was equipped to meet him on his own ground. Moreland's talk when pursuing a girl varied little, if at all, from his conversation at any other time. Some women found this too severe an intellectual burden; others were flattered, even when incapable of keeping pace. With Matilda, this level of dialogue seemed just what was required. She was a clever girl, with a good all-round knowledge of the arts: one who liked being treated as a serious person. This was apparent by the time we reached the restaurant, where Moreland at once began to discuss the play.

' "The lusty spring smells well; but drooping autumn tastes well," ' he said. 'How like:

Pauvre automne
Meurs en blancheur et en richesse
De neige et de fruits mûrs

or: *Je suis soumis au Chef du Signe de l'Automne*
Partant j'aime les fruits je déteste les fleurs

I was thinking the other day one might make an anthology of the banker poets . . . Guillaume Apollinaire . . . T. S. Eliot . . . Robert W. Service . . .'

He put down the menu which he had been studying.

'A wonderful idea,' said Matilda, who had been adding magenta to her lips to emphasise the whiteness of her skin or offset the colour of her dress, 'but first of all make up your mind what you are going to eat. I have already decided on Sole Bonne Femme, but I know we shall have to start all over again when the waiter comes.'

Clearly she possessed a will of her own, and had already learnt something of Moreland's habits; for example, that persuading him to choose a dish at a restaurant was a protracted affair. When faced with a menu Moreland's first thought was always to begin some lengthy discussion that postponed indefinitely the need to make a decision about food.

'What do you think I should like?' he said.

'Oeufs Meyerbeer,' she said. 'You always enjoy them.'

Moreland took up the menu again irresolutely.

'What do you think?' he said. 'I hate being hurried about any of my appetites. What are you going to eat, Nick? I am afraid you may order something that will make me regret my own choice. You have done that in the past. It is very disloyal of you. You know I think Gossage – in as much as he possesses any sexual feelings at all – derives a certain vicarious satisfaction from contemplating the loves of Norman Chandler and Mrs Foxe. The situation manages to embrace within one circumference Gossage's taste for rich ladies and good-looking young men – together with a faint spice of musical background.'

'Gossage says there is talk of putting on Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*,' said Matilda.

Moreland once again abandoned the menu.

' "Holla, ye pampered jades of Asia," ' he cried. ' "What, can ye draw but twenty miles a day?" That is rather what I feel about the newspaper criticism of Gossage and Maclintick. I should like them to drag me to concerts, like the kings drew Tamerlaine, in a triumphal coach. They would be far better employed doing that than pouring out all that stuff for their respective periodicals every week. Perhaps that is not fair to Maclintick. It is certainly true of Gossage.'

'I am sure Maclintick would draw you to the Queen's Hall in a rickshaw if you asked him,' said Matilda. 'He admires you so much.'

She turned to the waiter, ordered whatever she and I had agreed to eat, and Oeufs Meyerbeer for Moreland, who, still unable to come to a decision about food, accepted her ruling on this matter without dissent.

'I think there is just a chance I might be cast for Zenocrate,' she said, 'if they did ever do *Tamburlaine*. In any case, the show wouldn't be coming on for ages.'

'I wouldn't limit it to Maclintick and Gossage,' Moreland said. 'I should like to be dragged along by all the music critics, arranged in order of height, tallest in front, midgets at the back. That will give you some clue to what the procession would look like. I have always been interested in Tamerlaine. I found myself thinking of him the other day as part of that cruel, parched, Central Asian feeling one gets hearing *Prince Igor*. I am sure it was his bad leg that made him such a nuisance.'

'You may be interested in Tamerlaine, darling,' said Matilda, 'but you are not in the least interested in my career.'

'Oh, Matty, I am. I'm sorry. I am really. I want you to be the Duse of our time.'

He took her hand.

'I don't believe you, you old brute.'

In spite of saying that she smiled, and did not seem seriously annoyed. On the whole they appeared to understand one another pretty well. When the moment came to pay the bill, I flicked a note across to Moreland to cover my share. Matilda at once took charge of this, at the same extracting another note from Moreland himself – always a great fumbler with money. These she handed over with a request for change. When the waiter returned with some money on a plate, she apportioned the silver equitably between Moreland and myself, leaving the correct tip; a series of operations that would have presented immense problems of manipulation to Moreland. All this enterprise made her appear to possess ideal, even miraculous, qualifications for becoming his wife. They were, indeed, married some months later. The ceremony took place in a registry office, almost secretly, because Moreland hated fuss. Not long after, perhaps a year, almost equally unexpectedly, I found myself married too; married to Isobel Tolland. Life – the sort of life Moreland and I used to live in those days – all became rather changed.

2

SUNDAY LUNCHEON at Katherine, Lady Warminster's, never, as it were, specially dedicated to meetings of the family, had in the course of time grown into an occasion when, at fairly regular intervals, several – sometimes too many – of the Tollands were collected together. Now and then more distant relations were present, once in a way a friend; but on the whole immediate Tollands predominated. Everyone expected to meet their 'in-laws'; and, among other characteristics, these parties provided, at least superficially, a kind of parade of different approaches to marriage. There was in common a certain sense of couples being on their best behaviour in Lady Warminster's presence, but, in spite of that limited uniformity, routine at Hyde Park Gardens emphasised any individuality of matrimonial technique. Blanche, Robert, Hugo, and Priscilla Tolland still lived under the same roof as their step-mother, so that the two girls attended the meal more often than not; Robert, his social life always tempered with secrecy, was intermittently present; while Hugo, still tenuously keeping university terms accentuated by violent junctures when to be 'sent down' seemed unavoidable, could be seen there only during the vacation. This accommodation in the house of several younger members of the family had not resulted in much outward gaiety of atmosphere. On the contrary, the note struck as one entered the hall and ascended the staircase was quiet, almost despondent. The lack of exhilaration confirmed a favourite proposition of Moreland's as to the sadness of youth.

'I myself look forward ceaselessly to the irresponsibility of middle-age,' he was fond of stating.

It may, indeed, have been true that 'the children', rather than Lady Warminster herself, were to blame for this distinct air of melancholy. Certainly the environment was very different from the informality, the almost calculated disorder, surrounding the Jeavonses in South Kensington, a household I had scarcely visited since my marriage. Ted Jeavons's health had been even worse than usual; while Molly had given out that she was much occupied with reorganisation of the top floor (where her husband's old, bedridden – and recently deceased – cousin had lived), which was now to be done up as a flat for some friend or dependent. No doubt this reconditioning had reduced the Jeavons house to a depth of untidiness unthinkably greater than that which habitually prevailed there. The interior of Hyde Park Gardens was altogether in contrast with any such circumstance of invincible muddle. Hyde Park Gardens was unexceptional, indeed rather surprisingly ordinary, considering the personalities enclosed within, decorations and furniture expressing almost as profound an anonymity as Uncle Giles's private hotel, the Ufford; although, of course, more luxurious than the Ufford's, and kept just the right side of taste openly to be decried as 'bad', or even aggressively out of fashion.

Appreciably older than her sister Molly Jeavons – and, like her, childless – Lady Warminster had largely withdrawn from the world since her second husband's death in Kashmir eight or nine years before. Lord Warminster, who could claim some name as a sportsman, even as an amateur explorer, had formed the habit of visiting that country from time to time, not, so far as was known, on account of the sensual attractions extolled in the Kashmiri Love Song, but for pleasure in the more general beauty of its valleys, and the shooting of ibex there. On this last occasion, grazing his hand while opening a tin, he had contracted blood poisoning, an infection from which he subsequently died. Grieved in a remote way at her loss, although their comparatively brief married life together had been marked on his part by prolonged travel abroad, Lady Warminster had also been delighted to hand over Thrubworth to her eldest step-son, Erridge; to settle herself permanently in London. She had always hated country life. Erridge had been less pleased to find himself head of the family at the age of eighteen or nineteen, saddled with the responsibilities of a large house and estate. Indeed, from that moment he had contended as little as possible with any but the most pressing duties contingent upon his 'position', devoting himself to his left-wing political interests, which merged into a not too exacting study of sociology.

Chips Lovell (with whom I had formerly been teamed up as a fellow script-writer in the film business), who was inclined to call almost everyone of an older generation than himself either 'Uncle' or 'Aunt', and was always prepared at a moment's notice to provide an *a priori* account of the personal history and problems of all his relations and acquaintances, had said: 'Like every other Ardglass, Aunt Katherine only really enjoys pottering about.' It was certainly true that Lady Warminster, as a widow, divided her time between her own ailments, real or imagined – opinion differed within the family on this point – and the writing of biographical studies devoted to the dominating, Amazonian women of history. Maria-Theresa, at the time of which I speak, had offered a theme sympathetic to the fashion of the moment for things Austrian. Lady Warminster enjoyed the reputation of having 'got on' pretty well with her step-children, even if no outstandingly warm sentiments existed between herself and any individual member of the family, except perhaps Blanche. In the past there had been, of course, occasional rows. Frederica and George found their step-mother's way of life too eccentric to wish to play much part in it themselves; Erridge and Norah, on the other hand, thought her hopelessly conventional. Such divergence of view was only to be expected in a large family, and most of her own contemporaries agreed on the whole that Katherine Warminster, so far as her step-children were concerned, was to be congratulated on having made a fairly good job of it. For my own part, I liked Lady Warminster, although at the same time never wholly at ease in her presence. She was immaculately free from any of the traditional blemishes of a mother-in-law; agreeable always; entertaining; even, in her own way, affectionate; but always a little alarming: an elegant, deeply experienced bird – perhaps a bird of prey – ready to sweep down and attack from the frozen mountain peaks upon which she preferred herself to live apart.

Robert Tolland, seventh child and third son of his parents, was in the drawing-room at Hyde Park Gardens when, rather too early for the appointed time of the meal, I arrived there. He was a tall, cadaverous young man of about twenty-four, with his family's blue eyes and characteristic angularity of frame. Of my wife's brothers, Robert was the one with whom I felt myself generally most at home. He had some of the oddness, some of that complete disregard for public opinion, that distinguished Erridge (as I shall continue to call the eldest of the Tollands, since that was the name by which he was known within the family, rather than 'Alfred', or even 'Alf', preferred by his left-wing cronies like J. G. Quiggin), although at the same time Robert was without Erridge's political enthusiasms. He was not so conformist – 'not so bloody boring', Chips Lovell had said – as his second brother, George Tolland (retired from the Brigade of Guards, now working in the City), although

Robert to some extent haunted George's – to Chips Lovell – rather oppressive social world. In fact, outwardly, Robert was just as 'correct' as George, to use the term Molly Jeavons liked to apply to any of her relations whom she suspected of criticising her own manner of life. All the same, a faint suggestion of dissipation was also to be found in Robert; nothing like that thick sea mist of gossip which at an early age already encompassed his younger brother, Hugo, but something that affirmed to those with an instinct for recognising such things at long range, the existence in the neighbourhood of vaguely irregular behaviour. Chips Lovell, whose stories were always to be accepted with caution, used to hint that Robert, a school contemporary of his, had a taste for night-club hostesses not always in their first youth. The case was non-proven. Robert would take girls out occasionally – girls other than the hypothetical 'peroxide blondes old enough to be his mother', so designated, probably imaginatively, by Lovell – but he never showed much interest in them for more than a week or two. By no means to be described as 'dotty' himself, there was perhaps something in Robert of his 'dotty' sister, Blanche: a side never fully realised, emotionally undeveloped. He sometimes reminded me of Archie Gilbert, that 'dancing man' of my early London days, whose life seemed exclusively lived at balls. Robert was, of course, more 'intelligent' than Archie Gilbert, intelligent at least in the crudest sense of being able to discourse comprehensibly about books he had read, or theatres, concerts and private views he had attended; conversational peaks to which Archie Gilbert had never in the least aspired. Robert, as it happened, was rather a keen concert-goer and frequenter of musical parties. He had a job in an export house trading with the Far East, employment he found perfectly congenial. No one seemed to know whether or not he was any good at the work, but

Robert was thought by his sisters to possess a taste for making money. When I arrived in the drawing-room he was playing *Iberia* on the gramophone.

'How is Isobel?'

He threw the newspaper he had been reading to the ground and jumped to his feet, giving at the same time one of those brilliant smiles that suggested nothing could have come as a more delightful, a less expected, surprise than my own arrival in the room at just that moment. Although I was not exactly taken in by this reception, Robert's habitual exhibition of good manners never failed to charm me.

'Pretty well all right now. She is emerging tomorrow. I am going to see her this afternoon.'

'Do please give her my best love. I ought to have gone to see her in the nursing home myself. Somehow one never gets time for anything. What a bore it has been for you both. I was so sorry to hear about it.'

He spoke with solicitude, at the same time giving the impression that he was still, even at this late stage, unable wholly to conceal his wonder that someone should have chosen Isobel – or any other of his sisters – as a wife; nice girls, no doubt, beings for whom he felt the warmest affection, but creatures to be thought of always in terms of playing shops or putting their dolls to bed.

'Who will be at lunch?'

'I'll tell you. But shall we have the other side of this record first? I am playing them all in the wrong order. I love *Les Parfums de la Nuit*. I think that is really the bit I like best.'

'Do you adapt your music to the foreign news, Robert?'

'Rather suitable, isn't it? Now that the Alcazar has been relieved things seem to have become a bit static. I wonder who will win.'

He closed the lid of the gramophone, which began once more to diffuse the sombre, menacing notes adumbrating their Spanish background: tawny skies: dusty plains: bleak sierras: black marble sarcophagi of dead kings under arabesqued ceilings: *art nouveau* blocks of flats past which the squat trams rattled and clanged: patent-leather cocked hats of the Guardia Civil: leather cushions cast upon the sand under posters promulgating cures for impotence and the pox . . . these and a hundred other ever-changing cubist abstractions, merging their visual elements with the hurdy-gurdy music of the bull-ring . . . now – through this landscape – baked by the sun, lorries, ramshackle as picadors' horses, crawled uphill in bottom gear and a stink of petrol . . . now, frozen by the wind and hooded like the muffled trio in Goya's *Winter*, Moorish levies convoyed pack-mules through the gorges veiled in snow . . .

'I expect you have heard about Erridge,' said Robert.

'That the Thrubworth woods will have to be sold?'

'Well, that, of course. But I mean his latest.'

'No?'

'He is going out there.'

'Where?'

Robert jerked his head in the direction of the shiny wooden cabinet from which Debussy quavered and tinkled and droned.

'Spain.'

'Indeed?'

'Can you imagine.'

'The International Brigade?'

'I don't know whether he will actually fight. As you know, he holds pacifist views. However, he will certainly be on the opposite side to General Franco. We can at least be sure of that. I can't think that Erry would be any great help to any army he joined, can you?'

The news that Erridge contemplated taking a comparatively active part in the Spanish civil war came as no great surprise to me. Politically, his sympathies would naturally be engaged with the extreme Left, whether Communist or Anarchist was not known. Possibly Erridge himself had not yet decided. He had been, of course, a supporter of Blum's 'Popular Front', but, within the periphery of 'Leftism', his shifting preferences were unpredictable; nor did he keep his relations informed on such matters. The only fact by then established was that Erridge had contributed relatively large sums of money to several of the organisations recently come into being, designed to assist the Spanish Republican forces. This news came from Quiggin, who like myself, visited from time to time the office of the weekly paper of which Mark Members was now assistant literary editor.

The fortunes of these two friends, Quiggin and Members, seemed to vary inversely. For a time Quiggin had been the more successful, supplanting Members as St John Clarke's secretary, finding congenial odd jobs in the world of letters, running away with the beautiful Mona, battening on Erridge; but ever since Mona had, in turn, deserted Quiggin for Erridge, Quiggin had begun to undergo a period of adversity. From taking a patronising line about Members, he now – like myself – found himself professionally dependent upon his old friend for books to review. The tide, on the other hand, seemed to be flowing in favour of Members. He had secured this presentable employment, not requiring so much work that he was unable to find time to write himself; his travel book, *Baroque Interlude*, had been a notable success; there was talk of his marrying a rich girl, who was also not bad-looking. So far as the affair of Mona was concerned, Quiggin had 'made it up' with Erridge; even declaring in his cups that Erridge had done him a good turn by taking her off his hands.

'After all,' said Quiggin, 'Mona has left him too. Poor Alf has nothing to congratulate himself about. He has just heaped up more guilt to carry round on his own back.'

After Erridge's return from the Far East, he and Quiggin had met at – of all places – a party given by Mrs Andriadis, whose sole interest now, so it appeared, was the Spanish war. Common sympathy in this cause made reconciliation possible without undue abasement on Quiggin's part, but the earlier project of founding a paper together was not revived for the moment, although Quiggin re-entered the sphere of Erridge's patronage.

'I correspond a certain amount with your brother-in-law,' he had remarked when we had last met, speaking, as he sometimes did, with that slight hint of warning in his voice.

'Which one?'

'Alf.'

'What do you correspond with him about?'

'Medical supplies for the Spanish Loyalists,' said Quiggin, pronouncing the words with quiet doggedness, 'Basque children – there is plenty to do for those with a political conscience.'

The whole business of Mona had made some strongly self-assertive action to be expected from Erridge; to be, in fact, all but certain to take place sooner or later. After leaving Quiggin, with whom she had been living during the period immediately prior to my own marriage, and setting sail with Erridge for China (where he planned to investigate the political situation), Mona had returned to England only a few months later by herself. No one had been told the cause of this severed relationship, although various stories – largely circulated by Quiggin himself – were current on the subject of Mona's adventures on the way home. She was the first woman in whom Erridge was known to have taken more than the most casual interest. It was not surprising that they should have found each other mutually incompatible. There was nothing easy-going about Mona's temperament; while Erridge, notwithstanding passionately humane and liberal principles, was used to having his own way in the smallest respect, his high-minded nonconformity of life in general absolving him, where other people were concerned, from even the irksome minor disciplines of everyday convention.

By leaving her husband, Peter Templer, in the first instance, Mona had undeniably shown aims directed to something less banal than mere marriage to a comparatively rich man. She would certainly never have put herself out for Erridge in order to retain him as husband or lover. What she did, in fact, desire from life was less explicable; perhaps, as Templer said after she left him, 'just to raise hell'. She had never, as once had been supposed, got herself married to Quiggin, so no question existed of further divorce proceedings. The Tolland family were less complacent about that fact than might have been expected.

'Personally, I think it was the greatest pity Erry failed to hold on to Minna, or whatever her name was,' Norah said. 'She sounds as if she might have done him a lot of good.'

Only George and Frederica dissented from this view among Erridge's brothers and sisters. More distant relations were probably divided about equally between those who resented, and those who thoroughly enjoyed, the idea of Erridge making a *mésalliance*. Lady Warminster's opinion was unknown. Possibly she too, in secret, considered – like Strindberg – any marriage better than none at all. Erridge himself, since his return from Asia, had remained alone, shut up in Thrubworth, occupying himself with those Spanish activities now to take a more decided form, refusing to attend to other more local matters, however pressing. The question of death duties had recently been reopened by the taxation authorities, the payment of which threatened a considerable sale of land to raise the money required. Only

Norah, in face of opposition, had effected an entry into Thrubworth not long before this, reporting afterwards that her eldest brother had been 'pretty morose'. No one knew whether Erridge had achieved any degree of success in getting to the bottom of Far Eastern problems. Probably China and Japan, like his own estate, were now forgotten in contrast with a more fashionable preoccupation with Spain. To someone of Erridge's views and temperament, finding himself in the position he found himself, the Spanish war clearly offered a solution. Robert agreed in seeing nothing surprising in his brother's decision.

'Like big-game hunting in Edwardian days,' said Robert, 'or going to the Crusades a few years earlier. There will be one or two newspaper paragraphs about "the Red Earl", I suppose. Bound to be. Still, Erry gets remarkably little publicity as a rule, which is just as well. For some reason he has never become news. I hope he doesn't go and get killed. I shouldn't think he would, would you? Very well able to look after himself in his own way. All the same, a man I used to sit next to at school was shot in the street in Jerusalem the other day. In the back, just as he was getting into a taxi to go and have a spot of dinner. But he was a professional soldier and they have to expect that sort of thing. Rather different for someone like Erry who is a pacifist. I can't see the point of being a pacifist if you don't keep out of the way of fighting. Anyway, we can none of us be certain of surviving when the next war comes.'

'What will Erry do?'

'I suppose there will be a lot of the sort of people he likes out there already,' said Robert. 'His beard and those clothes will be all the go. He'll hang about Barcelona, lending a hand with the gardening, or the washing up, to show he isn't a snob. I think it is rather dashing of him to take this step considering his hypochondria. Of course, George would at least make some effort to keep up Thrubworth properly if he inherited. I say, I hope everyone is not going to be late. I am rather hungry this morning.'

'You haven't told me who is coming yet.'

'Nor I have. Well, the guest of honour is St John Clarke, the novelist. I expect you know him of old, as a brother of the pen.'

'As a matter of fact, Robert, I have never met St John Clarke. Who else?'

'Blanche, Priscilla–George and Veronica–Sue and Roddy.'

'But why St John Clarke?'

'I gather he more or less asked himself. His name is held on the books, you know. He used to turn up occasionally at Aunt Molly's. I remember Hugo being sick over him as a child. Probably St John Clarke sheered off the place after that. Of course he may be going to lend a hand with the Maria-Theresa book. I have only just thought of that possibility.'

Lady Warminster used sometimes to announce that she was receiving 'help' with one or another of her biographies from some fairly well-known figure – usually a distinguished politician or civil servant – although it was never explained what form this help took. Probably they adjusted the grammar.

'They tell me about punctuation,' she used to say.

This intermittent publication of an historical biography had in no way brought Lady Warminster into the literary world, nor could her house be said to present any of the features of a '*salon*'. A well-known author like St John Clarke was therefore an unexpected guest. At the Jeavonses' everything was possible. There was no one on earth who could occasion surprise there. Lady Warminster, on the contrary, living a very different sort of life, saw only relations and a few old friends. Even minor celebrities were rare, and, when they appeared, tended to be submerged by the family.

Blanche and Priscilla entered the room at that moment, bearing between them on a tray a jigsaw puzzle, newly completed and brought downstairs to be admired.

When people called Blanche 'dotty', no question of incipient madness was implied, nor even mild imbecility. Indeed, after a first meeting it was possible to part company from her without suspicion that something might be slightly amiss. However, few who knew her well doubted that something, somewhere, had unquestionably gone a little wrong. Quieter than the rest of her sisters, good-looking, always friendly, always prepared to take on tedious tasks, Blanche would rarely initiate a conversation. She would answer with a perfectly appropriate phrase if herself addressed, but she never seemed to feel the need to comment on any but the most trivial topics. The world, the people amongst whom she moved, appeared to make no impression on her. Life was a dream that scarcely even purported to hold within its promise any semblance of reality. The cumulative effect of this chronic sleep-walking through her days – which far surpassed that vagueness of manner often to be found in persons well equipped to look after their own interest – together with her own acceptance of the fact that she was not quite like other people, did not care at all that she was different, had finally established Blanche's reputation for 'dottiness'. That was all. The impression of being undeveloped, unawakened, which perhaps in some degree Robert shared, may have caused both to prefer rather secret lives. Publicly, Blanche was almost always occupied with good works: girls' clubs in the East End; charities in which her uncle, Alfred Tolland, was concerned for which he sought her help. Blanche's practical activities were usually very successful so far as the end in view, although she herself never troubled to take much credit for them. Nor did she show any interest in getting married, though in her time not without admirers.

'We've finished it at last,' she said, indicating the puzzle. 'It took five months in all – with everyone who came to the house having a go. Then one afternoon the cats broke most of it up. The last few pieces were due to Priscilla's brilliance.'

She showed a huge representation of Venice, a blue-grey Santa Maria della Salute, reflected in blue-grey waters of the canal, against a blue-grey sky. Priscilla, six or seven years younger than her sister, longer-legged, with fairer, untidy hair, was then about twenty. In spite of his own good resolutions to marry an heiress, Chips Lovell had shown interest in her for a time; apparently without things coming to much. Priscilla had at present several beaux, successfully concealing her own feelings about them. She was not at all like her sister, Norah, in disparaging the whole male sex, but the young men she met at dances never seemed quite what she required. There was talk of her taking a job. A fund was being organised for the promotion of opera, and Robert, who knew some of the members of the board, thought he could find her a place in its office.

'How is Isobel?' Priscilla asked rather truculently, as if she had not yet forgiven her immediately elder sister, even after two years, for getting married before herself.

'Pretty well all right now. I am going to see her this afternoon.'

'I looked in the day before yesterday,' said Priscilla. 'It is a grimmish place, isn't it. I say, have you heard about Erry?'

'Robert told me this moment.'

'Erry is mad, of course. Do you know, I realised that for the first time when I was seven years old and he was grown up. Something about the way he was eating his pudding. I knew I must be growing up myself when I grasped that. Hullo, Veronica, hullo, George.'

The manner in which he wore his immensely discreet suit, rather than a slight, fair, fluffy moustache, caused George Tolland to retain the flavour of his service with the Brigade of Guards. Years before, when still a schoolboy, I had travelled to London with Sunny Farebrother, that business friend of Peter Templer's father, and he had remarked in the train: 'It helps to look like a soldier in the City. Fellows think they can get the better of you even before they start. That is always an advantage in doing a deal.' Perhaps George Tolland held the same theory. Certainly he had done nothing to modify this air of having just come off parade. Whether assumed consciously or not, the style rather suited him, and was quite unlike Ted Jeavons's down-at-heel look of being a wartime ex-officer. George was said to work like a black in the City and seemed quite content with a social life offered chiefly by his own relations.

However, George had astonished everyone about eighteen months earlier by making an unexpected marriage. In some ways even Erridge's adventure with Mona had surprised his family less. Erridge was a recognised eccentric. He made a virtue of behaving oddly. In taking Mona abroad he had even, in a sense, improved his reputation for normality by showing himself capable of such an act. George, on the other hand, was fond of drawing attention – especially in contrasting himself with Erridge – to the exemplary, even, as he insisted, deliberately snobbish lines upon which his own life was run. 'I can never see the objection to being a snob,' George used to say. 'It seems far the most sensible thing to be.' Apparent simplicity of outlook is always suspicious. This remark should have put everyone on their guard. It was a sign that something was taking place under the surface of George's immaculate façade. However, since the vast majority accept at face value the personality any given individual puts forward as his own, no one in the least expected George to marry the woman he did. Veronica was the former wife of a businessman called Collins, whose job took him to Lagos for most of the year. She had two children by her first husband ('Native women,' said Chips Lovell, 'also some trouble about a cheque,') whom she had divorced a year or two before meeting George at some party given by City friends. A big brunette, not pretty, but with plenty of 'attack', Veronica was popular with her 'in-laws', especially Lady Warminster. She was older than George, now to all appearances completely under her thumb.

'How is Isobel, Nick?' Veronica asked. 'I went to see her last week. She was looking a bit washed out. I'd have gone again, but one of the kids was running a temperature and I got stuck in the house for a day or two. I hear St John Clarke is coming to lunch. Isn't that exciting? I used to love *Fields of Amaranth* when I was a girl. I never seem to get any time for reading now.'

George and Veronica were almost immediately followed into the room by Susan and her husband, Roddy Cutts, also in the City, now an M.P. Tall, sandy-haired, bland, Roddy smiled ceaselessly. The House of Commons had, if anything, increased a tendency, probably congenital, to behave with a shade more assiduity than ordinary politeness required; a trait that gave Roddy some of the bearing of a clergyman at a school-treat. Always smiling, his eyes roved for ever round the room, while he offered his hosts their own food, and made a point of talking chiefly to people he did not know, as if he felt these could not be altogether comfortable if still unacquainted with himself. In spite of accepting, indeed courting, this duty of putting young and old at their ease, he lacked the powerful memory – perhaps also the interest in individual differences of character – required to retain in the mind names and personal attributes; a weakness that sometimes impaired this eternal campaign of universal good-will. All the same, Roddy was able, ambitious, quite a formidable figure.

George and Roddy did not exactly dislike one another, but a certain faint sense of tension existed between them. Roddy, who came of a long line of bankers on his father's side, while his mother, Lady Augusta's, family could claim an almost equal tradition of shrewd business grasp, undoubtedly regarded George as an amateur where money matters were concerned. George, on the other hand, was clearly made impatient when Roddy, speaking as a professional politician, explained in simple language the trend of public affairs, particularly the military implications of world strategy in relation to the growing strength of Germany. Besides, Susan was George's favourite sister, so there may have been a touch of jealousy about her too. Susan was a pretty girl, not a beauty, but lively and, like her husband, ambitious; possessing plenty of that taste for 'occasion' so necessary to the wife of a man committed to public life.

Lady Warminster now appeared in the room. She had probably mastered her habitual unpunctuality at meals in honour of St John Clarke. Slighter in build than her sister, Molly Jeavons, she looked as usual like a very patrician sibyl about to announce a calamitous disaster of which she had personally given due and disregarded warning. This Cassandra-like air of being closely in touch with sacred mysteries, even with the Black Arts themselves, was not entirely misleading. Lady Warminster was prone to fortune-tellers and those connected with divination. She was fond of retailing their startling predictions. I found that, in her day, she had even consulted Uncle Giles's fortune-telling friend, Mrs Erdleigh, whom she rated high as an oracle, although the two of them had long been out of touch, and had not 'put the cards out' together for years.

'I asked Mr Clarke for half-past one,' said Lady Warminster. 'You know I had not seen him since one of those rum parties Aunt Molly used to give, when I noticed him at Bumpus's last week, browsing about among the books. I think he only goes there to read the new ones, because he showed no sign of wanting to buy anything. When he caught sight of me, he immediately followed me out into Oxford Street and began to talk about Shelley. He told me a long story of how he wanted to see me again, how people no longer liked him on account of his political opinions. He is rather an old humbug, but I remember enjoying the first part of *Fields of Amaranth* when it came out. I always think one ought to be grateful to an author if one has liked even a small bit of a book.'

I had heard little of St John Clarke since the days when Mark Members and J. G. Quiggin had been, one after another in quick succession, his secretary; to be followed by the 'Trotskyist' German boy, Werner Guggenbühl; Guggenbühl, so Quiggin hinted, had been sacked as a result of political pressure, but did not mind leaving as he had found a better job. By this time, so many people of relative eminence were writing, speaking, or marching in one or another form of militant political expression that St John Clarke's adhesion to the Left was a matter of little general interest. He was said to have become at times resentful of a brand of politics he felt to lay a burden on his social life.

'The man has got it in him to be a traitor to any cause,' Quiggin said, when he reported this. 'We shall never see Clarke manning a machine-gun.'

This supposed backsliding on the part of St John Clarke was certainly not because any potential hostess objected to his being a 'Communist'. On the contrary, as an elderly, no longer very highly esteemed writer, such views may even have done something to re-establish his name. The younger people approved, while in rich, stuffy houses, where he was still sometimes to be seen on the strength of earlier reputation as a novelist, a left-wing standpoint was regarded as suitable to a man of letters, even creditable in a widely known, well-to-do author, who might at his age perfectly well have avoided the controversies of politics. However, St John Clarke himself apparently felt less and less capable, in practice, of taking part in the discussion of Marxist dialectic, with its ever-changing bearings. As a consequence of this laxity in 'keeping up', he had lost ground in the more exacting circles of the intellectual Left. His name was rarely seen except in alphabetical order among a score of nonentities signing at the foot of some letter to the press. St John Clarke, according to Members (himself suspected by Quiggin of 'political cynicism') yearned for his former unregenerate life. If so, he must have felt himself too deeply committed, perhaps too old, to make a reversal of programme – which, at that period, would in any case have entailed swimming against a stream that brought to a writer certain advantages. Lady Warminster was probably better informed about St John Clarke than he supposed. Her phrase 'rather an old humbug' established within the family her own, as it were, official attitude. She now made some enquiry about the colds from which Veronica's two children, Angus and Iris, had been suffering.

'Oh, Angus is all right at last,' said George, speaking before his wife could reply. 'We have been looking about for a school for him. I am going down to see another next week.'

'They are both off to their Granny's on Friday,' said Veronica, 'where they will get fussed over a lot and probably catch colds all over again. But there it is. They have to go. The rest of the year will be spent getting them out of bad habits.'

'Talking of grandparents,' said George, who, although reputed to be very 'good' about Veronica's children, probably preferred relations on their father's side to be kept, in so far as possible, out of sight and out of mind, 'I was wondering whether I ought to try and reopen with Erry the question of getting the stained glass window put up to our own grandfather. I saw Uncle Alfred the other day – he has not been at all well, he tells me – who complained the matter had been allowed to drift for a number of years. I thought I would leave it for a time until Erry had settled down after his Chinese trip, then tackle him about it. There are always a mass of things to do after one has come home from abroad, especially after a long tour like that. I don't know what state of mind he is in at the moment. Do you happen to have seen anything of him lately?'

George's line about Erridge was pity rather than blame. That was the tone in which these words had been spoken. Lady Warminster smiled to herself. She was known to regard the whole question of the stained glass window not only as at best a potential waste of money (out-of-date sentiment, threatening active production of ugliness) but also, no doubt correctly, as a matter to which Erridge would in no circumstances ever turn his attention; one, therefore, which was an even greater waste of time to discuss. She may have smiled for that reason alone. In addition, she was going to enjoy communicating to George news so highly charged with novelty as Erridge's latest project.

'You will have to be quick, George, if you want to get hold of Erry,' she said gently.

'Why?'

'He is going abroad again.'

'Where is he off to this time?'

'Spain.'

'What – to join in the war?'

'So he says.'

George took the information pretty well. He was by no means a fool, even if people like Chips Lovell did not find him a specially amusing companion. Like others who knew Erridge well, George had probably observed a cloud of that particular shape already forming on the horizon. Roddy Cutts, on the other hand, who, in the course of a couple of years of marriage to Susan, had only managed to meet her eldest brother once, was more surprised. Indeed, the whole Erridge legend, whenever it cropped up, always disturbed Roddy. He had clear-cut, practical ideas how people behaved. Erridge did not at all fit in with these.

'But surely Erridge isn't going to fight?' Roddy said. 'I suppose he has gone into the legal status of a British national taking part in a continental civil war. It is a most anomalous position – not to mention a great embarrassment to His Majesty's Government, whatever the party in power. I presume he will be anti-Franco, holding the views he does.'

'Of course he will be anti-Franco,' said George. 'But I agree with you, Roddy, that I should not have thought actual fighting would have been in his line.'

All this talk was going on outside Lady Warminster's immediate orbit. Now she turned towards us to give one of her semi-official warnings.

'I believe Mr Clarke has something he wants to tell me about Erridge,' she said. 'It might entail a more or less private talk with him after luncheon. Don't any of you feel you have got to stay, if he decides to tell me some long rigmarole.'

She did not say, perhaps did not know, whether St John Clarke wanted to discuss Erridge's latest move or some more general matter that concerned Erridge's affairs. I had not heard that Erridge had been seeing more of St John Clarke recently. This indicated that their previous casual acquaintance must have grown in intimacy. The escapade with Mona, the decision to take part in the Spanish war, such things showed Erridge's more picturesque side, the aspect at which his beard and tattered clothes freely hinted. There were other, less dramatic matters to cause his family concern. The chief of these was the reopening of the question of death duties; but, in addition, the Thrubworth agent had died while Erridge was in China, revealing by vacation of office a situation often suspected by the rest of the family, that is to say gross, perhaps disastrous, mismanagement of the estate, which had been taking place over a long period. The account was seriously overdrawn at the bank. Thrubworth woods would probably have to be sold to meet the deficit. At least, selling the woods was Erridge's idea of the easiest way out; the trustees, too, were though to be amenable to this solution. It was possible that Erridge, having no taste for meeting his step-mother to discuss business, had entrusted St John Clarke with some message on the subject, before he himself set off for Spain, where he could forget the trivialities of estate management in the turmoil of revolution. Perhaps Lady Warminster's last aside was intended to convey that, if business affairs were to be discussed at all, they were not to be interrupted. If so, she made her announcement just in time, because a second later St John Clarke himself was announced. He came hurriedly into the room, a hand held out in front of him as if to grasp the handle of a railway carriage door before the already moving train gathered speed and left the platform.

'Lady Warminster, I am indeed ashamed of myself,' he said in a high, rich, breathless, mincing voice, like that of an experienced actor trying to get the best out of a minor part in Restoration comedy. 'I must crave the forgiveness of you and your guests.'

He gave a rapid glance round the room to discover whom he had been asked to meet, at the same time diffusing about him a considerable air of social discomfort. Lady Warminster accepted St John Clarke's hand carefully, almost with surprise, immediately relinquishing it, as if the texture or temperature of the flesh dissatisfied her.

'I hope you were not expecting a grand luncheon party, Mr Clarke,' she said. 'There are only a few of the family here, I am afraid.'

Plainly, that was only too true. There could be no doubt from St John Clarke's face, flushed with running up the stairs, that he had hoped for something better than what he found; perhaps even a *tête-à-tête* with his hostess, rather than this unwieldy domestic affair, offering neither intimacy nor splendour. However, if disappointed at first sight, he was an old campaigner in the ups and downs of luncheon parties; he knew how to make the best of a bad job.

'Much, *much* pleasanter,' he murmured, still gazing suspiciously round the room. 'And I am sure you will agree with me, Lady Warminster, in thinking, so far as company is concerned, enough is as bad as a feast, and half a loaf in many ways preferable to the alternative of a whole one or the traditional no bread. How enjoyable, therefore, to be just as we are.'

Although his strongly outlined features were familiar from photographs in the papers, I had never before met this well-known author. Something about St John Clarke put him in the category – of which Widmerpool was another example – of persons at once absurd and threatening. St John Clarke's head recalled Blake's, a resemblance no doubt deliberately cultivated, because the folds and crannies of his face insistently suggested a self-applauding interior activity, a desire to let everyone know about his own 'mental strife'. I had seen him in person on a couple of occasions, though never before closely: once, five or six years earlier, walking up Bond Street with his then secretary Mark Members; a second time, on that misty afternoon in Hyde Park, propelled in a wheeled chair by Mona and Quiggin (who had replaced Members), while the three of them marched in procession as part of a political demonstration. Although he still carried himself with some degree of professional panache, St John Clarke did not look well. He might have been thought older than his years; his colour was not that of a man in good health. Once tall and gaunt in appearance, he had grown fat and flabby, a physical state which increased for some reason his air of being a dignitary of the Church temporarily passing, for some not very edifying reason, as a layman. Longish grey hair and sunken, haunted eyes recalled Mr Deacon's appearance, probably because both belonged to the same generation, rather than on account of much similarity about the way their lives had been lived. Certainly St John Clarke had never indulged himself in Mr Deacon's incurable leanings towards the openly disreputable. On the contrary, St John Clarke had been straitlaced, as much from inclination as from policy, during his decades of existence as a writer taken reasonably seriously. Even now, forgotten by the critics but remembered fairly faithfully by the circulating libraries, he had remained a minor public figure, occasionally asked to broadcast on some non-literary, non-political subject like the problem of litter or the abatement of smoke, talks into which he would always inject – so Members alleged – some small admixture of Marxist lore.

'And how is your sister, Lady Molly?' he asked, when we had moved into the dining-room and taken our places. 'It is many a year since I had the pleasure. Why, I scarcely seem to have seen her since she was châtelaine of Dogdene. How long ago seem those Edwardian summer afternoons.'

Lady Warminster, who was in one of her more playful moods, received the enquiry with kindly amusement, offering at once some formal statement which suggested no words of hers could do justice to conditions prevailing in the Jeavons house during redecoration. Lady Warminster had few illusions as to St John Clarke's preference for her sister as Marchioness of Sleaford, rich and presiding over a famous mansion, rather than married to Ted Jeavons and living in disorder and no great affluence in South Kensington. St John Clarke recalled that he had visited the Jeavons house, too, but also a long time ago. A minute or two later I heard her ask him whether he had read any of the two or three books I had written; a question calculated to produce more entertainment for Lady Warminster herself than gratification to St John Clarke or me. Aware, certainly, that I knew Members and Quiggin, he had given me a stiff, distrustful bow when introduced. Memories of his own dealings with that couple must have been unwelcome. Besides, Lady Warminster's buoyant manner was not of a kind to bring reassurance.

'Certainly, certainly,' said St John Clarke guardedly. 'I remember praising one of them. A laudable piece of work.'

He took a sip of the sickly white Bordeaux poured out for us. Lady Warminster possessed a horror of 'drink'. As a rule barely enough appeared at her table to satisfy the most modest requirements. This was perhaps her sole characteristic shared with Erridge. St John Clarke was abstemious too. Members, during his secretaryship, had tried to encourage in his master a taste for food and wine, but complained later that the only result had been a lot of talk about rare vintages and little known recipes, while the meals at St John Clarke's table grew worse than ever.

'Yes,' said St John Clarke, wiping his mouth and refolding the napkin on his knee, 'yes.'

It was true he had spoken favourably of my first book in a New York paper, when discoursing in general terms of younger English writers. That, so far as I was concerned, had been the first indication that St John Clarke – in the hands of Members – was undergoing some sort of aesthetic conversion. Kind words from him only a short time before would have been unthinkable. However, mention of a first novel at the safe remove of an American newspaper's book-page is one thing: to be brought face to face with its author five or six years later, quite another. So, at least, St John Clarke must have keenly felt. Mutual relationship between writers, whatever their age, is always delicate, not so much – as commonly supposed – on account of jealousy, but because of the intensely personal nature of a writer's stock in trade. For example, St John Clarke seemed to me a 'bad' writer, that is to say a person to be treated (in those days) with reserve, if not thinly veiled hostility. Later, that question – the relationship of writers of different sorts – seemed, like so many others, less easily solved; in fact infinitely complicated. St John Clarke himself had made a living, indeed collected a small fortune, while giving pleasure to many by writing his books (pleasure even to myself when a boy, if it came to that), yet now was become an object of disapproval to me because his novels did not rise to a certain standard demanded by myself. Briefly, they seemed to me trivial, unreal, vulgar, badly put together, idiously phrased and 'insincere'. Yet, even allowing for these failings, was not St John Clarke still a person more like myself than anyone else sitting round the table? That was a sobering thought. He, too, for longer years, had existed in the imagination, even though this imagination led him (in my eyes) to a world ludicrously contrived, socially misleading, professionally nauseous. On top of that, had he not on this earlier occasion gone out of his way to speak a word of carefully hedged praise for my own work? Was that, therefore, an aspect of his critical faculty for which he should be given credit, or was it an even stronger reason for guarding against the possibility of corruption at the hands of one whose own writings could not be approved? Fortunately these speculations, heavily burdened with the idealistic sentiments of one's younger days, were put to no practical test; not only because St John Clarke was sitting at some distance from me, but also on account of the steps he himself immediately took to change a subject likely to be unfruitful to both of us. He quickly commented on the flowers in the vases, which were arranged with great skill, and turned out to be the work of Blanche.

'Flowers mean more to us in a city than in a garden,' said St John Clarke.

Lady Warminster nodded. She was determined not to abandon the subject of literature without a struggle.

'I expect you are writing a new book yourself, Mr Clarke,' she said. 'We have not had one from you for a long time.'

'Nor from you, Lady Warminster.'

'But I am not a famous writer,' she said. 'I just amuse myself with people like Maria-Theresa who take my fancy. For you, it is quite another matter.'

St John Clarke shook his head energetically, like a dog emerging from a pond. It was ten or fifteen years since he had published anything but occasional pieces.

'Sometimes I add a paragraph to my memoirs, Lady Warminster,' he said. 'There is little about the critics of the present day to encourage an author of my age and experience to expose his goods in the market place. To tell the truth, Lady Warminster, I get more pleasure from watching the confabulation of sparrows in their parliament on the rooftops opposite my study window, or from seeing the clouds scudding over the Serpentine in windy weather, than I do from covering sheets of foolscap with spidery script that only a few sympathetic souls, some now passed on to the Great Unknown, would even care to read.

No sparrow on any roof was ever lonely
As I am, nor any animal untamed.

Doesn't Petrarch say that somewhere? He is a great stay to me. Childish pleasures, you may tell me, Lady Warminster, but I answer you that growing old consists abundantly in growing young.'

Lady Warminster was about to reply, whether in agreement or not with this paradox was never revealed, because St John Clarke suddenly realised that his words belonged to an outdated, even decadent state of mind, wholly inconsistent with political regeneration. He could hardly have been carried away by the white wine. Probably it was some time since he had attended a luncheon party of this sort, the comparative unfamiliarity of which must have made him feel for a minute or two back in some much earlier sequence of his social career.

'Of course I was speaking of when the errant mind strays,' he added in a different, firmer tone, 'as I fear the mind of that unreliable fellow, the intellectual, does from time to time. I meant to imply that, when there are so many causes to claim one's attention, it seems a waste of time to write about the trivial encounters of an individual like myself, who has spent so much of his time pursuing selfish, and, I fear, often frivolous aims. We shall have to learn to live more collectively, Lady Warminster. There is no doubt about it.'

'That was just what a fellow in the City was saying to me the other day,' said George. 'We were talking about those trials for treason in Russia. I can't make head or tail of them. He seemed full of information about Zinoviev and Kamenev and the rest of them. He was quite well disposed to Russia. A bill-broker named Widmerpool. You probably remember him at school, Nick. Some story about an overcoat, wasn't there?'

'I've met him,' said Roddy. 'Used to be with Donners-Brebner. Heavy-looking chap with thick spectacles. As a matter of fact, he was always regarded as rather a joke in our family at the time when my sister, Mercy, was going to dances. He was the absolute last resort when a man had dropped out for a dinner party. Didn't some girl pour sugar over his head once at a ball?'

'What's happened to Widmerpool?' I asked. 'I haven't seen him for a year or two. Not since Isobel and I were married, as a matter of fact. I've known him for ages.'

'Fettiplace-Jones was giving him dinner at the House,' said Roddy, 'the night of the India debate.'

'Is he thinking of standing?' George asked. 'He is rather the type.'

'Not as a Tory,' Roddy said. 'Widmerpool is far from being a Tory.'

Roddy looked a shade resentful at George's probably quite artless judgment that Widmerpool was the sort of man likely to make an M.P.

'I ran across him somewhere,' said George. 'Then he was sitting at the next table one day at Sweeting's. He struck me as a knowledgeable chap. We had him to dinner as a matter of fact. Now I come to think of it, he said he knew you, Nick. My firm does a certain amount of business with Donners-Brebner, where Widmerpool used to be. He may be going back there in an advisory capacity, anyway temporarily, he told me.'

'I didn't at all take to Mr Widmerpool,' said Veronica, breaking off conversation with Susan on the subject of the best place to buy curtain material. 'He could talk of nothing but Mrs Simpson the night he came to us. You couldn't get him off the subject.'

St John Clarke, who had begun to look a little petulant at all this chatter about persons in general unknown to him, brightened at that name. He seemed about to speak; then some inner prompting must have caused him to think better of expressing any reflections stirring within his mind, because finally he remained silent, crumbling his bread thoughtfully.

'I met Mr Widmerpool once at Aunt Molly's,' said Susan. 'There was that business of his engagement being broken off, wasn't there – with that rather dreadful lady, one of the Vowchurches?'

'I hear poor Uncle Ted is a little better,' said Lady Warminster.

She referred to the war wound from which Jeavons intermittently suffered, at the same time managing to convey also a sense of moral or social improvement in Jeavons's condition which appeared for some reason to forbid further discussion of Widmerpool's unsuccessful attempt of a year or two before to marry Mrs Haycock.

'Roddy and I were at the Jeavonses' last week,' said Susan. 'The worst of the redecorating is over now, although one still falls over ladders and pails of whitewash. Aunt Molly's friend Miss Weedon – whom I can't stand – has moved in permanently now. She has a kind of flat on the top floor. And do you know who is living there too? Charles Stringham of all people. Do you remember him? Miss Weedon is said to be "looking after him".'

'Was that the Stringham we were at school with?' George asked me, but with no idea of what amazement I felt at this news, 'He was another contemporary of Widmerpool's.'

'I used to think Charles Stringham so attractive when he occasionally turned up at dances,' said Susan reminiscently, speaking as if at least half a century had passed since she herself had been seen on a dance floor. 'Then he absolutely disappeared from the scene. What happened to him? Why does he need "looking after"?'

'Charles Stringham isn't exactly a teetotaller, darling,' said Roddy, showing slight resentment at the expression by his own wife of such unqualified praise of another man's charms.

Lady Warminster shuddered visibly at the thought of what that understatement about Stringham's habits must comprehend. I asked Susan how this indeed extraordinary situation had come about: that Miss Weedon and Stringham should be living under the same roof at the Jeavonses'.

'Charles Stringham went to see Miss Weedon there one evening – she was his mother's secretary once, and has always been friends with Charles. He was in an awful state apparently, with 'flu coming on, practically delirious. So Miss Weedon kept him there until he recovered. In fact he has been there ever since. That is Aunt Molly's story.'

'Molly mentioned something about it to me,' said Lady Warminster.

She spoke very calmly, as if in reassuring confirmation that there was really nothing whatever for anyone to worry about. Having once registered her own illimitable horror of alcohol, Lady Warminster was fully prepared to discuss Stringham's predicament, about which, as usual, she probably knew a great deal more than her own family supposed. The information about Stringham was not only entirely new to me, but full of all kind of implications of other things deep rooted in the past; far more surprising, far more dramatic, for example, than Erridge's setting off for Spain.

'Charles is Amy Foxe's son by her second husband,' said Lady Warminster. 'There was a daughter, too – divorced from that not very nice man with one arm – who is married to an American called Wisebite. Amy has had trouble with both her children.'

Stringham's mother was an old friend of Lady Warminster's, although the two of them now saw each other rarely. That was chiefly because Mrs Foxe's unrelenting social activities allowed little time for visits to the drowsy, unruffled backwater in which the barque of Lady Warminster's windowhood had come to rest; unruffled, that is to say, in the eyes of someone like Mrs Foxe. In fact, life at Hyde Park Gardens could not always be so described, although its tenor was very different from the constant rotaion of parties, committee meetings, visits, through which Mrs Foxe untiringly moved. Perhaps this description of Mrs Foxe's existence was less exact since she had become so taken up with Norman Chandler; but, although she might now frequent a less formal social world (her charity organising remained unabated), she had been, on the other hand, correspondingly drawn into Chandler's own milieu of the theatre and music.

'It is really very good of Miss Weedon to look after Charles Stringham,' Lady Warminster continued. 'His mother, what with her hospitals and those terrible wars over them with Lady Bridgnorth, is always so dreadfully busy. Miss Weedon – Tuffy, everyone used to call her – was Flavia Stringham's governess before she became her mother's secretary. Such a nice, capable woman. I don't know why you should not like her, Sue.'

This speech did not make absolutely clear whether Lady Warminster cared as little as Susan for Mrs Foxe's former secretary, or whether, as the words outwardly indicated, she indeed approved of Miss Weedon and liked meeting her. Lady Warminster's pronouncements in such fields were often enigmatic. Possibly we were all intended to infer from her tone a shade of doubt as to whether Miss Weedon should have been allowed to take such absolute control over Stringham as now seemed to prevail. I felt uncertainty on that subject myself. This new situation might be good; it might be bad. I remembered Miss Weedon's unconcealed adoration for him when still a boy; the signs she had shown later at the Jeavonses' of hoping to play some authoritarian rôle in Stringham's life.

'I am doing what I can to help,' Miss Weedon had said, when we had met at the Jeavons house not long before my marriage.

Then, I had wondered what she meant. Now I saw that restraint, even actual physical restraint, might have been in her mind. Perhaps nothing short of physical restraint would meet Stringham's case. It was at least arguable. Miss Weedon seemed to be providing something of the sort.

'Molly will be glad of the additional rent,' said Lady Warminster, who seemed to be warming to the subject, now that its alcoholic aspects had faded into the background. 'She has been complaining a lot lately about being hard up. I tremble to think what Ted's doctor's bill must be like at any time. What difficulties he has with his inside. However, he is off slops again, I hear.'

'Have the Stringhams any money?' George asked.

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Lady Warminster, speaking as if the mere suggestion of anyone, let alone the Stringhams, having any money was in itself a whimsical enough notion. 'But I believe Amy was considered quite an heiress when she first appeared in London and old Lady Amesbury took her about a lot. She was South African, you know. Most of it spent now, I should think. Amy has always been quite thoughtless about money. She is very wilful. People said she was brought up in a very silly way. I suppose she probably lives now on what her first husband, Lord Warrington, left in trust. I don't think Charles's father – "Boffles", as he used to be called – had a halfpenny to bless himself with. He used to be very handsome, and so amusing. He looked wonderful on a horse. He is married now to a Frenchwoman he met at a tennis tournament in Cannes, and he farms in

Kenya. Poor Amy, she has some rather odd friends.'

In making this last comment, Lady Warminster was no doubt thinking of Norman Chandler; although no one could say how much, or how little, she knew of this association, nor what she thought about it. Robert caught my eye across the table. Within the family, he was regarded as the chief authority on their step-mother's obliquity of speech. Robert, strangely enough, had turned out to be one of the young men I had seen with Mrs Foxe at that performance of *The Duchess of Malfi* three or four years before. Mrs Foxe's other two guests had been John Mountfichet, the Bridgnorths' eldest son, and Venetia Penistone, one of the Huntercombes' daughters. After we had become brothers-in-law, and later talked of this occasion, Robert had described to me the excitement shown by Mrs Foxe that night at the prospect of seeing Chandler after the play was over. It was only a week or two since they had met for the first time.

'You know Mrs Foxe is rather daunting in her way,' Robert had said. 'At least she always rather daunts me. Well, she was trembling that night like a leaf. I think she was absolutely mad about that young actor we eventually took out to supper. She didn't get much opportunity to talk to him, because Max Pilgrim came too and spent the whole evening giving imitations of elderly ladies.

This companionship between Mrs Foxe and Chandler still flourished. She was said to give him 'wonderful' presents, expecting nothing in return but the pleasure of seeing him when he had the time to spare. That one of the most exigent of women should find satisfaction in playing this humble rôle was certainly remarkable. Chandler, lively and easy-going, was quite willing to fall in with her whim. They were continually seen about together, linked in a relationship somewhere between lover with mistress and mother to son.

'I could understand it if Norman were a sadist,' Moreland used to say. 'A mental one, I mean, who cut her dates and suchlike. On the contrary, he is always charming to her. Yet it still goes on. Women are inexplicable.'

During all this talk about Stringham and his parents, St John Clarke had once more dropped out of the conversation. His face was beginning to show that, although aware a self-invited guest must submit to certain periods of inattention on the part of his hostess, these had been allowed to become too frequent to be tolerated by a man of his position. He began to shift about in his chair as if he had something on his mind, perhaps wondering if he would finally be given a chance of being alone with Lady Warminster, or whether he had better say whatever he had to say in public. He must have decided that a *tête-à-tête* was unlikely, because he now spoke to her in a low confidential tone.

'There was a matter I wanted to put to you, Lady Warminster, which, in the hurried circumstances of our meeting at Bumpus's, I hardly liked to bring up. That was why I invited myself so incontinently to your house, to which you so graciously replied with an invitation to this charming lunch party. Lord Warminster – your eldest stepson – Alfred, I have begun to call him.'

St John Clarke paused, laughed a little coyly, and put his head on one side.

'*We* call him Erridge,' said Lady Warminster kindly, 'I never quite know why. It was not the custom in my own family, but then we were different from the Tollands in many ways. The Tollands have always called their eldest son by the second title. I suppose he could perfectly well be called Alfred. And yet, somehow, Erridge is not quite an Alfred.'

She considered a moment, her face clouding, as if the problem of why Erridge was not quite an Alfred worried her more than a little, even made her momentarily sad.

'Lady Priscilla mentioned her brother's political sympathies just now,' said St John Clarke, smiling gently in return, as if to express the ease with which he could cope with social fences of the kind Lady Warminster set in his way. 'I expect you may know he is leaving for Spain almost immediately.'

'He told me so himself,' said Lady Warminster.

'The fact is,' said St John Clarke, getting rather red in the face and losing some of his courtliness of manner, 'the fact is, Lady Warminster, your stepson has asked me to look after his business affairs while he is away. Of course I do not mean his estate, nothing like that. His interests of a politico-literary kind——'

He took up his glass, but it was empty.

'Lord Warminster and I have been seeing a good deal of each other since his return from the East,' he said, stifling a sigh probably caused by thought of Mona.

'At Thrubworth?' asked Lady Warminster.

She showed sudden interest. In fact everyone at the table pricked up their ears at the supposition that St John Clarke had been received at Thrubworth. Guests at Thrubworth were rare. A new name in the visitors' book would be a significant matter.

'At Thrubworth,' said St John Clarke reverently. 'We talked there until the wee, small hours. During the past few years both of us have undergone strains and stresses, Lady Warminster. Alfred has been very good to me.'

He stared glassily down the table, as if he thought I myself might well be largely to blame for Members and Quiggin; for the disturbances the two of them must have evoked in his personal life.

'No one can tell what may happen to Lord Warminster in Spain,' St John Clarke said, speaking now more dramatically. 'He knows me to be a strong supporter of the democratically elected Spanish Government. He knows I feel an equally strong admiration for himself.'

'Yes, of course,' said Lady Warminster encouragingly.

'At the same time, Lady Warminster, I am an author, a man of letters, not a man of affairs. I thought it only right you should know the position. I want to do nothing behind your back. Besides that, Alfred has occasional dealings with persons known to me in the past with whom I should be unwilling . . . I do not mean of course . . .'

These phrases, which seemed to appeal to Lady Warminster's better feelings, certainly referred in the main to Quiggin.

'Oh, I am sure he does,' said Lady Warminster fervently. 'I do so much sympathise with you in feeling that.'

She plainly accepted St John Clarke's halting sentences as reprobating every friend Erridge possessed.

'In short I wondered if I could from time to time ask your advice, Lady Warminster – might get in touch with you if necessary, perhaps even rely on you to speak with acquaintances of your stepson's with whom – for purely personal reasons, nothing worse I assure you – I should find it distasteful to deal.'

St John Clarke made a gesture to show that he was throwing himself on Lady Warminster's mercy. She, on her part, did not appear at all unwilling to learn something of Erridge's affairs in this manner, although she can have had no very clear picture of St John Clarke's aims, which were certainly not easy to clarify. No doubt he himself liked the idea of interfering in Erridge's business, but at the same time did not wish to be brought once more in contact with Quiggin. Lady Warminster must have found it flattering to be offered the position of St John Clarke's confidante, which would at once satisfy curiosity and be in the best interests of the family. If Erridge never came back from Spain – an eventuality which had to be considered – there was no knowing what messes might have to be cleared up. Besides, Erridge's plans often changed. His doings had to be coped with empirically. Like less idealistic persons, he was primarily interested in pleasing himself, even though his pleasures took unusual form. Little could be guessed from an outward examination of these enthusiasms at any given moment.

'Write to me, Mr Clarke, or telephone,' said Lady Warminster, 'whenever you think I can be of help. Should my health not allow me to see you at that moment, we will arrange something later.'

I had by then seen too much of Lady Warminster and her stepchildren to be surprised by the calm with which news of this sort was accepted. My own temper was in sympathy with such an attitude of mind. I looked forward to hearing Quiggin's account of the current Erridge situation. Possibly Quiggin himself might decide to go to Spain. Such a move was not to be ruled out. No doubt he too intended to keep an eye on Erridge's affairs; the best way to do that might be to attach himself to Erridge's person. The development of St John Clarke as a close friend of Erridge must be very unsympathetic to Quiggin. St John Clarke's appeal to Lady Warminster was unexpected. He had managed to get most of it said without attracting much attention from the rest of the party, who were discussing their own affairs, but the general drift of his muttered words probably caused the turn conversation took when it became general once more.

'Do you hold any view on what the outcome in Spain will be, Mr Clarke?' asked George.

St John Clarke made a gesture with his fingers to be interpreted as a much watered-down version of the Popular Front's clenched fist. Now that he had had his word with Lady Warminster about Erridge, he seemed more cheerful, although I was again struck by the worn, unhealthy texture of his skin. He still possessed plenty of nervous energy, but had lost his earlier flush. His cheeks were grey and pasty in tone. He looked a sick man.

'Franco cannot win,' he said.

'What about the Germans and Italians?' said George. 'It doesn't look as if non-intervention will work. It has been a failure from the start.'

'In that case,' said St John Clarke, evidently glad to find an opportunity to pronounce this sentence, 'can you blame Caballero for looking elsewhere for assistance.'

'Russia?'

'In support of Spain's elected government.'

'Personally, I am inclined to think Franco will win,' said George.

'Is that to your taste?' asked St John Clarke mildly.

'Not particularly,' George said. 'Especially if that has got to include Hitler and Mussolini. But then Russia isn't to my taste either. It is hard to feel much enthusiasm for the way the Government side go on, or, for that matter, the way they were going before the war broke out.'

'People like myself look forward to a social revolution in a country that has remained feudal far too long,' said St John Clarke, speaking now almost benignly, as if the war in Spain was being carried on just to please him personally, and he himself could not help being flattered by the fact. 'We cannot always be living in the past.'

This expressed preference for upheaval for its own sake roused Roddy Cutts. He began to move forward his knives and forks so that they made a pattern on the table, evidently a preliminary to some sort of a speech. St John Clarke was about to expand his view on revolution, when Roddy cut him short in measured, moderate, parliamentary tones.

'The question is,' Roddy said, 'whether the breakdown of the internal administration of Spain – and nobody seriously denies the existence of a breakdown – justified a military *coup d'état*. Some people think it did, others disagree entirely. My own view is that we should not put ourselves in the position of seeming to encourage a political adventurer of admittedly Fascist stamp, while at the same time expressing in no uncertain terms our complete lack of sympathy for any party or parties which allow the country's rapid disintegration into a state of lawlessness, which can only lead, through Soviet intrigue, to the establishment of a Communist régime.'

'I think both sides are odious,' said Priscilla. 'Norah backs the Reds, like Erry. She and Eleanor Walpole-Wilson have got a picture of La Pasionaria stuck up on the mantelpiece of their sitting-room. I asked them if they approved of shooting nuns.'

St John Clarke's expression suggested absolute neutrality on that point.

'The tradition of anti-clericalism in Spain goes back a long way, Lady Priscilla,' he said, 'especially in Catalonia.'

Roddy Cutts had no doubt been studying Spanish history too, because he said: 'You will find an almost equally unbroken record of Royalism in Navarre, Mr Clarke.'

'I haven't been in Spain for years,' said Lady Warminster, in her low, musical voice, speaking scarcely above a whisper. 'I liked the women better than the men. Of course they all have English nannies.'

Luncheon at an end, St John Clarke established himself with Blanche in a corner of the drawing-room, where he discoursed of the humour of Dickens in a rich, sonorous voice, quite unlike the almost falsetto social diction he had employed on arrival. Blanche smiled gently, while with many gestures and grimaces St John Clarke spoke of Mr Micawber and Mrs Nickleby. They were still there, just beginning on

Great Expectations, when I set out for the nursing home, carrying messages of good-will to Isobel from the rest of the family.

A future marriage, or a past one, may be investigated and explained in terms of writing by one of its parties, but it is doubtful whether an existing marriage can ever be described directly in the first person and convey a sense of reality. Even those writers who suggest some of the substance of married life best, stylise heavily, losing the subtlety of the relationship at the price of a few accurately recorded, but isolated, aspects. To think at all objectively about one's own marriage is impossible, while a balanced view of other people's marriage is almost equally hard to achieve with so much information available, so little to be believed. Objectivity is not, of course, everything in writing; but even casting objectivity aside, the difficulties of presenting marriage are inordinate. Its forms are at once so varied, yet so constant, providing a kaleidoscope, the colours of which are always changing, always the same. The moods of a love affair, the contradictions of friendship, the jealousy of business partners, the fellow feeling of opposed commanders in total war, these are all in their way to be charted. Marriage, partaking of such – and a thousand more – dual antagonisms and participations, finally defies definition. I thought of some of these things on the way to the nursing home.

'How were they all?' asked Isobel.

We went over the luncheon party in detail; discussed the news about Erridge. Isobel was returning the following day, so that there were domestic arrangements to be rehearsed, mysteries of the labyrinth of married life fallen into abeyance with her imprisonment, now to be renewed with her release.

'I shan't be sorry to come home.'

'I shan't be sorry for you to be home again.'

Late in the afternoon I left the place. Its passages somewhat like those of Uncle Giles's *pied-à-terre*, the Ufford, were additionally laden with the odour of disinfectant, more haunted with human kind. As in the Ufford, it was easy to lose your way. Turning a corner that led to the stairs, I suddenly saw in front of me, of all people, Moreland, talking to a tall, grey-haired man, evidently a doctor, because he carried in his hand, like a stage property in a farce, a small black bag. Moreland looked hopelessly out of place in these surroundings, so that the two of them had some of the appearance of taking part in a play. The doctor was talking earnestly, Moreland fidgeting about on his feet, evidently trying to get away without too great a display of bad manners. We had not met for over a year – although occasionally exchanging picture postcards – because Moreland had taken a job at a seaside resort known for pride in its musical activities. Sooner or later to be a conductor in the provinces was a destiny Moreland had often predicted for himself in moods of despondency. I knew little or nothing about his life there, nor how his marriage was going. The postcards dealt usually with some esoteric matter that had caught his attention – a peculiar bathing dress on the beach, peepshows on the pier, the performance of pierrots – rather than the material of daily life. In the earlier stages of marriage, Matilda was keeping pace pretty well with circumstances not always easy from shortage of money. When he caught sight of me, Moreland looked quite cross, as if I had surprised him in some situation of which he was almost ashamed.

'What on earth are you doing here?' he asked brusquely.

'Visiting my wife.'

'Like me.'

'Is Matilda in this awful place too?'

'But of course.'

He, too, had seemed in the depths of gloom when I first saw him; now, delighted at encountering a friend in these unpromising surroundings, he began to laugh and slap a rolled-up newspaper against his leg. Matilda had made him buy a new suit, in general cleaned up his appearance.

'So you have come back to London.'

'Inevitably.'

'For good?'

'I had to. I couldn't stand the seaside any longer. Matilda is about to have a baby, as a matter of fact. That is why I am haunting these portals.'

'Isobel has just had a miscarriage.'

'Oh, Lord,' said Moreland, 'I am always hearing about miscarriages. I used to think such things were quite out of date, and took place only in Victorian times when ladies – as Sir Magnus Donners would say – laced themselves up "a teeny, teeny little bit too tight". Rather one of Sir Magnus's subjects. I may add I shall be quite bankrupt unless Matilda makes up her mind fairly soon. She keeps on having false alarms. It is costing a fortune.'

He began to look desperately worried. The man with the black bag took a step forward.

'Both you gentlemen might be surprised if I told you the incidence of abortion,' he said in a thin, rasping voice, 'even within my own practice.'

'Oh, sorry,' said Moreland. 'This is Dr Brandreth.'

I saw the man to be the Brandreth who had been at school with me. Four or five years older, he had probably been unaware of my existence at that time, but I had seen him again at least once in later life, notably at that Old Boy Dinner at which our former housemaster, Le Bas, had fainted, an occasion when Brandreth, as a doctor, had taken charge of the situation. Tall and bony, with hair like the locks of a youngish actor who has dusted over his skull to play a more aged part in the last act, Brandreth possessed those desiccated good looks which also suggest the theatre. I began to explain that I knew him already, that we had been schoolboys together, but he brushed the words aside with a severe 'Yes, yes, yes . . .' at the same time taking my hand in a firm, smooth, interrogatory, medical grip, no doubt intended to give confidence to a patient, but in fact striking at once a disturbing interior dread at the possibilities of swift and devastating diagnosis.

'I had an unusual case yesterday,' he went on, 'complicated by certain cardiac symptoms. Neither of you gentlemen may be aware that nervous strain may cause a woman to have a baby the wrong way up.'

Brandreth continued to hold Moreland with his eye, as if to make sure his attention did not wander too far afield. At the same time he took up a position closer to myself that seemed to imply appeal to me, as one probably familiar with Moreland's straying mind, to help if necessary in preventing his escape before the time was ripe. Penning us both in, Brandreth was evidently determined to obstruct with all the forces at his command further conversation between us which, by its personal nature, might exclude himself. However, at the critical moment, just as Brandreth was beginning to speak, he was interrupted by the competition of a new, impelling force. A stoutly built man, wearing a Jaeger dressing-gown, pushed past us without ceremony, making towards a door of frosted glass in front of which we were grouped. In his manner of moving, this person gave the impression that he thought we were taking up too much room in the passage – which may have been true – and that he himself was determined to convey, if necessary by calculated discourtesy, demonstrated by his own aggressive, jerky progress, a sense of strong moral disapproval towards those who had time to waste gossiping. Brandreth had already opened his mouth, probably to make some further pronouncement about obstetrics, but now he closed it quickly, catching the man in the dressing-gown by the sleeve.

'Widmerpool, my dear fellow,' he said, 'I want you to meet another patient of mine – one of England's most promising young musicians.'

Widmerpool, whose well-worn dressing-gown covered a suit of grubby pyjamas in grey and blue stripe, stopped unwillingly. Without friendliness, he rotated his body towards us. Brandreth he disregarded, staring first at Moreland, then myself, frowning hard through his thick spectacles, relaxing this severe regard a little when he recognised in me a person he knew.

'Why, Nicholas,' he said, 'what are you doing here?'

Like Moreland, Widmerpool too seemed aggrieved at finding me within the precincts of the nursing home.

'Ha!' said Brandreth. 'Of course you know one another. Fellow pupils of Le Bas. Strange coincidence. I could tell you some stranger ones. We were speaking of the high incidence of abortion, my dear Widmerpool.'

Widmerpool started violently.

'Not abortion, Dr Brandreth,' said Moreland, laughing. 'Miscarriage – nothing against the law.'

'Medical language,' said Brandreth, treating our ignorance with genial amusement, 'employs the term "abortion" for what the layman calls "miscarriage". I can understand your surprise if you were unaware of that. I was speaking to Mr Moreland of Wagner, who, as you have probably read, suffered throughout his life from erysipelas, and finally, so it would appear, succumbed to angina pectoris – unlike Schubert, with his abdominal typhoid.'

The fact that Widmerpool and I knew each other at least as well as Brandreth knew Widmerpool, prevented Brandreth from dominating the situation so completely as he had intended before Widmerpool's arrival. His tone in addressing Widmerpool was at once hearty and obsequious, almost servile in its unconcealed desire to make a good impression by play with Moreland's musical celebrity. Brandreth obviously considered Widmerpool a person of greater importance than Moreland, but also one who might be interested to come in contact with sides of life different from his own. In supposing this, Brandreth showed his acquaintance with Widmerpool to be superficial. Widmerpool remained totally unimpressed by the arts. He was even accustomed to show an open contempt for them in *tête-à-tête* conversation. In public, for social reasons, he had acquired the merest working knowledge to carry him through a dinner party, content with St John Clarke as a writer, Isbister as a painter.

'I don't know about those things,' he had once said to me. 'If I don't know about things, they do not interest me. Even if artistic matters attracted me – which they do not – I should not allow myself to dissipate my energies on them.'

Now, he stood staring at me as if my presence in the nursing home was an insoluble, an irritating, mystery. I explained once more that I had been visiting Isobel.

'Oh, yes,' said Widmerpool. 'You married one of the Tollands, did you not, Nicholas? I was sorry not to have come to your wedding. That was some time ago . . . nearly . . . as a matter of fact, I was far too busy. I should like to give you a wedding present. You must tell me something you want, even though I was not able to turn up at the ceremony. After all, we have known each other a long time now. A little piece of silver perhaps. I will consult my mother who arranges such things. Your wife is not suffering from anything serious, I hope. I believe I once met her at her aunt's, Lady Molly Jeavons. Perhaps it was one of her sisters.'

The meeting had, indeed, taken place. Isobel had mentioned it. She had not cared for Widmerpool. That was one of the reasons why I had made no effort to keep in touch with him. In any case I should never have gone out of my way to seek him, knowing, as one does with certain people, that the rhythm of life would sooner or later be bound to bring us together again. However, I remembered that I owed him a meal. Guilt as to this unfulfilled obligation was strengthened by awareness that he was capable of complaining publicly that I had never invited him in return. Preferring to avoid this possibility, I decided on the spot to ask Widmerpool, before we parted company, to lunch at my club; in fact while Isobel's convalescence gave an excuse for not bringing him to our flat.

'I have been enjoying a brief rest here,' he said. 'An opportunity to put right a slight michief with boils. Some tests have been made. I leave tomorrow, agog for work again.'

'Isobel goes tomorrow, too. She will keep rather quiet for a week or two.'

'Quite so, quite so,' said Widmerpool, dismissing the subject.

He turned abruptly on his heel, muttering something about 'arranging a meeting in the near future', at the same time making a rapid movement towards the door of frosted glass at which he had been aiming when first accosted by Brandreth.

'Can you lunch with me next Tuesday – at my club?'

Widmerpool paused for a second to give thought to this question, once more began to frown.

'Tuesday? Tuesday? Let me think. I have something on Tuesday. I must have. No, perhaps I haven't. Wait a minute. Let me look at my book. Yes . . . Yes. As it happens, I can lunch with you on Tuesday. But not before half-past one. Certainly not before one-thirty. More likely one-thirty-five.'

Quickening his step, drawing his dressing-gown round him as if to keep himself more separate from us, he passed through the door almost at a run. His displacement immediately readjusted in Moreland's favour Brandreth's social posture.

'To return to Wagner,' Brandreth said, 'you remember *Wanderlust*, Mr Moreland, of course you do, when Siegfried sings: "From the wood forth I wander, never to return!" – how does it go? –*"Aus dem Wald fort in die Welt zieh'n: nimmer kehr'ich zurück!"* Now, it always seems to me the greatest pity that in none of the productions of *The Ring* I have ever heard, has the deeper pessimism of these words been given full weight . . .'

Brandreth began to make movements with his hands as if he were climbing an invisible rope. Moreland disengaged us brutally from him. We descended the stairs.

'Who was the man in the dressing-gown with spectacles?' Moreland asked, when we had reached the street.

'He is called Kenneth Widmerpool. In the City. I have known him a long time.'

'I can't say I took to him,' Moreland said. 'But, look here, what a business married life is. I hope to goodness Matilda will be all right. There are various worrying aspects. I sometimes think I shall go off my head. Perhaps I am off it already. That would explain a lot. What are you doing tonight? I am on my way to the Maclintícks. Why not come too?'

Without waiting for an answer, he began to recount all that had been happening to Matilda and himself since we had last met; various absurd experiences they had shared; how they sometimes got on each other's nerves; why they had returned to London; where they were going to live. There had been some sort of a row with the municipal authorities at the seaside resort. Moreland held decided professional opinions; he could be obstinate. Some people, usually not the most intelligent, found working with him difficult. I heard some of his story, telling him in return how the film company for which I had been script-writing had decided against renewing my contract; that I was now appearing on the book page of a daily paper; also reviewing from time to time for a weekly of which Mark Members was now assistant literary editor.

'Mark recommended Dr Brandreth to us,' Moreland said. 'A typical piece of malice on his part. Brandreth is St John Clarke's doctor – or was when Mark was St John Clarke's secretary. Gossip is the passion of his life, his only true emotion – but he can also put you on the rack about music.'

'Is he looking after Matilda?'

'A gynaecologist does that. He is not a music-lover, thank God. Of course, a lot of women have babies. One must admit that. No doubt it will be all right. It just makes one a bit jumpy. Look here, Nick, you must come to the Maclintícks'. It would be more cheerful if there were two of us.'

'Should I be welcome?'

'Why not? Have you developed undesirable habits since we last met?'

'I never think Maclintick much likes me.'

'Likes you?' said Moreland. 'What egotism on your part. Of course he doesn't like you. Maclintick doesn't like anybody.'

'He likes you.'

'We have professional ties. As a matter of fact, Maclintick doesn't really hate everyone as much as he pretends. I was being heavily humorous.'

'All the same, he shows small visible pleasure in meeting most people.'

'One must rise above that. It is a kindness to do so. Maclintick does not get on too well with his wife. The occasional company of friends eases the situation.'

'You do make this social call sound tempting.'

'If nobody ever goes there, I am afraid Maclintick will jump into the river one of these days, or hang himself with his braces after a more than usually gruelling domestic difference. You must come.'

'All right. Since you present it as a matter of life and death.'

We took a bus to Victoria, then passed on foot into a vast, desolate region of stucco streets and squares upon which a doom seemed to have fallen. The gloom was cosmic. We traversed these pavements for some distance, proceeding from haunts of seedy, grudging gentility into an area of indeterminate, but on the whole increasingly unsavoury, complexion.

'Maclintick is devoted to this part of London,' Moreland said. 'I am not sure that I agree with him. He says his mood is for ever Pimlico. I grant that a sympathetic atmosphere is an important point in choosing a residence. It helps one's work. All the same, tastes differ. Maclintick is always to be found in this neighbourhood, though never for long in the same place.'

'He never seems very cheerful when I meet him.'

I had run across Maclintick only a few times with Moreland since our first meeting in the Mortimer.

'He is a very melancholy man,' Moreland agreed. 'Maclintick is very melancholy. He is disappointed, of course.'

'About himself as a musician?'

'That – and other things. He is always hard up. Then he has an aptitude for quarrelling with anyone who might be of use to him professionally. He is writing a great tome on musical theory which never seems to get finished.'

'What is his wife like?'

'Like a wife.'

'Is that how you feel about marriage?'

'Well, not exactly,' said Moreland laughing. 'But you know one does begin to understand all the music-hall jokes and comic-strips about matrimony after you have tried a spell of it yourself. Don't you agree?'

'And Mrs Maclintick is a good example?'

'You will see what I mean.'

'What is Maclintick's form about women? I can never quite make out.'

'I think he hates them really – only likes whores.'

'Ah.'

'At least that is what Gossage used to say.'

'That's a known type.'

'All the same, Maclintick is also full of deeply romantic, hidden away sentiments about *Wein, Weib und Gesang*. That is his passionate, carefully concealed side. The gruffness is intended to cover all that. Maclintick is terrified of being thought sentimental. I suppose all his bottled-up feelings came to the surface when he met Audrey.'

'And the prostitutes?'

'He told Gossage he found them easier to converse with than respectable ladies. Of course, Gossage – you can imagine how he jumped about telling me this – was speaking of a period before Maclintick's marriage. No reason to suppose that sort of thing takes place now.'

'But if he hates women, why do you say he is so passionate?'

'It just seems to have worked out that way. Audrey is one of the answers, I suppose.'

The house, when we reached it, turned out to be a small, infinitely decayed two-storey dwelling that had seen better days; now threatened by a row of mean shops advancing from one end of the street and a fearful slum crowding up from the other. Moreland's loyalty to his friends – in a quiet way considerable – prevented me from being fully prepared for Mrs Maclintick. That she should have come as a surprise was largely my own fault. Knowing Moreland, I ought to have gathered more from his disjointed, though on the whole decidedly cautionary, account of the Maclintick household. Besides, from the first time of meeting Maclintick – when he had gone to the telephone in the Mortimer – the matrimonial rows of the Maclinticks had been an accepted legend. However much one hears about individuals, the picture formed in the mind rarely approximates to the reality. So it was with Mrs Maclintick. I was not prepared for her in the flesh. When she opened the door to us, her formidable discontent with life swept across the threshold in scorching, blasting waves. She was a small dark woman with a touch of gipsy about her, this last possibility suggested by sallow skin and bright black eyes. Her black hair was worn in a fringe. Some men might have found her attractive. I was not among them, although at the same time not blind to the fact that she might be capable of causing trouble where men were concerned. Mrs Maclintick said nothing at the sight of us, only shrugging her shoulders. Then, standing starkly aside, as if resigned to our entry in spite of an overpowering distaste she felt for the two of us, she held the door open wide. We passed within the Maclintick threshold.

'It's Moreland – and another man.'

Mrs Maclintick shouted, almost shrieked these words, while at the same time she twisted her head sideways and upwards towards a flight of stairs leading to a floor above, where Maclintick might be presumed to sit at work. We followed her into a sitting-room in which a purposeful banality of style had been observed; only a glass-fronted bookcase full of composers' biographies and works of musical reference giving some indication of Maclintick's profession.

'Find somewhere to sit,' said Mrs Maclintick, speaking as if the day, bad enough before, had been finally ruined by our arrival. '*He* will be down soon.'

Moreland seemed no more at ease in face of this reception than myself. At the same time he was evidently used to such welcomes in that house. Apart from reddening slightly, he showed no sign of expecting anything different in the way of reception. After telling Mrs Maclintick my name, he spoke a few desultory words about the weather, then made for the bookcase. I had the impression this was his accustomed gambit on arrival in that room. Opening its glass doors, he began to examine the contents of the shelves, as if – a most unlikely proposition – he had never before had time to consider Maclintick's library. After a minute or two, during which we all sat in silence, he extracted a volume and began to turn over its pages. At this firm treatment, which plainly showed he was not going to allow his hostess's ill humour to perturb him, Mrs Maclintick unbent a little.

'How is your wife, Moreland?' she asked, after picking up and rearranging some sewing upon which she must have been engaged on our arrival. 'She is having a baby, isn't she?'

'Any day now,' said Moreland.

Either he scarcely took in what she said, or did not consider her a person before whom he was prepared to display the anxiety he had earlier expressed to me on that subject, because he did not raise his eyes from the book, and, a second after she had spoken, gave one of his sudden loud bursts of laughter. This amusement was obviously caused by something he had just read. For a minute or two he continued to turn the pages, laughing to himself.

'This life of Chabrier is enjoyable,' he said, still without looking up. 'How wonderful he must have been dressed as a bull-fighter at the fancy dress ball at Granada. What fun it all was in those days. Much gayer than we are now. Why wasn't one a nineteenth-century composer living in Paris and hobnobbing with the Impressionist painters?'

Mrs Maclintick made no reply to this rhetorical question, which appeared in no way to fire within her nostalgic daydreams. She was about to turn her attention, as if unwillingly, towards myself, with the air of a woman who had given Moreland a fair chance and found him wanting, when Maclintick came into the room. He was moving unhurriedly, as if he had arrived downstairs to search for something he had forgotten, and was surprised to find his wife entertaining guests. Despondency, as usual, seemed to have laid an icy grip on him. He wore bedroom slippers and was pulling at a pipe. However, he brightened a little when he saw Moreland, screwing up his eyes behind the small spectacles and beginning to nod his head as if humming gently to himself. I offered some explanation of my presence in the house, to which Maclintick muttered a brief, comparatively affirmative acknowledgement. Without saying more, he made straight for a cupboard from which he took bottles and glasses.

'What have you been up to all day?' asked Mrs Maclintick. 'I thought you were going to get the man to see about the gas fire. You haven't moved from the house as far as I know. I wish you'd stick to what you say. I could have got hold of him myself, if I'd known you weren't going to do it.'

Maclintick did not answer. He removed the cork from a bottle, the slight 'pop' of its emergence appearing to embody the material of a reply to his wife, at least all the reply he intended to give.

'I've been looking at this book on Chabrier,' said Moreland. 'What an enjoyable time he had in Spain.'

Maclintick grunted. He hummed a little. Chabrier did not appear to interest him. He poured out liberal drinks for everyone and handed them round. Then he sat down.

'Have you become a father yet, Moreland?' he asked.

He spoke as if he grudged having to make so formal an enquiry of so close a friend.

'Not yet,' said Moreland. 'I find it rather a trial waiting. Like the minute or two before the lights go out when you are going to conduct.'

Maclintick continued to hum.

'Can't imagine why people want a row of kids,' he said. 'Life is bad enough without adding that worry to the rest of one's other troubles.'

Being given a drink must have improved Mrs Maclintick's temper for the moment, because she asked me if I too were married. I told her about Isobel being about to leave a nursing home.

'Everyone seems to want babies nowadays,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'It's extraordinary. Maclintick and I never cared for the idea.'

She was about to enlarge on this subject when the bell rang, at the sound of which she went off to open the front door.

'How are you finding things now that you are back in London?' Maclintick asked.

'So-so,' said Moreland. 'Having to do a lot of hack work to keep alive.'

From the passage came sounds of disconnected talk. It was a man's voice. Whomever Mrs Maclintick had admitted to the house, instead of joining us in the sitting-room continued downstairs to the basement, making a lot of noise with his boots on the uncarpeted stairs. Mrs Maclintick returned to her chair and the knickers she was mending. Maclintick raised his eyebrows.

'Carolo?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'What's happened to his key?'

'He lost it.'

'Again?'

'Yes.'

'Carolo is always losing keys,' said Maclintick. 'He'll have to pay for a new one himself this time. It costs a fortune keeping him in keys. I can't remember whether I told you Carolo has come to us as a lodger, Moreland.'

'No,' said Moreland, 'you didn't. How did that happen?'

Moreland seemed surprised, for some reason not best pleased at this piece of information.

'He was in low water,' Maclintick said, speaking as if he were himself not specially anxious to go into detailed explanations. 'So were we. It seemed a good idea at the time. I'm not so sure now. In fact I've been thinking of getting rid of him.'

'How is he doing?' asked Moreland. 'Carolo is always very particular about what jobs he will take on. All that business about teaching being beneath his dignity.'

'He says he likes time for that work of his he is always tinkering about with,' said Maclintick. 'I shall be very surprised if anything ever comes of it.'

'I like Carolo here,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'He gives very little trouble. I don't want to die of melancholia, never seeing a soul.'

'What do you mean?' said Maclintick. 'Look at the company we have got tonight. What I can't stick is having Carolo scratching away at the other end of the room when I am eating. Why can't he keep the same hours as other people?'

'You are always saying artists ought to be judged by different standards from other people,' said Mrs Maclintick fiercely. 'Why shouldn't Carolo keep the hours he likes? He is an artist, isn't he?'

'Carolo may be an artist,' said Maclintick, puffing out a long jet of smoke from his mouth, 'but he is a bloody unsuccessful one nowadays. One of those talents that have dried up, in my opinion. I certainly don't see him blossoming out as a composer. Look here, you two had better stay to supper. As Audrey says, we don't often have company. You can see Carolo then. Judge for yourselves. It is going to be one of his nights in. I can tell from the way he went down the stairs.'

'He has got to work somewhere, hasn't he?' said Mrs Maclintick, whose anger appeared to be rising again after a period of relative calm. 'His bedroom is much too cold in this weather. You use the room with a gas fire in it yourself, the only room where you can keep warm. Even then you can't be bothered to get it repaired. Do you want Carolo to freeze to death?'

'It's my house, isn't it?'

'You say you don't want him in the sitting-room. Why did you tell him he could work in the room off the kitchen if you don't want him there?'

'I am not grumbling,' said Maclintick, 'I am just warning these two gentlemen what to expect – that is to say Carolo scribbling away at a sheet of music at one end of the room, and some cold beef and pickles at the other.'

'Mutton,' said Mrs Maclintick.

'Mutton, then. We can get some beer in a jug from the local.'

'Doesn't Carolo ever eat himself?' Moreland asked.

'He often meals with us as a matter of fact,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'I don't know why Maclintick should make all this fuss suddenly. It is just when Carolo has other plans that he works while we are having supper. Then he eats out later. He likes living on snacks. I tell him it's bad for him, but he doesn't care. What is so very extraordinary about all that?'

Her husband disregarded her.

'Then you are both going to stay,' he said, almost anxiously. 'That is fixed. Where is the big jug, Audrey? I'll get some beer. What does everyone like? Bitter? Mild-and-bitter?'

Moreland had probably been expecting this invitation from the start, but the Maclinticks' bickering about Carolo seemed to have put him out, so that, giving a hasty glance in my direction as if to learn whether or not I was prepared to fall in with this suggestion, he made some rambling, inconclusive answer which left the whole question in the air. Moreland was subject to fits of jumpiness of that sort; certainly the Maclinticks, between them, were enough to make anyone ill at ease. However, Maclintick now obviously regarded the matter as settled. The prospect of enjoying Moreland's company for the rest of the evening evidently cheered him. His tone in suggesting different brews of beer sounded like a gesture of conciliation towards his wife and the world in general. I did not much look forward to supper at the Maclinticks, but there seemed no easy way out. Moreland's earlier remarks about Maclintick's need for occasional companionship were certainly borne out by this visit. The Maclinticks, indeed, as a married couple, gave the impression of being near the end of their tether. When, for example, Mona and Peter Templer had quarrelled – or, later, when Mona's interlude with Quiggin had been punctuated with bad temper and sulkiness – the horror had been less acute, more amenable to adjustment, than the bleak despair of the Maclinticks' union. Mrs Maclintick's hatred of everything and everybody – except, apparently, Carolo, praise of whom was in any case apparently little more than a stick with which to beat Maclintick – caused mere existence in the same room with her to be disturbing. She now made for the basement, telling us she would shout in due course an invitation to descend. Simultaneously, Maclintick set off for the pub at the end of the street, taking with him a large, badly chipped china jug to hold the beer.

'I am afraid I've rather let you in for this,' said Moreland, when we were alone.

His face displayed that helpless, worried look which it would sometimes take on; occasions when Matilda, nowadays, probably took charge of the situation. No doubt he found life both worrying and irksome, waiting for her to give birth, himself by this time out of the habit of living on his own.

'Is it usually like this here?'

'Rather tougher than usual.'

We waited for some minutes in the sitting-room, Moreland returning to the life of Chabrier, while I turned over the pages of an illustrated book about opera, chiefly looking at the pictures, but thinking, too, of the curious, special humour of musicians, and also of the manner in which they write; ideas, words and phrases gushing out like water from a fountain, so utterly unlike the stiff formality of painters' prose. After a time, Mrs Maclintick yelled from the depths that we were to join her. Almost at the same moment, Maclintick returned with the beer. We followed him downstairs to the basement. There, in a room next to the kitchen, a table was laid. We settled ourselves round it. Maclintick filled some tumblers; Mrs Maclintick began to carve the mutton. Carolo was immediately manifest. Although, architecturally speaking, divided into separate parts, the Maclinticks' dining-room was not a large one, the table taking up most of one end. Maclintick's objection to their lodger working while he and his wife were making a meal seemed valid enough when the circumstances revealed themselves. Carolo sat, his face to the wall, engrossed with a pile of music. He looked round when Moreland and I entered the room, at the same time giving some sort of a hurried greeting, but he did not rise, or pause from his work, for more than a second. Mrs Maclintick's temper had improved again; now she appeared almost glad that Moreland and I had stayed.

'Have some beetroot,' she said. 'It is fresh today.'

Moreland and Maclintick did not take long to penetrate into a region of musical technicality from which I was excluded by ignorance; so that while they talked, and Carolo scratched away in the corner, just as Maclintick had described, I found Mrs Maclintick thrown on my hands. In her latest mood, she turned out to have a side to her no less tense than her temper displayed on arrival, but more loquacious. In fact a flow of words began to stem from her which seemed to have been dammed up for months. No doubt Maclintick was as silent in the home as out of it, and his wife was glad of an outlet for her reflexions. Indeed, her desire to talk was now so great that it was hard to understand why we had been received in the first instance with so little warmth. Mrs Maclintick's dissatisfaction with life had probably reached so advanced a stage that she was unable to approach any new event amiably, even when proffered temporary alleviation of her own chronic spleen. Possibly Moreland's friendship with her husband irked her, suggesting a mental intimacy from which she was excluded, more galling in its disinterested companionship than any pursuit of other women on Maclintick's part. She began to review her married life aloud.

'I can't think why Maclintick goes about looking as he does. He just won't buy a new suit. He could easily afford one. Of course, Maclintick doesn't care what he looks like. He takes no notice of anything I say. I suppose he is right in one way. It doesn't matter what he looks like the way we live. I don't know what he does care about except Irish whiskey and the Russian composers and writing that book of his. Do you think it will ever get finished? You know he has been at it for seven years. That's as long as we've been married. No, I'm wrong. He told me he started it before he met me. Eight or nine years, then. I tell him no one will read it when it is finished. Who wants to read a book about the theory of music, I should like to know? He says himself there is too much of that sort of thing published as it is. It is not that the man hasn't got ability. He is bright enough in his way. It is just that he doesn't know how to go about things. Then all these friends of his, like Moreland and you, encourage him, tell him he's a genius, and the book will sell in thousands. What do you do? Are you a musician? A critic, I expect. I suppose you are writing a book yourself.'

'I am not a music critic. I am writing a book.'

'Musical?'

'No – a novel.'

'A novel?' said Mrs Maclintick.

The idea of writing a novel seemed to displease her only a little less than the production of a work on musical theory.

'What is it to be called?'

'I don't know yet.'

'Have you written any other novels?'

I told her. She shook her head, no more in the mood for literature than music. All the time she treated Maclintick as if he were not present in the flesh; and, since he and Moreland were deeply engaged with questions of pitch and rhythm, both were probably unaware of these reflections on her domestic situation.

'And then this house. You can see for yourself it is like a pig-sty. I slave sixteen hours a day to keep it clean. No good. Might as well not attempt it. Maclintick isn't interested in whether his house is clean or not. What I say is, why can't we go and live in Putney? Where *I* want to live is never considered, of course. Maclintick likes Pimlico, so Pimlico it has to be. The place gives me the pip. Well, don't you agree yourself? Even if we move, it has to be somewhere else in Pimlico, and the packing up is more trouble than it is worth. I should like a bit of garden. Can't have that here. Not even a window-box. Of course Maclintick hates the sight of a flower.'

I quoted St John Clarke's opinion that the beauty of flowers is enhanced by metropolitan surroundings. Mrs Maclintick did not reply. Her attention had been distracted by Carolo, who had begun to pile his sheets of music together and stow them away in a portfolio.

'Come and have a drink with us, Carolo, before you go,' she said, with greater warmth than she had shown until that moment. 'Maclintick will get some more beer. We could all do with another drop. Here is the jug, Maclintick. Don't take all the cheese, Moreland. Leave a little for the rest of us.'

Maclintick did not look specially pleased at this suggestion of Carolo joining us at the table, but he too welcomed the idea of more beer, immediately picking up the chipped jug and once more setting off with it to the pub. A chair was drawn up for Carolo, who accepted the invitation with no more than mumbled, ungracious agreement; to which he added the statement that he would not be able to stay long. I had not set eyes on him since that night in the Mortimer. Carolo looked just the same: pale; unromantic; black wavy hair a shade longer and greasier than before. Mrs Maclintick gave him a glance that was almost affectionate.

'Have you got to go out tonight, Carolo?' she said. 'There is a little mutton left.'

Carolo shook his head, looking wearily at the residue of the joint, the remains of which were not specially tempting. He seemed in a thoughtful mood, but, when Maclintick reappeared with the jug and poured him out a glass, he drank a deep draught of the beer with apparent gratification. After wiping his mouth with a handkerchief, he spoke in his harsh, North Country voice.

'How have you been, Moreland?' he asked.

'Much as usual,' said Moreland. 'And you?'

'Pretty middling. How's Matilda?'

'Having a baby,' said Moreland flushing; and, as if he preferred to speak no more for the moment about that particular subject, went on: 'You know, in that book I was reading upstairs, Chabrier says that the Spanish fleas have their own national song – a three-four tune in F major that Berlioz introduces into the *Damnation of Faust*.'

'The Spanish fleas must be having a splendid time nowadays,' said Maclintick, 'biting both sides indiscriminately.'

'The International Brigade could certainly make a tasty dish,' said Moreland, 'not to mention the German and Italian "volunteers". As a matter of fact the fleas probably prefer the Germans. More blonds.'

'I hope to God Franco doesn't win,' said Mrs Maclintick, as if that possibility had at this moment just struck her.

'Who do you want to win?' said Maclintick gruffly. 'The Communists?'

Up till then Maclintick had been on the whole in a better temper than usual. The arrival at the table of Carolo had unsettled him. He now showed signs of wanting to pick a quarrel with someone. His wife was clearly the easiest person present with whom to come into conflict. Biting and sucking noisily at his pipe he glared at her. It looked as if the Spanish war might be a matter of controversy of some standing between them; a source of contention as a married couple, rather than a political difference. Maclintick's views on politics could never be foretold. Violent, changeable, unorthodox, he tended to dislike the Left as much as the Right. He had spoken very bitterly.

'I would rather have the Communists than the Fascists,' said Mrs Maclintick, compressing her lips.

'Only because you think it is the done thing to be on the Left,' said Maclintick, with an enraging smile. 'There isn't a middle-brow in the country who isn't expressing the same sentiment. They should try a little practical Communism and see how they like it. You are no exception, I assure you.'

He removed his pipe from his mouth and swallowed hard. Moreland was obviously becoming uneasy at the turn things were taking. He began kicking his foot against the side of his chair.

'I am Pinkish myself,' he said laughing.

'And you want the Communists?' asked Maclintick.

'Not necessarily.'

'And Marxist music?'

'I long to hear some.'

'Shostakovitch, Russia's only reputable post-Revolution composer, not allowed to have his opera performed because the dictatorship of the proletariat finds that work musically decadent, bourgeois, formalist?'

'I'm not defending the Soviet régime,' said Moreland, still laughing. 'I'm all for *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* – my favourite title. Wasn't there a period in the Middle Ages when the Pope forbade certain chords under pain of excommunication? All I said – apropos of the war in Spain – I am Pinkish. No more, no less.'

This attempt to lighten the tension was not very successful. Maclintick leaned down and tapped his pipe against his heel. Mrs Maclintick, though silent, was white with anger.

'What about Toscanini?' she demanded suddenly.

'What about him?' said Maclintick.

'The Fascists slapped his face.'

'Well?'

'I suppose you approve of that.'

'I don't like the Fascists any more than you do,' said Maclintick. 'You know that perfectly well. It was me that

Blackshirt insisted on taking to the police station in Florence, not you. You tried to truckle to him.'

'Anyway,' said Mrs Maclintick, 'I want the Government in Spain to win – not the Communists.'

'How are you going to arrange that, if they do defeat Franco? As it is, the extremists have taken over on the side of "the Government", as you call it. How are you going to arrange that the nice, liberal ones come out on top?'

'What do you know about it?' said his wife, speaking now with real hatred. 'What do you know about politics?'

'More than you.'

'I doubt it.'

'Doubt it, then.'

There was a moment during the pause that followed this exchange of opinion when I thought she might pick up one of the battered table knives and stick it into him. All this time, Carolo had remained absolutely silent, as if unaware that anything unusual was going on round him, unaware of Spain, unaware of civil war there, unaware of Communists, unaware of Fascists, his expression registering no more than its accustomed air of endurance of the triviality of those who inhabited the world in which he unhappily found himself. Now he finished the beer, wiped his mouth again with the pocket handkerchief, and rose from the table.

'Got to remove myself,' he said in his North Country burr.

'What time will you be back?' asked Maclintick.

'Don't know.'

'I suppose someone will have to let you in.'

'Suppose they will.'

'Oh, shut up,' burst out Mrs Maclintick. 'I'll let him in, you fool. What does it matter to you? You never open a door for anyone, not even your precious friends. It's me that does all the drudgery in this house. You never do a hand's turn, except sitting upstairs messing about with a lot of stuff that is really out of your reach – that you are not quite up to.

By this time everyone was standing up.

'I think probably Nick and I ought to be going too,' said Moreland, the extent of his own discomposure making him sound more formal than usual. 'I've got to get up early tomorrow . . . go and see Matilda . . . one thing and another . . .'

He succeeded in suggesting no more than the fact that the Maclinticks' house had become unbearable to him. Maclintick showed no sign of surprise at this sudden truncation of our visit, although he smiled to himself rather grimly.

'Do you want to take the book about Chabrier?' he asked. 'Borrow it by all means if you would like to read the rest of it.'

'Not at the moment, thanks,' said Moreland. 'I have got too much on hand.'

Carolo had already left the house by the time we reached the front door. Without bidding us farewell, Mrs Maclintick had retired in silence to the kitchen, where she could be heard clattering pots and pans and crockery. Maclintick stood on the doorstep biting his pipe.

'Come again,' he said, 'if you can stand it. I'm not sure how long I shall be able to.'

'It won't be till after Matilda has given birth,' Moreland said.

'Oh, I forgot about that,' said Maclintick. 'You're going to become a father. Well, good night to you both. Pleasant dreams.'

He shut the door. We set off up the street.

'Let's walk by the river for a bit to recover,' Moreland said. 'I'm sorry to have let you in for all that.'

'Was it a representative Maclintick evening?'

'Not one of their best. But they understand each other in an odd way. Of course, that is the sort of thing people say just before murder takes place. Still, you grasp what I mean when I insist it is good for Maclintick to see friends occasionally. But what on earth can Carolo be doing there? Everyone must be pretty short of cash for Carolo to live with the Maclinticks as a lodger. I should not have thought either party would have chosen that. All the pubs are shut by now in this area, aren't they?'

Cutting down to the Embankment, we walked for a time beside the moonlit, sparkling river, towards Vauxhall Bridge and along Millbank, past the Donners-Brebner Building dominating the far shore like a vast penitentiary, where I had called for Stringham one night years before, when he had been working there.

'Married life is unquestionably difficult,' Moreland said. 'One may make a slightly better shot at it than the Maclinticks, but that doesn't mean one has no problems. I shall be glad when this baby is born. Matilda has not been at all easy to deal with since it started. Of course, I know that is in the best possible tradition. All the same, it makes one wonder, with Maclintick, how long one will be able to remain married. No, I don't mean that exactly. It is not that I am any less fond of Matilda, so much as that marriage – this quite separate entity – somehow comes between us. However, I expect things will be all right as soon as the baby arrives. Forgive these morbid reflections. I should really write them for the Sunday papers, get paid a huge fortune for it and receive an enormous fan-mail. The fact is, I am going through one of those awful periods when I cannot work. You know what hell that is.'

Moreland and I parted company, making arrangements to meet soon. The subject of marriage cropped up again, although in a different manner, when Widmerpool lunched with me the following week.

'We will not take too long over our meal, if you do not mind,' he said, speaking only after he had hung his hat, topcoat and umbrella on a peg in the hall. 'I am, as usual, very busy. That is why I am a minute or two after time. There is a lot of work on hand as a matter of fact. You probably know that I have accepted the commitment of advising Donners-Brebner regarding the investment of funds for their pension scheme. Sir Magnus, in general an excellent man of business for immediate negotiation, is sometimes surprisingly hesitant in matters of policy. Unexpectedly changeable, too. In short Sir Magnus doesn't always know his own mind. Above all, he is difficult to get hold of. He will think nothing of altering the hour of appointment three or four times. I have had to point out to his secretary more than once that I must make a schedule of my day just as much as Sir Magnus must plan his.'

All the same, in spite of petty annoyances like Sir Magnus's lack of decision, Widmerpool was in far better form than at our last luncheon together, two or three years before, a time when he had himself been thinking of marriage. He ate more than on that occasion, although for drink he still restricted himself to a glass of water, swallowing pills both before and after the meal.

'Brandreth recommended these tablets,' he said. 'He says they are soothing. I find him on the whole a satisfactory medical adviser. He is rather too fond of the sound of his own voice, but he has a sensible attitude towards things. Brandreth is by no means a fool. Nothing narrow about him like so many doctors.'

'Did you go to him because you knew him at school?'

'No, no,' said Widmerpool. 'What an idea. For a man to have shared one's education is, in my eyes, no special recommendation to my good graces. I suppose I could have formed some early impression of his character and efficiency. I regret to say that few, if any, of my school contemporaries struck me sufficiently favourably for me to go out of my way to employ their services. In any case, Brandreth was that amount older than myself to make it difficult to judge his capabilities – certainly his capabilities as a medical man. At the same time, it is true to say that our connexion has something to do with the fact we were at school together. Do you remember that Old Boy Dinner at which Le Bas fainted? I was impressed by the manner in which Brandreth handled that situation – told the rest of the party to go about their business and leave Le Bas to him. I liked that. It is one of my principles in life to surround myself with persons whose conduct has satisfied me. Usually the people themselves are quite unaware that they have benefited by the fact that, at one time or another; they made a good impression on me. Brandreth is a case in point.'

'The opposite process to entertaining angels unawares?'

'I don't quite know what you mean,' said Widmerpool. 'But tell me about yourself, your married life, Nicholas. Where are you living? I dined with your brother-in-law, George Tolland, not long ago. I am never sure that it is a wise thing for soldiers to go into business. If fellows enter the army, let them stay in the army. That is true of most professions. However, he gave me some acceptable advice regarding raising money for my Territorials. The mess fund balance always seems low.'

Widmerpool rarely showed great interest in other people's affairs, but his good humour that day was such that he listened with more attention than usual when subjects unconnected with himself were ventilated. I wondered if some business deal had put him in such a genial mood. Conversation drifted to such matters.

'Things are looking up a little in the City,' he said, when luncheon was over. 'I foresee that the rhythm of the trade circle is moving towards improvement. I have been doing some small calculations on my own account to verify how matters stand. It will interest you to hear my findings. As you know, the general level of dividends is the major determinant of general stock values and market prices over a long period of time. Over shorter periods stock prices fluctuate more widely than dividends. That is obvious, of course. I worked out, for example, that since the Slump, stock prices have risen between 217⅜ per cent and 218½ per cent. So far as I could ascertain, dividends have not exceeded 62¾ per cent to 64⅝ per cent. Those are my own figures. I do not put them forward as conclusive. You follow me?'

'Perfectly.'

'Setting aside a European war,' said Widmerpool, 'which I do not consider a strong probability in spite of certain disturbing features, I favour a reasoned optimism. I hold views, as it happens, on the interplay of motions and emotions of the Stock Exchange, which, in my opinion, are far more amenable to appraisement than may be supposed by the tyro. My method could not be simpler. I periodically divide the market price of stocks – as expressed by some reliable index – by the dividend paid on the index. What could be easier than that. You agree?'

'Of course.'

'But lest I should seem to pontificate upon my own subject, to be over-occupied with the sordid details of commerce, let me tell you, Nicholas, that I have been allowing myself certain relaxations.'

'You have?'

'As you know, my mother has always urged me to spend more time seeking amusement. She thinks I work too hard.'

'I remember your telling me.'

I did not know what he was aiming at. There was no doubt he was pleased about something. He seemed uncertain whether or not to reveal the reason for that. Then, suddenly, his gratification was explained.

'I have been moving in rather exalted circles lately,' he said, giving a very satisfied smile.

'Indeed?'

'Not exactly royal – that is hardly the word yet . . . You understand me . . . ?'

'I think so.'

'It was an interesting experience.'

'Have you actually met . . .'

Widmerpool bowed his head, suggesting by this movement the knowledge of enviable secrets. At the same time he would allow no admission that might be thought compromising either to himself or those in high places whose reputation must rightly be shielded. I tried to extort more from him without any success.

'When did this happen?'

'Please do not press me for details.'

He was now on his dignity. There was a moment of silence. Widmerpool took a deep breath, as if drawing into his lungs all the health-giving breezes of the open sea of an elevated social life.

'I think we are going to see some great changes, Nicholas,' he said, 'and welcome ones. There is much – as I have often said before – to be swept away. I feel sure the things I speak of will be swept away. A new broom will soon get to work. I venture to hope that I may even myself participate in this healthier society to which we may look forward.'

'And you think we shall avoid war?'

'Certainly, I do. But I was speaking for once of society in its narrower sense – the fashionable world. There is much in the prospect before us that attracts me.'

I wondered if he were again planning to marry. Widmerpool, as I had noticed in the past, possessed certain telepathic powers, sometimes to be found in persons insensitive to the processes of thought of other people except in so far as they concern themselves; that is to say he seemed to know immediately that some idea about him was germinating in a given person's mind – in this case that I was recalling his fiasco with Mrs Haycock.

'I expect you remember that the last time you were lunching with me I was planning matrimony myself,' he said. 'How fortunate that nothing came of it. That would have been a great mistake. Mildred would not have made at all a suitable wife for me. Her subsequent conduct has caused that to become very plain. It was in the end a relief to my mother that things fell out as they did.'

'How is your mother?'

'As usual, she is positively growing younger,' said Widmerpool, pleased by this enquiry. 'And together with her always keen appreciation of youth, she tries, as I have said, to persuade me to venture more often into a social world. She is right. I know she is right. I made an effort to follow her advice – with the satisfactory consequence that I have more than half imparted to you.'

It was no good hoping to hear any more. Like Moreland dropping hints about his love affairs, Widmerpool hoped only to whet my curiosity. He seemed anxious to convince me that, although his own engagement had been broken off in embarrassing circumstances, he had been left without any feeling of bitterness.

'I hear Mildred Haycock has returned to the South of France,' he said. 'Really the best place for her. I won't repeat to you a story I was told about her the other day. For my own part, I see no reason to hurry into marriage. Perhaps, after all, forty is the age at which to find a mate. I believe Léon Blum says in his book. He is a shrewd man, Monsieur Blum.'

3

PEOPLE TALKED as if it were a kind of phenomenon that Matilda should ever have given birth to a child at all: the unwillingness of the world to believe that anyone – especially a girl who has lived fairly adventurously – might exist for a time in one manner, then at a later date choose quite another way of life. The baby, a daughter, survived only a few hours. Matilda herself was very ill. Even when she recovered, Moreland remained in the deepest dejection. He had worried so much about his wife's condition before the child was born that he seemed almost to have foreseen what would happen. That made things no better. About that time, too, there was a return of trouble with his lung: money difficulties obtruded: everything went wrong: depression reigned. Then, after some disagreeable weeks, two unexpected jobs turned up. Almost from one day to the next Moreland recovered his spirits. There was, after all, no reason why they should not in due course have another child. The financial crisis was over: the rent paid: things began to look better. All the same, it had to be admitted the Morelands did not live very domestically. The routine into which married life is designed inexorably to fall was still largely avoided by them. They kept rigorously late hours. They were always about together. A child would not have fitted easily into the circumstances of their small, rather bleak flat (no longer what Moreland had begun to call 'my former apolaustic bachelor quarters') where they were, in fact, rarely to be found.

We used to see a good deal of the Morelands in those days, dining together sometimes at Foppa's, sometimes at the Strasbourg, afterwards going to a film, or, as Moreland really preferred, sitting in a pub and talking. He would develop a passion for one particular drinking place – never the Mortimer after marriage – then tire of it, inclination turning to active aversion. Isobel and Matilda got on well together. They were about the same age; they had the nursing home in common. Matilda had recovered quickly, after an unpromising start. She found apparent relief in describing the discomfort she had suffered, although speaking always in a manner to cast a veil of unreality over the experience. Lively, violent, generous, she was subject, like Moreland himself, to bouts of deep depression. On the whole the life they lived together – so wholly together – seemed to suit her. Perhaps, after all, people were right to think of her as intended by nature for a man's mistress and companion, rather than as cast for the rôle of mother.

'Matilda's father was a chemist,' Moreland once remarked, when we were alone together, 'but he is dead now – so one cannot get special terms for purges and sleeping pills.'

'And her mother?'

'Married again. They were never on very good terms. Matty left home very young. I think everyone was rather glad when she struck out on her own.'

Two of my sisters-in-law, as it happened, had come across Matilda in pre-Moreland days. These were Veronica, George Tolland's wife, and Norah, who shared a flat with Eleanor Walpole-Wilson. Veronica, whose father was an auctioneer in a country town not far from Stourwater Castle, was one of the few people to know something of Matilda's early life. They had, indeed, been at school together.

'I was much older, of course,' Veronica said. 'I just remember her right down at the bottom of the junior school, a little girl you couldn't help noticing. She was called Betty Updike then.'

'How did you ever discover Matilda was the same girl?'

'When I was living at home and divorcing Fred, I met a local girl in the High Street who'd got a job on the *Daily Mail*. She began to talk about Sir Magnus Donners and said: "Do you know the piece called Matilda Wilson he is always seen around with is really Betty Updike".'

There was nothing particularly surprising about Matilda having taken a new name for the stage. Many people did that. It was something to be expected. The manner in which Matilda had first met Sir Magnus was more interesting.

'This girl told me Matilda Wilson came down one term to help the school dramatic society do *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,' said Veronica. 'They had got permission to act the play at Stourwater. Sir Magnus, wandering round, came across Matilda Wilson dressing up a lot of little girls as elves. That went pretty well.'

It seemed as credible a story as any other. Once involved with Sir Magnus, Matilda had, of course, been 'seen everywhere'; within the limitations of the fact that Sir Magnus preferred to keep his girl of the moment as much as possible to himself, allowing her to meet no more of his own friends than strictly necessary for his own entertainment when the two of them could not be alone together. Certainly that had been true of the time when Sir Magnus was associated with Baby Wentworth, alleged by Barnby to have 'given notice' on this very account. There had been a lot of gossip about Matilda when she was 'with' Sir Magnus. When, not long before my own marriage, I had stayed with Quiggin and Mona in the cottage lent them by Erridge, Quiggin had even talked too much about Matilda for Mona's taste.

'Oh, yes,' Mona had said, in her irritated drawl, 'Matilda Wilson – one of those plain girls men for some extraordinary reason like running after. Because they are not much trouble, I suppose.'

Norah Tolland had encountered Matilda in quite different circumstances; in fact having drinks with Heather Hopkins, the pianist, who had formerly inhabited one of the lower floors of the house in Chelsea where Norah and Eleanor Walpole-Wilson occupied the attics. At the period of which I am speaking – about two years after my own marriage – Norah and Eleanor had both found themselves jobs and become very 'serious', talking a lot about politics and economics and how best to put the world right. They were now rather ashamed of their Heather Hopkins days.

'Poor old Hopkins,' Norah said, when I mentioned her once. 'Such a pity she goes round looking and talking like the most boring kind of man. Her flat might be the bar in a golf club. She is a good-hearted creature in her own way.'

'You get tired of all that clumping about,' said Eleanor, kicking some bedroom slippers out of sight under the sofa. 'And besides, Heather isn't in the least interested in world affairs one does ask a little sense of responsibility in people.'

However, things had been very different some years before. Then, Hopkins had thrilled Norah and Eleanor with her eyeglass and her dinner-jacket and her barrack-room phrases. Matilda had been brought to the Hopkins flat by a young actress at that time much admired by the hostess. The gathering was, of course, predominantly female, and Matilda, often found attractive by her own sex, but herself preferring men even in an unaggressively masculine form, had spent most of the evening talking to Norman Chandler. She met him for the first time at this Hopkins party. Through Chandler, Matilda had subsequently obtained a foothold in that branch of the theatre which had led in due course to her part in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Norah, usually sparing of praise, had been impressed by Matilda, to whom, as it happened, she only managed to speak a couple of words in the course of the evening.

'I thought she was rather wonderful,' said Norah.

Moreland himself had first met his future wife at a time when Matilda's connexion with Sir Magnus, if not completely severed, had been at least considerably relaxed. Moreland's behaviour on this occasion had been characteristic. He had fallen deeply in love, immediately overwhelming Matilda with that combination of attention and forgetfulness which most women found so disconcerting in his addresses. For once, however, that approach worked very well. Matilda was won. There had already been some ups and downs in their relationship by the time I was allowed to meet her, but, in principle, they were satisfied enough with each other before marriage; they still seemed satisfied when we used to meet them and dine together at Foppa's or the Strasbourg. I discounted Moreland's casual outbursts against marriage as an institution; indeed, took his word for it that, as he used to explain, these complaints were a sign of living in a world of reality, not a palace of dreams.

'People always treat me as if I was a kind of 1880 bohemian,' he used to say. 'On the contrary, I am the sane Englishman with his pipe.'

It was one one of these evenings at the Strasbourg that he announced his symphony was finished and about to be performed. Although Moreland never talked much about his own compositions, I knew he had been working on the symphony for a long time.

'Norman's friend, Mrs Foxe, is going to give a party for it,' he said.

'But how lovely,' said Isobel. 'Will Mrs Foxe and Norman stand at the top of the stairs, side by side, receiving the guests?'

'I hope so,' said Moreland. 'An example to all of us. A fidelity extremely rare among one's friends.'

'Does Mrs Foxe still live in a house somewhere off Berkeley Square?' I asked.

'That's it,' said Moreland. 'With objects like mammoth ice-cream cornets on either side of the front door for putting out the torches after you have paid off your sedan chair.'

'I am not sure that I like parties at that house,' said Matilda. 'We have been there once or twice. I can stand grand parties less and less anyway.'

She was having one of her moods that night, but it was on the whole true to say that since marriage Moreland had increasingly enjoyed going to parties, especially parties like that offered by Mrs Foxe; Matilda, less and less.

'You talk as if we spent our life in a whirl of champagne and diamonds,' Moreland said. 'Anyway, it won't be as grand as all that. Mrs Foxe has promised just to ask our own sordid friends.'

'Who,' asked Isobel, 'apart from us?'

'I'd far rather go off quietly by ourselves somewhere after the thing is over and have supper with Isobel and Nick,' Matilda said. 'That would be much more fun.'

'It *is* rather an occasion, darling,' said Moreland, vexed at these objections. 'After all, I am noted among composers for the smallness of my output. I don't turn out a symphony every week like some people. A new work by me ought to be celebrated with a certain flourish – if only to encourage the composer himself.'

'I just hate parties nowadays.'

'There are only going to be about twenty or thirty people,' Moreland said. 'I know Edgar Deacon used to assure us that "the saloon, rather than the *salon*, is the true artist's milieu", but his own pictures were no great advertisement for that principle. Personally, I feel neither subservience nor resentment at the prospect of being entertained by Mrs Foxe in luxurious style.'

'Have you ever talked to her naval husband?' I asked.

'There is a smooth, hearty fellow about the house sometimes,' Moreland said. 'A well-fed air, and likes a good mahogany-coloured whisky. I once heard him give an anguished cry when the footman began to splash in too much soda. I never knew he was her husband. He doesn't look in the least like a husband.'

'Of course he is her husband,' said Matilda. 'What an ass you are. He pinched my leg the night we were having supper with them after *Turandot*. That is one of the reasons I turned against the house.'

'Darling, I'm sure he didn't. Just your swank.'

'I told you when we got home. I even showed you the bruise. You must have been too tight to see it.'

'He always seems scrupulously well behaved to me,' Moreland said. 'Rather afraid of Mrs Foxe, as a matter of fact. I understand why, now she turns out to be his wife.'

Soon after this meeting with the Morelands came the period of crisis leading up to the Abdication, one of those public events which occupied the minds not only of those dedicated by temperament to eternal discussion of what they read about in the newspapers, but of everyone else in the country of whatever age, sex, or social class. The constitutional and emotional issues were left threadbare by debate. Barnby would give his views on the controversy in his most down-to-earth manner; Roddy Cutts treated it with antiseptic discretion; Frederica's connexion with the Court caused her to show herself in public as little as possible, but she did not wholly avoid persecution at the hands of friends and relations vainly hoping for some unreleased titbit.

'I shall have a nervous breakdown if they don't settle things soon,' said Robert Tolland. 'I don't expect you hear any news, Frederica?'

'I can assure you, Robert, my own position is equally nerve-racking,' said Frederica. 'And I hear no news.'

She certainly looked dreadfully worried. I found Members and Quiggin discussing the ineluctable topic when I went to collect a book for review.

'I am of course opposed in principle to monarchy, like all other feudal survivals,' Quiggin was saying. 'But if the country must have a king, I consider it desirable, indeed essential that he should marry a divorcée. Two divorces – double as good. I am no friend of the civilisation of Big Business, but at least an American marriage is better than affiliation with our own so-called aristocracy.'

Members laughed dryly.

'Have you taken part in a procession of protest yet, J.G.?' he asked, now in a sufficiently strong economic position vis-à-vis his old friend to treat Quiggin's indignation with amused irony. 'I believe all kinds of distinguished people from the intellectual world have been parading the streets with sandwich boards expressing outraged royalist sentiments.'

'I regard the whole matter as utterly trivial in any case,' said Quiggin, irritably shoving a handful of recently published novels back into the shelf behind Members's desk, tearing the paper wrappers of two of them by the violence of his action. 'You asked me my views, Mark, and I've told you what they are. Like Gibbon, I dismiss the subject with impatience. Perhaps you will produce a book of some interest this week, a change from these interminable autobiographies of minor criminals which flow so freely from the press and to which I am for ever condemned by you.'

I met Moreland in the street just after the story had broken in the newspapers.

'Isn't this just my luck?' he said. 'Now nobody is going to listen to music, look at a picture, or read a book, for months on end. We can all settle down happily to discussions every evening about Love and Duty.'

'Fascinating subjects.'

'They are in one's own life. Less so, where others are concerned.'

'You speak with feeling.'

'Do I? Just my naturally vehement way of expressing myself.'

As it turned out, once the step had been taken, the Abdication become a matter of history, everything resumed an accustomed routine with much greater ease than popularly foreseen. There appeared no reason to suppose the box office for Moreland's symphony would suffer. Priscilla (who had eventually taken the job in the organisation raising money for the promotion of opera) reported, for example, that the cross-section of the public seen through this particular microscope seemed to have settled down, after some weeks of upheaval, to its normal condition. Priscilla was not particularly interested in music – less so than Robert – but naturally this employment had brought her in touch to some degree with the musical world. At the same time, I was surprised when, the day before Moreland's work was to be performed, Priscilla rang up and asked if she could come with us the following evening. Isobel answered the telephone.

'I didn't know you often went to concerts,' she said.

'I don't unless I have a free ticket,' said Priscilla.

'Did you get a free ticket for this one?'

'Yes.'

'Who gave it you?'

'One of the persons whose music is going to be played.'

'I thought they were all dead, or living abroad, except Hugh Moreland.'

'Hugh Moreland gave me the ticket.'

'I didn't know you knew him.'

'Of course I do.'

'Oh, yes. You met him with us, didn't you?'

'And other times too. I meet him in my office.'

'You never mentioned it.'

'Look here, can I come with you and Nick, or can't I?' said Priscilla. 'I am just asking. If you think being seen in my company will get you a bad name, I'll go alone and pretend I don't know either of you if we meet in the bar. Nothing easier.'

This conversation was reported later by Isobel, with the information that Priscilla was dining with us the following night.

'Typical of Hugh to present a ticket to Priscilla, who is not in the least interested in music,' I said, 'when all sorts of people who might be useful to him would have been delighted to be remembered in that way.'

The statement was true, at the same time disingenuous. I was a little aware of that at the time. It was a priggish remark; not even genuinely priggish. There seemed no point in adding that it was obviously more fun to give a ticket to a pretty girl like Priscilla, rather than to some uncouth musical hanger-on whose gratification might ultimately pay a doubtful dividend. I felt it one of those occasions when a show of worldliness might be used as a smoke-screen. But why should a smoke-screen be required?

'I suppose Hugh had a few drinks at some party,' I said, 'and distributed tickets broadcast.'

In the end I convinced myself of the probability of this surmise. Isobel did not express any views on the subject. However, when she arrived at the flat, Priscilla explained that Moreland, the day before, had visited, in some professional capacity, the place where the Opera fund was administered. There, 'rummaging about in his pocket for his cigarettes', he found this spare ticket 'crumpled up among a lot of newspaper cuttings, bits of string, and paper-clips'. He had given the ticket to Priscilla, suggesting at the same time that she should come on to Mrs Foxe's party after the concert. That was a convincing story. It had all the mark of Moreland's behaviour. We talked of other things; of Erridge, who had cabled for thicker underclothes to be sent him in Barcelona, indicating in this manner that he was not, as some prophesied, likely to return immediately. We discussed Erridge's prospects in Spain. By the time we reached the concert hall, Priscilla seemed to have come with us that evening by long previous arrangement.

Moreland was fond of insisting that whatever the critics say, good or bad, all works of art must go through a maturing process before taking their allotted place in the scheme of things. There is nothing particularly original in that opinion, but those who hold firmly to it are on the whole less likely to be spoiled by praise or cast down by blame than others – not necessarily worse artists – who find heaven or hell in each individual press notice. The symphony was, in fact, greeted as a success, but not as an overwhelming success; a solid piece of work that would add to Moreland's reputation, rather than a detonation of unexampled brilliance. Gossage, fiddling about with the mustard pot at some restaurant, had once remarked (when Moreland was out of the room) that he would be wise to build up his name with a work of just that sort. In the concert hall, there had been a lot of applause; at the same time a faint sense of anti-climax. Even for the most self-disciplined of artists, a public taken by surprise is more stimulating than a public relieved to find that what is offered can be swallowed without the least sharpness on the palate. This was especially true of Moreland, who possessed his healthy share of liking to startle, in spite of his own innate antagonism to professional startlers. However, if the symphony turned out to be a little disappointing to those who may have hoped for something more barbed, the reception was warm enough to cast no suggestion of shadow over a party of celebration.

'That went all right, didn't it?' said Isobel.

'It seemed to.'

'I thought it absolutely wonderful,' said Priscilla.

I felt great curiosity at the prospect of seeing Mrs Foxe's house again, not entered since the day when, still a schoolboy, I had lunched there with Stringham and his mother. Nothing had changed in the pillared entrance hall. There was, of course, absolutely no reason why anything should have changed, but I had an odd feeling of incongruity about reappearing there as a married man. The transition against this same backcloth was too abrupt. Some interim state, like steps in the gradations of freemasonry, seemed to have been omitted. We were shown up to a crimson damask drawing-room on the first floor, at one end of which sliding doors were open, revealing the room at right angles to be the 'library – with its huge malachite urn, Romney portrait, Regency bookcases – into which Stringham had brought me on that earlier visit. There I had first encountered the chilly elegance of Commander Foxe; also witnessed Stringham's method of dealing with his mother's 'current husband'.

Commander Foxe, as it happened, was the first person I saw when we came through the door. He was talking to Lady Huntercombe. From a certain bravado in his manner of addressing her, I suspected he had probably let himself off attending the concert. Mrs Foxe came forward to meet us as we were announced, looking just as she looked at *The Duchess of Malfi*, changeless, dazzling, dominating. As an old friend of Lady Warminster's, she had, of course, known Isobel and Priscilla as children. She spoke to them for a moment about their stepmother's health, then turned to me. I was about to recall to her the circumstances in which we had formerly met in what was now so dim a past, wondering at the same time what on earth I was going to say about Stringham, mention of whose name was clearly unavoidable, when Mrs Foxe herself forestalled me.

'How well I remember when Charles brought you to luncheon here. Do you remember that too? It was just before he sailed for Kenya. We all went to the Russian Ballet that night. Such a pity you could not have come with us. What fun it was in those days . . . Poor Charles . . . He has had such a lot of trouble . . . You know, of course . . . But he is happier now. Tuffy looks after him – Miss Weedon; you met her too when you came here, didn't you? – and Charles has taken to painting. It has done wonders.'

'I remember his caricatures.'

Stringham could not draw at all in the technical sense, but he was a master of his own particular form of graphic representation, executed in a convention of blobs and spidery lines, very effective for producing likenesses of Le Bas or the other masters at school. I could not imagine what Stringham's 'painting' could be. This terminology put the activity into quite another setting.

'Charles uses gouache now,' said Mrs Foxe, speaking with that bright firmness of manner people apply especially to close relations attempting to recover from more or less disastrous mismanagement of their own lives, 'designing theatrical costumes and that sort of thing. Norman says they are really quite good. Of course, Charles has had no training, so it is probably too late for him to do anything professionally. But the designs have originality, Norman thinks. You know Norman talks a lot about you and Isobel. He adores you both. Norman made me read one of your books. I liked it very much.'

She looked a bit pathetic when she said that, making me feel in this respect perhaps Chandler had gone too far in his exercise of power. However, other guests coming up the stairs at our heels compelled a forward movement. Moreland, red in the face, appeared in Mrs Foxe's immediate background. We offered our congratulations. He muttered a word or two about the horror of having a new work performed; seemed very happy about everything. We left him talking to Priscilla, herself rather pink, too, with the excitement of arrival. The party began to take more coherent shape. Mrs Foxe had, on the whole, most dutifully followed Moreland's wishes in collecting together his old friends, rather than arranging a smart affair of her own picking and choosing. Indeed, the far end of the crimson drawing-room could almost have been a corner of the Mortimer on one of its better nights; the group collected there making one feel that at any moment the strains of the mechanical piano would suddenly burst forth. The Maclinticks, Carolo, Gossage, with several other musicians and critics known to me only by sight, were present, including a famous conductor of a generation older than Moreland's, invited probably through acquaintance with Mrs Foxe in a social way rather than because of occasional professional contacts between Moreland and himself. This distinguished person was conversing a little loudly and self-consciously, with a great deal of gesticulation, to show there was no question of condescension from himself towards his less successful colleagues. Near this knot of musicians stood Chandler's old friend, Max Pilgrim, trying to get a word or two out of Rupert Wise, another of Chandler's friends – indeed, a great admiration of Chandler's – a male dancer known for his strict morals and lack of small talk. Wise's engagement to an equally respectable female member of the *corps de ballet* had recently been announced. Mrs Foxe had promised to give them a refrigerator as a wedding present.

'Not colder than Rupe's heart,' Chandler had commented. 'It was my suggestion. He may have a profile like Apollo, but he's got a mind like Hampstead Garden Suburb.'

The Huntercombes, as well as the celebrated conductor, were certainly contributed to the party by Mrs Foxe rather than by Moreland. Once – as I knew from remarks let fall by Stringham in the past – Mrs Foxe would have regarded Lady Huntercombe as dreadfully 'slow', and laughed at her clothes, which were usually more dramatic than fashionable. However, now that Mrs Foxe's energies were so largely directed towards seeking ways of benefiting Chandler and his friends, Lord Huntercombe's many activities in the art world had to be taken into account. In his capacity as trustee of more than one public gallery, Lord Huntercombe was, it was true, concerned with pictures rather than with music or the theatre. At the same time, his well recognised abilities in his own field had brought him a seat on several committees connected with other branches of the arts or activities of a generally 'cultural' sort. Lord Huntercombe, small and immensely neat, was indeed a man to be reckoned with. He had caught napping one of the best known Bond Street dealers in the matter of a Virgin and Child by Benozzo Gozzoli (acquired from the gallery as the work of a lesser master, later resoundingly identified), also so nicely chosen the moment to dispose of his father's collection of English pastels that he obtained nearly twice their market value.

Lady Huntercombe, as usual majestically dressed in a black velvet gown, wore a black ribbon round her neck clipped with an elaborate ornament in diamonds. She took a keen interest in music, more so than her husband, who liked to be able himself to excel in his own spheres of patronage, and was not musically inclined. I remembered Lady Huntercombe expressing her disappointment after Stringham's wedding at the manner in which the choir had sung the anthem. 'Dreadfully sharp,' I heard her say at the reception. 'It set my teeth on edge.' Now she was talking to Matilda, to the accompaniment of animated and delighted shakings of her forefinger, no doubt indicative of some special pleasure she had taken in Moreland's symphony; apparently at the same time trying to persuade Matilda – who seemed disposed to resist these advances – to accept some invitation or other similar commitment.

Moving towards the inner room, I observed that Chandler's small bronze of *Truth Unveiled by Time*, long ago bought from the Caledonian Market and rescued from Mr Deacon's shop after his death, had now come finally to rest on the console table under the Romney. Chandler himself was standing beside the table, stirring a glass of champagne with a gold swizzle-stick borrowed from Commander Foxe. Although Chandler might hold Mrs Foxe under his sway, she, on her part, had in some degree tamed him too. His demeanour had been modified by prolonged association with her. He was no longer quite the *gamin* of the Mortimer.

'Hullo, my dear,' he said. 'Fizz always gives me terrible hiccups, unless I take the bubbles away. You know Buster, of course.'

Commander Foxe, greyer now, a shade bulkier than when I had last seen him, was at the same time, if possible, more dignified as a result of these outward marks of maturity. He retained in his dress that utter perfection of turn-out that stopped so brilliantly short of seeming no more than the trappings of a tailor's dummy. His manner, on the other hand, had greatly changed. He had become chastened, almost humble. I could not imagine how I had ever found him alarming; although, even with this later development of geniality, there still existed a suggestion that below the surface he knew how to make himself disagreeable if need be. I mentioned where we had last met. He at once recollected, or pretended to recollect, the occasion; the essence of good manners and friendliness, almost obsequious in his desire to please.

'Poor old Charles,' he said. 'Of course I remember you were a friend of his. Do you ever see him these days? Well, of course, nobody does much, do they? All the same, it hasn't worked out too badly. Do you remember Miss Weedon, Amy's secretary? Rather a formidable lady. Oh, you know all about that, do you? Yes, Molly Jeavons is an aunt of your wife's, of course. Quite a solution for Charles in a way. It gives him the opportunity to live a quiet life for a time. Norman goes round and sees Charles sometimes, don't you, Norman?'

'I simply adore Charles,' said Chandler, 'but I'm rather afraid of that gorgon who looks after him – I believe you are too, Buster.'

Buster laughed, almost achieving his savage sneer of former times. He did not like Miss Weedon. I remembered that. He was no doubt glad to have ridded the house of Stringham too. They had never got on well together.

'At least Tuffy keeps Charles in order,' Buster said. 'If one hasn't any self-discipline, something of the sort unfortunately has to be applied from the outside. It is a hard thing to say, but there it is. Are you in this musical racket yourself? I hear Hugh Moreland's symphony was very fine. I couldn't manage to get there myself, much to my regret.'

I felt a pang of horror at the way his family now talked of Stringham: as if he had been put away from view like a person suffering from a horrible, unmentionable disease, or become some terrifying legendary figure, fearful as the Glamis monster, about whom it was appropriate to joke as dreadful to behold, but at the same time a being past serious credence. All the same, it was hard to know what else they could do about him, how better behave towards him. Stringham, after all, was their problem, not mine. I myself could offer no better solution than Miss Weedon; was in no position to disparage his own relations so far as their conduct towards Stringham was concerned.

'They were a bit hurried in seeing our former King off the premises, weren't they?' said Buster, changing the subject to public events, possibly because he feared his last words might provoke musical conversation. 'Some of one's friends have been caught on the wrong foot about it all. Still, I expect he will have a much better time on his own in the long run. His former job was not one I should care to take on.'

'My dear, you'd do it superbly,' said Chandler. 'I always think that when I look at that photograph of you in tropical uniform.'

'No, no, nonsense, Norman,' said Buster, not displeased at this attribution to himself of potentially royal aptitudes. 'I should be bored to death. I can't in the least imagine myself opening Parliament and all that sort of thing.'

Chandler signified his absolute disagreement.

'I must go off and have a word with Auntie Gossage now,' he said, 'or the old witch will fly off on a broomstick and complain about being cut. See you both later.'

'What a wonderful chap Norman is,' said Buster, speaking with unaccustomed warmth. 'You know I sometimes wonder what Amy would do without him. Or me, either, for that matter. He runs the whole of our lives. He can do anything from arranging the flowers to mixing the best Tom Collins I have ever drunk. So talented in other ways too. Ever seen him act? Then, as for dancing and playing the saxophone . . . Well, I've never met a man like him.'

There seemed no end to Buster's admiration for Chandler. I did not disagree, although surprised, rather impressed, by

Buster's complete freedom from jealousy. It was not that anyone supposed that Chandler was 'having an affair' with Mrs Foxe – although no one can speak with certainty, as Barnby used to insist, about any two people in that connexion – but, apart from any question of physical relationship, she obviously loved Chandler, even if this might not be love of quite the usual sort. A husband, even a husband as unprejudiced as Buster, might have felt objection on personal, or merely general, grounds. Many men who outwardly resembled Buster would, on principle, have disliked a young man of Chandler's appearance and demeanour; certainly disliked for ever seeing someone like that about the house. Either natural tolerance had developed in Buster as he had grown older, or there were other reasons why his wife's infatuation with Chandler satisfied him; after all Matilda had alleged the pinching of her leg. Possibly Chandler kept Mrs Foxe from disturbing Buster in his own amusements. If that was the reason, Buster showed a good grace in the manner in which he followed his convenience; in itself a virtue not universally practised. Perhaps he was a little aware that he had displayed himself to me in an unexpected light.

'Amy needs a good deal of looking after,' he said. 'I am sometimes rather busy. Get caught up in things. Business engagements and so on. Most husbands are like that, I suppose. Can't give a wife all the attention she requires. Know what I mean?'

This self-revelation was so unlike the Buster I remembered, that I was not sure whether to attribute the marked alteration in his bearing in some degree to changes in myself. Perhaps development in both of us had made a mutually new attitude possible. However, before Buster could particularise further on the subject of married life, a subject about which I should have liked to hear more from him, Maclintick, moving with the accustomed lurching walk he employed drunk or sober, at that moment approached us.

'Any hope of getting Irish in a house like this?' he asked me in an undertone. 'Champagne always gives me diarrhoea. It would be just like the rich only to keep Scotch. Do you think it would be all right if I accosted one of the flunkeys? I don't want to let Moreland down in front of his grand friends.'

I referred to Buster this demand for Irish whiskey on Maclintick's part.

'Irish?' said Buster briskly. 'I believe you've got us there. I can't think why we shouldn't have any in the cellar, because I rather like the stuff myself. Plenty of Scotch, of course. I expect they told you that. Wait here. I'll go and make some investigations.'

'Who is that kind and beautiful gentleman?' asked Maclintick acidly, not showing the least gratitude at Buster's prompt effort to satisfy his need for Irish whiskey. 'Is he part of the management?'

'Commander Foxe.'

'I am no wiser.'

'Our hostess's husband.'

'I thought she was married to Chandler. He is the man I always see her with at the ballet – if you can call him a man. I suppose I have shown my usual bad manners again. I ought never to have come to a place like this. Quite against my principles. All the same, I hope Baron Scarpia will unearth a drop of Irish. Must be an unenviable position to be married to a woman like his wife.'

His own matrimonial state seemed to me so greatly worse than Commander Foxe's that I was surprised to find Maclintick deploring any other marriage whatever. Gossage – 'that old witch', as Chandler had called him – joined us before I could answer. He seemed to be enjoying the party, clasping together his fingers and agitating his hands up and down in the air.

'What did you think of Moreland's work, Maclintick?' he asked. 'A splendid affair, splendidly received. Simply wonderful. I rarely saw such enthusiasm. Didn't you think so, Maclintick?'

'No, I didn't,' said Maclintick, speaking with finality. 'So far as reception was concerned, I thought it just missed being a disaster. The work itself was all right. I liked it.'

Gossage was not in the least put out by the acerbity of Maclintick's disagreement. He stood on his toes, placing the tips of his fingers together in front of him like a wedge.

'You judged that, did you, Maclintick?' he said thoughtfully, as if a whole new panorama had been set in front of him. 'You judged that. Well, perhaps there is something in what you say. All the same, I considered it a great personal triumph for Moreland, a great triumph.'

'You know as well as I do, Gossage, that it was not a triumph,' said Maclintick, whose temper had risen suddenly. 'We are all friends of Moreland's – we shouldn't have come to this bloody awful party tonight, dressed up in these clothes, if we weren't – but it is no help to Moreland to go round saying his symphony was received as a triumph, that it is the greatest piece of music ever written, when we all know it wasn't and it isn't. It is a very respectable piece of work. I enjoyed it. But it wasn't a triumph.'

Gossage looked as if he did not at all agree with Maclintick's strictures on Mrs Foxe's party and the burden of wearing evening clothes, but was prepared at the same time to allow these complaints to pass, as well as any views on Moreland as a composer, in the light of his colleague's notorious reputation for being cantankerous.

'There may be opposition from some quarters,' Gossage said. 'I recognise that. Some of the Old Gang may get on their hind legs. A piece of music is none the worse for causing that to happen.'

'I don't see why there should be opposition,' said Maclintick, as if he found actual physical relief in contradicting Gossage on all counts. 'A certain amount of brick-throwing might even be a good thing. There comes a moment in the career of most artists, if they are any good, when attacks on their work take a form almost more acceptable than praise. That happens at different moments in different careers. This may turn out to be the moment with Moreland. I don't know. I doubt it. All I know is that going round pretending the symphony is a lot of things it isn't, does Moreland more harm than good.'

'Ah, well,' said Gossage, speaking now with conscious resignation, 'we shall see what everyone says by the week-end. I liked the thing myself. It seemed to have a lot of life in it. Obvious failings, of course. All the same, I fully appreciate the points you make, Maclintick. But here is Mrs Maclintick. And how is Mrs Maclintick this evening?'

Mrs Maclintick had the air of being about to make trouble. She was wearing a fluffy, pale pink dress covered with rosettes and small bows, from which her arms and neck emerged surrounded by concentric circles of frills. On her head was set a cap, medieval or pre-Raphaelite in conception, which, above dark elfin locks, swarthy skin and angry black eyes, gave her the appearance of having come to the party in fancy dress.

'Do take your hands out of your pockets, Maclintick,' she said at once. 'You always stand about everywhere as if you were in a public bar. I don't know what the people here must think of you. We are are not in the Nag's Head now, you know. Try to remember not to knock your pipe out on the carpet.'

Maclintick took no notice of his wife whatsoever. Instead, he addressed to Gossage some casual remarks about Smetana which seemed to have occurred to him at that moment. Mrs Maclintick turned to me.

'I don't expect you are any more used to this sort of party than I am,' she said. 'As for Maclintick, he wouldn't have been here at all if it hadn't been for me. I got him into those evening trousers somehow. Of course he never wants to wear evening clothes. He couldn't find a black bow-tie at the last moment. Had to borrow a made-up one Carolo used to wear. He is tramping about in his ordinary clodhopping black shoes too.'

Maclintick continued to ignore his wife, although he must have heard all this.

'What did you think of Moreland's symphony?' she continued. 'Not much of a success, Maclintick thinks. I agree with him for once.'

Maclintick caught her words. He swung round in such a rage that for a moment I thought he was going to strike her; just as I had thought she might stick a dinner knife into him when I had been to their house. There was certainly something about her manner this evening which would almost have excused physical violence even in the circumstances of Mrs Foxe's party.

'I didn't say anything of the sort, you bloody bitch,' Maclintick said, 'so keep your foul mouth shut and don't go round repeating that I did, unless you want to get hurt. It is just like your spite to misrepresent me in that manner. You are always trying to make trouble between Moreland and myself, aren't you? What I said was that the music was "not Moreland's most adventurous" – that the critics had got used to him as an *enfant terrible* and therefore might underestimate the symphony's true value. That was all. That was what I said. You know yourself that was all. You know yourself that was what I said.'

Maclintick was hoarse with fury. His hands were shaking. His anger made him quite alarming.

'Yes, Maclintick was just saying that very thing, wasn't he?' agreed Gossage, sniggering nervously at this display of uncontrolled rage. 'The words were scarcely out of his mouth, Mrs Maclintick. That is exactly what he thinks.'

'Don't ask me what he thinks,' said Mrs Maclintick calmly, not in the least put out of countenance by the force of her husband's abuse. 'He says one thing at one moment, another at another. Doesn't know his own mind in the least. I told him he was standing about as if he was in the Nag's Head. That is the pub near us where all the tarts go. I suppose that is where he thinks he is. It's the place where he is most at home. Besides, if the symphony was such a success, why wasn't Moreland better pleased? Or Matilda, for that matter? Matilda doesn't seem at all at her best tonight. I expect these grand surroundings remind her of better days.'

'I didn't say the symphony was "a great success" either,' said Maclintick, speaking now wearily, as if his outburst of anger had left him weak. 'Anyway, what do you mean? Moreland looks all right to me. What is wrong with him? Of course, it was insane of me to express any opinion in front of a woman like you.'

'Go on,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'Just go on.'

'And what reason have you for saying Matilda isn't pleased?' said Maclintick. 'I only wish I had a wife with half Matilda's sense.'

'Matilda didn't seem to be showing all that sense when I was talking to her just now,' said Mrs Maclintick, still quite undisturbed by this unpleasant interchange, indeed appearing if anything stimulated by its brutality. 'Or to be at all pleased either. Not that I care how she speaks to me. I bet she has done things in her life I wouldn't do for a million pounds. Let her speak to me how she likes. I'm not going to bring up her past. All I say is that she and Moreland were having words during the interval. Perhaps it was what they were talking about upset them, not the way the symphony was received. It is not for me to say.'

Further recrimination was terminated for the moment by the butler bringing a decanter for Maclintick with Buster's apology that no Irish whiskey was to be found in the house. Buster himself appeared a moment later, adding his own regrets for this inadequacy. I withdrew from the group, and went over to speak to Robert Tolland, who had just come into the room. Robert knew Moreland only slightly, as a notable musical figure rather than as a friend. He had probably been asked to the party at the instigation of Mrs Foxe, had perhaps dined with her to make numbers even. I had not seen him in the concert hall.

'I expected to find you and Isobel here,' he said. 'I was asked at the last moment, I hardly know why. One of those curious afterthoughts which are such a feature of Amy Foxe's entertaining. I see Priscilla is here. Did you bring her?'

'Priscilla dined with us. You could have come to dinner too, if we had known you were on your way to this party.'

Robert gave one of his quiet smiles.

'Nice of you to suggest it,' he said, 'but there were things I had to do earlier in the evening as a matter of fact. How very attractive Mrs Moreland is. I always think so whenever I see her. What a relief that one no longer has to talk about the Abdication. Frederica is looking a lot better now that everything is settled.'

He smiled and moved away, exhaling his usual air of mild mystery. Lady Huntercombe, taking leave of Matilda with a profusion of complimentary phrases, swept after Robert. Matilda beckoned me to come and talk to her. She looked pale, seemed rather agitated, either on account of her long session with Lady Huntercombe, or perhaps because she was still feeling shaken by the strain of hearing the symphony performed.

'Give me some more champagne, Nick,' she said, clasping my arm. 'It is wonderful stuff for the nerves. Are you enjoying yourself at this smart party? I hope so.'

This manner was not at all her usual one. I thought she was probably a little drunk.

'Of course – and the symphony was a great success.'

'Did you think so?'

'Very much.'

'Are you sure?'

'Didn't you?'

'I suppose so.'

'Oh, yes.'

'You are certain, Nick?'

'Of course I am. Everything went all right. There was lots of applause. What else do you expect?'

'Yes, it was all right, I think. Somehow I hoped for more real enthusiasm. It is a wonderful work, you know. It really is.'

'I am sure it is.'

'It is wonderful. But people are going to be disappointed.'

'Does Hugh himself think that?'

'I don't think it worries him,' said Matilda. 'Not in his present state of mind.'

For some reason – from the note in her voice, a sense of trouble in the air, perhaps just from natural caution – I felt safer in not enquiring what she regarded as Moreland's 'present state of mind'.

'I see your little sister-in-law, Lady Priscilla, is here,' said Matilda.

She smiled rather in Robert's manner, as if at some secret inner pleasure that was also a little bitter to contemplate.

'You've met her with us, haven't you?'

'Yes.'

'She dined with us tonight.'

'I met her once at your flat,' said Matilda, speaking slowly, as if that were an extraordinary thing to have happened. 'She is very attractive. But I don't know her as well as Hugh does.'

I suddenly felt horribly uncomfortable, as if ice-cold water were dripping very gently, very slowly down my spine, but as if, at the same time, some special circumstance prevented admission of this unaccountable fact and also forbade any attempt on my own part to suspend the process; a sensation to be recognised, I knew well, as an extension of that earlier refusal to face facts about Moreland giving Priscilla the concert ticket. That odd feeling of excitement began to stir within me always provoked by news of other people's adventures in love; accompanied as ever by a sense of sadness, of regret, almost jealousy, inward emotions that express, like nothing else in life, life's irrational dissatisfactions. On the one hand, that Moreland might have fallen in love with Priscilla (and she with him) seemed immensely interesting; on the other – to speak only callously of the Morelands' marriage and Priscilla's inexperience (if she was inexperienced) – any such situation threatened complications of a most disturbing kind on two separate fronts of one's own daily existence. As to immediate action, a necessary minimum was obviously represented by refraining from any mention to Matilda of the complimentary ticket. Silence on that point offered at least a solid foundation upon which to build; the simple principle that a friend's actions, however colourless, vis-à-vis another woman, are always better unrepeated to his wife. Contemplation of this banal maxim increased the depression that had suddenly descended on me. The proposition that Moreland was having some sort of a flirtation with Priscilla sufficiently tangible to cause Matilda – even if she had had too much champagne – to draw my attention to such goings-on appeared at once ridiculous and irritating. Probably Matilda's speculations were unco-ordinated. Quite likely Moreland and Priscilla were indeed behaving foolishly. Why draw attention to that? The matter would blow over. All three persons concerned fell in my estimation. In any case, Matilda's speculations might be wholly unfounded. Priscilla, physically speaking – socially speaking, if it came to that – was not the sort of girl Moreland usually liked. 'Nothing is more disturbing,' he used to say himself, 'than one's friends showing unexpected sexual tastes.' Priscilla, for her part, was not in general inclined towards the life Moreland lived; had never shown any sign of liking married men, a taste some girls acquire at an early age. I thought it best to change the subject.

'I see you asked Carolo,' I said.

Moreland, although always perfectly friendly – indeed, making more effort with Carolo than he usually did with gloomy, silent geniuses – never gave the impression of caring much for his company. I supposed Carolo's invitation due to some inflexion of musical politics of which I was myself ignorant, and about which, to tell the truth, I felt very little interest. However, this comment seemed to sober Matilda, or at least to change her mood.

'We had to ask him,' she said. 'No choice of mine, I can assure you. It was all on account of the Maclinticks. As Carolo lives in the same house as the Maclinticks, Hugh thought it would be awkward if he didn't get an invitation. Hugh was very anxious for Maclintick to come – in fact wouldn't hear of his not coming. Hugh and Maclintick are really great friends, you know.'

'The Maclinticks were having a full-dress row when I left them a short time ago.'

'They always are.'

'They should lay off for an hour or two on occasions like this. A short rest would renew their energies for starting again when they return home.'

'That is just married life.'

'To be married to either of the Maclinticks cannot be much fun.'

'Is it fun to be married to anyone?'

'That is rather a big question. If you admit that fun exists at all – perhaps you don't – you cannot lay it down categorically that no married people get any fun from the state of being married.'

'But I mean *married* to someone,' said Matilda, speaking quite passionately. 'Not to sleep with them, or talk to them, or go about with them. To be *married* to them. I have been married a couple of times and I sometimes begin to doubt it.'

We were now in the midst of dangerous abstractions which might once more threaten further embarrassments of the kind I hoped to avoid. Generalisations about married life could easily turn to particularisation about Moreland and Priscilla, a relationship I should prefer to investigate later, in my own way and time, rather than have handed to me on a plate by Matilda; the latter method almost certainly calling for decisions and agreements undesirable, so it seemed to me, at this stage of the story. I was also very surprised by this last piece of information: that Matilda had had a husband previous to Moreland.

'You have been married twice, Matilda?'

'Didn't you know?'

'Not the least idea.'

I wondered for a moment whether Sir Magnus Donners could possibly have married her clandestinely. If so – and that was very unlikely – an equally clandestine divorce was scarcely conceivable. That notion could be dismissed at once.

'I was married to Carolo,' she said.

'My dear Matilda.'

'That surprises you?'

'Immensely.'

She laughed shrilly.

'I thought Hugh might have told you.'

'Never a word.'

'There is no particular secret about it. The marriage lasted a very short time. It was when I was quite young. In fact pretty soon after I left home. Carolo is not a bad old thing in his way. Just not very bright. Not a bit like Hugh. We used to quarrel a good deal. Then we didn't really get on in bed. Besides, I got tired of him talking about himself all the time.'

'Understandably.'

'After I left Carolo, as you know, I was kept by Donners for a time. At least people are all aware of *that*. It is such a relief not to have to explain everything about oneself to everyone. We met just about the time when Donners was getting restive about the way Baby Wentworth was treating him. He was taking Lady Ardglass out quite often too, but she never really liked being seen with him. I think she found him terribly unsmart. So did Baby Wentworth, I believe, if it comes to that. I did not mind that drab side of him. I got tired of him for other reasons, although he can be nice in his own particular way. He is awful, of course, at times. Really awful. But he can be generous – I mean morally generous – too. I am not interested in money. One thing about Donners, he does not know what jealousy means. When Baby was running round with Ralph Barnby, he did not mind at all. That did not affect me in one way, because unlike so many women, I prefer only one man at a time. But it is nice not to be bothered about where you went last night, or where you are going to tomorrow afternoon. Don't you agree?'

'Certainly I do. Was Carolo like that – jealous in that way?'

'A bit. But Carolo's chief interest is in making conquests. He doesn't much mind who it is. I shouldn't wonder if he doesn't run after Audrey Maclintick. Probably Maclintick would be glad of someone to keep her quiet and take her off his hands. What a bitch she is.'

'All the same, there is a difference between being fed up with your wife and wanting another man to take her off your hands.'

'There wasn't in Carolo's case. He was thankful when I fixed myself up. That is part of his simple nature, which is his chief charm. I had really left Donners by the time I met Hugh. What do you think about Hugh?'

'I should guess that he was not particularly jealous as men go.'

'Oh, I don't mean that. He isn't. I mean what do you think of him as a man?'

'You know quite well, Matilda, that he is a great friend of mine.'

'But his work . . . I do think he is . . . frightfully intelligent . . . a great man . . . whatever you like. Everything one says of that sort always sounds silly about someone you know – certainly someone you are married to. I had quite enough of being told my husband was a genius when I was Carolo's wife. But you do agree about Hugh, don't you, Nick?'

'Yes, I do, as a matter of fact.'

'That is why I am so worried about the symphony. You see, I am sure it will not be properly appreciated. People are so stupid.'

I longed to hear more about Sir Magnus Donners; whether some of the very circumstantial, very highly coloured stories that circulated about the elaboration of his idiosyncrasies, were at all near the truth. However, the moment to acquire such information, the moment for such frivolities, if it had ever existed, was now past. The tone had become too serious. I could not imagine what the next revelation would be; certainly nothing so light-hearted as a first-hand account of a millionaire's sexual fantasies.

'Then there is this business of both of us having a career.'

'That is always difficult.'

'I don't want never to act again.'

'Of course not.'

'After all, if Hugh wanted to marry a squaw, he could easily have found a squaw. They abound in musical circles. It is the answer for lots of artists.'

'Hugh has always been against squaws. Rightly, I think. In the long run, in my opinion, a squaw is even more nuisance than her antithesis – and often cooks worse too.'

'Then why do Hugh and I find it so difficult to get on together?'

'But you always seem to get on a treat.'

'That's what you think.'

'Well, don't you – when you look at the Maclinticks, for example?'

'And then . . .'

I thought for a moment she was going to speak of the child's death, which I now saw had dislocated their marriage more seriously than anyone had supposed from the outside. Instead, she returned to her earlier theme.

'And now he has gone and fallen in love with your sister-in-law, Priscilla.'

'But——'

Matilda laughed at the way in which I failed to find any answer. There was really nothing for me to say. If it was true, it was true. From one point of view, I felt it unjust that I should be visited in this manner with Matilda's mortification; from another, well deserved, in that I had not already acquainted myself with what was going on round me.

'Of course it is all quite innocent,' said Matilda. 'That is the worst thing about it from my point of view. It would be much easier if he had fallen for some old tart like myself he could sleep with for a spell, then leave when he was bored.'

'When did all this start up?'

In asking the question, I committed myself in some degree to acceptance of her premises about Moreland and Priscilla. There seemed no alternative.

'Oh, I don't know. A month or two ago. They met at that office where she works. I knew something of the sort had happened when he came home that day.'

'But they met first at our flat.'

'They'd met before you produced her at your flat. They kept quiet about knowing each other when they met there.'

I spared a passing thought for the slyness of Priscilla; also for Matilda's all-embracing information service. Before more could be said about this uncomfortable subject, two things happened to break up our conversation. First of all the distinguished conductor – rather specially noted for his appreciation of feminine attractions – presented himself with a great deal of flourish to pay his respects to Matilda. He was known to admire her, but until that moment had been unable to escape from persons who wanted to take this opportunity of chatting with a celebrity of his calibre, finally being pinned down by Lady Huntercombe, who had descended upon him after failing to capture Robert. He had already made some opening remarks of a complimentary kind to Matilda, consciously recalling by their form of expression the elaborate courtesies of an earlier age – and I was preparing to leave Matilda to him – when my attention was diverted to something that had taken place at the far end of the room.

This was nothing less than the arrival of Stringham. At first I could hardly believe my eyes. There he was standing by the door talking to Buster. The scene was only made credible by the fact that Buster looked extremely put out. After what had been said that evening, Stringham was certainly the last person to be expected to turn up at his mother's party. He was not wearing evening clothes, being dressed, in fact, in a very old tweed suit and woollen jumper. As usual he looked rather distinguished in these ancient garments, which could not have less fitted the occasion, but somehow at the same time seemed purposely designed to make Buster look overdressed. Stringham himself was, as formerly, perfectly at ease, laughing a lot at something he had just remarked to Buster, who, with wrinkled forehead and raised eyebrows, had for once lost all his air of lazy indifference to life, and seemed positively to be miming the part of a man who has suddenly received a disagreeable surprise. Stringham finished what he had to say, clapped Buster on the back, and turned towards his mother who came up at that moment. I was too far away to hear Mrs Foxe's words, but, as she kissed her son affectionately, she was clearly welcoming him in the manner appropriate to one returned unexpectedly from a voyage round the world. At the same time, unlike her husband, she showed no surprise or discomposure at her son's arrival. They spoke together for a second or two, then she returned to her conversation with Lord Huntercombe. Stringham turned away from her and strolled across the room, gazing about him with a smile. Catching sight of me suddenly, he drew back with a movement of feigned horror, then made towards the place where I was standing. I went to meet him.

'My dear Nick.'

'Charles.'

'I had no idea you had musical tastes, Nick. Why did you keep them from me all these years? Because I never asked, I suppose. One always finds the answer to everything in one's own egotism. But how nice to meet again. I am a recluse now. I see nobody. I expect you already knew that. Everybody seems to know by now. It is just a bit like being a leper, only I don't actually have to carry a bell. They decided to let me off that. Thought I should make too much of a row, I suppose. You can't imagine what a pleasure it is to come unexpectedly upon an old friend one knew several million years ago.'

There could be no doubt that he was drunk, but, within the vast area comprised by that term, among the immensely varied states of mind and body which intoxication confers, Stringham's at this moment was that controlled exhilaration of spirit more akin to madness than carousal, which some addicts can achieve after a single glass. He looked rather ghastly when you were close to him, his skin pale and mottled, his eyes sunken and bloodshot. Even so, there was plenty of the old dash about his manner.

'I had no idea my mother would be giving a party tonight,' he said. 'Just thought I would drop in and have a word with her by the fireside as I haven't seen her for some time. What do I find but a whirl of gaiety. I really came along to tease Buster. I like doing that from time to time. It cheers me up for some reason. You know I now live in a flat at the top of a house owned by a relation of your wife's – Molly Jeavons, one of the most delightful and charming of people. I sometimes hear about you both from her or from Ted. I dote on Ted. He hasn't been very well lately, you know, and he gives wonderful descriptions of what is going on in his lower intestine – that war wound of his. One need never be bored when Ted gets on to that subject. He and I sometimes go out for the quickest of quick drinks. I am not supposed to have much in the way of drink these days. Neither is Ted. I am trying to knock off, really – but it seems such a bore to be a total abstainer, as I believe such people are called. I can have just one drink still, you know. I don't have to keep off it utterly.'

He said these words in such an appealing tone that I felt torn inwardly to think of the condition he must be in, of the circumstances in which he must live. His awareness of his own state seemed almost worse than total abandonment to the bottle. It looked very much as if he might just have come on to his mother's house that night from one of those 'very quick drinks' with Jeavons; perhaps felt unable to bring himself to return to Miss Weedon's flat and paint in gouache – if it was really with painting that therapeutically ordered his spare time. His life with Miss Weedon was impossible to contemplate.

'Do you know this fellow Moreland?' he went on. 'I gather from Buster that the party is being given in Moreland's honour – that he is a famous musician apparently. It just shows how right it is that I should have to live as a hermit, not to know that Moreland is a famous musician – and have to be told by Buster. All the same, it cuts both ways. If you are a hermit, you can't be expected to keep up with all the latest celebrities. Buster, of course, was quite incapable of giving any real information about Moreland, the party, the guests, or anything else. He is awfully stupid, poor old Buster. An absolute ape. You know a fact that strikes one very forcibly as one grows older is that some people are intelligent and some are stupid. I don't set up as an intellectual myself – even though I am a great hand with the paintbrush, did they tell you that, Nick? – but if I were as ill-informed as Buster, I should take steps to educate myself. Go to a night-school or hire a well-read undergraduate to teach me a few things in the long vac. The person I shall have to get hold of is Norman. He will tell me all about everything. Have you met Norman yet? He is simply charming. He is – well, I don't want to labour the point, and I can see from your face you have guessed what I was going to say, and you are quite right. All the same, my mother has taken him up in a big way. You must meet Norman, Nick.'

'But I know him well. I have known him for years.'

'I am surprised at the company you must have been keeping, Nick. Known him for years, indeed. I shouldn't have thought it of you. And a married man too. But you do agree, don't you, that Norman is a delightful fellow?'

'Absolutely.'

'I knew you would. I can't tell you how good Norman has been for my mother. Brilliant ideas and helpful comment don't exactly gush from Buster, with all his manly qualities. Besides, when it comes to doing odd jobs about the house, Buster is no good with his hands. What, you say, a sailor and no good with his hands? I don't believe you. It's the perfect truth. I sometimes tease him about it. He doesn't always take that in good part. Now, at last there is someone in the house who can turn to when it comes to hanging a picture or altering the place of a piece of furniture without smashing the thing to a thousand fragments. Not only that, but Norman decides what detective stories ought to come from the Times Book Club, settles what plays must be seen, gives good advice to my mother about hats – in fact excels at all the things poor old Buster fails at so lamentably. On top of that, Norman won't be bullied. He gets his own way. He is just about the only person who deals with my mother who does get his own way.'

'Jolly good.'

'Look here, Nick, you are not being serious. I want to be serious. People are always charging me with not being sufficiently serious. There is something serious I want to ask you. You know the Abdication?'

'I heard something about it.'

'Well, I thought it was a good thing. A frightfully good thing. The only possible thing. I wish to goodness Buster would abdicate one of these days.'

'Not a hope.'

'You're right. Not a hope. I say, Nick, it is awfully nice meeting you again after all these years. Let me get you another drink. You see the extraordinary thing is that I don't feel the smallest need for drink myself. I rise above it. That shows an advance, doesn't it? Not everyone we know can make that boast with truth. I must mention to you that there are some awfully strange people at this party tonight. Not at all like the people my mother usually collects. I suppose it is them, and not me. You agree? Yes, I thought I was right. They remind me more of the days when I used to know Milly Andriadis. Poor old Milly. I wonder what has happened to her. Perhaps they have put her away too.'

While he was speaking his eyes were on Mrs Maclintick, who was now making her way towards us.

'This lady, for example,' said Stringham. 'What could have induced her to dress like that?'

'She is coming to talk to us.'

'My God, I believe you're right.'

Mrs Maclintick arrived within range. Cold rage still possessed her. She addressed herself to me.

'That was a nice way to be spoken to by your husband,' she said. 'Did you ever hear anything like it?'

Before I could reply, Stringham caught her by the arm.

'Hullo, Little Bo-Peep,' he said. 'What have you done with your shepherdess's crook? You will never find your sheep at this rate. Don't look so cross and pout at me like that, or I shall ruffle up all those dainty little frills of yours – and then where will you be?'

The effect on Mrs Maclintick of this unconventional approach was electric. She flushed with pleasure, contorting her body into an attitude of increased provocation. I saw at once that this must be the right way to treat her; that a deficiency of horseplay on the part of her husband and his friends was probably the cause of her endemic sulkiness. No doubt something in Stringham's manner, the impression he gave that evening of having cut himself off from all normal restraints, played a part in Mrs Maclintick's submission. He was in a mood to carry all before him. Even so, she made an effort to fight back.

'What an extraordinary thing to say,' she remarked. 'And who are you, I should like to know?'

I introduced them, but neither was inclined to pay much attention to names or explanations. Stringham, for some reason, seemed set on pursuing the course he had begun. Mrs Maclintick showed no sign of discouraging him, beyond a refusal entirely to abandon her own traditional acerbity of demeanour.

'Fancy a little girl like you being allowed to come to a grown-up party like this one,' said Stringham. 'You ought to be in bed by now I'm sure.'

'If you think I don't know most of the people here,' said Mrs Maclintick, uncertain whether to be pleased or offended at this comment, 'you are quite wrong. I have met nearly all of them.'

'Then you have the advantage of me in that respect,' said Stringham, 'and so you must tell me who everyone is. For example, what is the name of the fat man wearing a dinner jacket a size too small for him – the one drinking something from a tumbler?'

If there was any doubt about the good impression Stringham had already made on Mrs Maclintick, this enquiry set him immediately at the topmost peak of her estimation.

'That's my husband,' she said, speaking at once with delight and all the hatred of which she was capable. 'He has just been vilely rude to me. He hates wearing evening clothes. The state they were in – even though he never gets into them – you wouldn't have believed. I had to tack the seam of the trousers before he could be seen in them. He isn't properly shaved either. I told him so. He said he had run out of new blades. He looks a fright, doesn't he?'

'He does indeed,' said Stringham. 'You have put the matter in a nutshell.'

'If you had heard some of the things he has been shouting at me in this very room,' said Mrs Maclintick, 'you would not have credited your hearing. The man has not a spark of gratitude.'

'What do you expect with a thick neck like that?' said Stringham. 'Not gratitude, surely?'

'Language of the gutter,' said Mrs Maclintick, as if relishing her husband's phrases in retrospect. 'Filthy words.'

'Think no more of his trivial invective,' said Stringham. 'Come with me and forget the ineptitudes of married life – with which I was once myself only too familiar – in a glass of wine. Let me persuade you to drown your sorrows.

> While the Rose blows along the River Brink
> With old Stringhám the Ruby Vintage drink . . .

It isn't ruby in this case, but none the worse for that. Buster's taste in champagne is not too bad. It is one of his redeeming features.

Mrs Maclintick was about to reply, no doubt favourably, but, before she could speak, Stringham, smiling in my direction, led her away. Why he wished to involve himself with Mrs Maclintick I could not imagine: drink; love of odd situations; even attraction to a woman he found wholly unusual; any of those might have been the reason. Mrs Maclintick was tamed, almost docile, under his treatment. I was still reflecting on the eccentricity of Stringham's behaviour when brought suddenly within the orbit of Lord Huntercombe, who was moving round the room in a leisurely way, examining the pictures and ornaments there. He had just taken up *Truth Unveiled by Time*, removed his spectacles, and closely examined the group's base. He now replaced the cast on its console table, at the same time smiling wryly in my direction and shaking his head, as if to imply that such worthless bric-à-brac should not be allowed to detain great connoisseurs like ourselves. Smethyck (a museum official, whom I had known as an undergraduate) had introduced us not long before at an exhibition of seventeenth-century pictures and furniture Smethyck himself had helped to organise, to which Lord Huntercombe had lent some of his collection.

'Have you seen your friend Smethyck lately?' asked Lord Huntercombe, still smiling.

'Not since we talked about picture-cleaning at that exhibition.'

'Before the exhibition opened,' said Lord Huntercombe, 'Smethyck showed himself anxious to point out that my my *Prince Rupert Conversing with a Herald* was painted by Dobson, rather than Van Dyck. Fortunately I had long ago come to the same conclusion and had recently caused its label to be altered. I was even able to carry the war into Smethyck's country by enquiring whether he felt absolutely confident of the authenticity of that supposed portrait of Judge Jeffreys, attributed to Lely, on loan from his own gallery. What nice china there is in this house. It looks to me as if there were some Vienna porcelain mixed up with the Meissen in this cabinet. I believe Warrington knew something of china. That was why Kitchener liked him. You know, I think I shall have to inspect these a little more thoroughly.'

Lord Huntercombe tried the door of the cabinet. Although the key turned, the door refused to open. He steadied the top of the cabinet with his hand, then tried again. Still the door remained firmly closed. Lord Huntercombe shook his head. He brought out a small penknife from his pocket, opened the shorter blade, and inserted this in the crevice.

'How is Erridge?' he asked.

He spoke with that note almost of yearning in his voice, which peers are inclined to employ when speaking of other peers, especially of those younger than themselves of whom they disapprove.

'He is still in Spain.'

'I hope he will try to persuade his friends not to burn *all* the churches,' said Lord Huntercombe, without looking up, as he moved the blade of the knife gently backwards and forwards.

He had crouched on his haunches to facilitate the operation, and in this position gave the impression of an old craftsman practising a trade at which he was immensely skilled, his extreme neatness and the quick movement of his fingers adding to this illusion. However, these efforts remained ineffective. The door refused to open. I had some idea of trying to find Isobel to arrange a meeting between herself and Stringham. However, I was still watching Lord Huntercombe's exertions when Chandler now reappeared.

'Nick,' he said, 'come and talk to Amy.'

'Just hold this cabinet steady for a moment, both of you,' said Lord Huntercombe. 'There . . . it's coming . . . that's done it. Thank you very much.'

'I say, Lord Huntercombe,' said Chandler, 'I did simply worship those cut-glass candelabra you lent to that exhibition the other day. I am going to suggest to the producer of the show I'm in rehearsal for that we try and get the effect of something of that sort in the Second Act – instead of the dreary old pewter candlesticks we are now using.'

'I do not think the Victoria and Albert would mind possessing those candelabra,' said Lord Huntercombe with complacency, at the same time abstracting some of the pieces from the cabinet. 'Ah, the Marcolini Period. I thought as much. And here are some *Indianische Blumen*.'

We moved politely away from Lord Huntercombe's immediate area, leaving him in peace to pursue further researches.

'My dear,' said Chandler, speaking in a lower voice, 'Amy is rather worried about Charles turning up like this. She thought that, as an old friend of his, you might be able to persuade him to go quietly home after a time. He is a sweet boy, but in the state he is in you never know what he is going to do next.'

'It is ages since I saw Charles. We met tonight for the first time for years. I doubt if he would take the slightest notice of anything I said. As a matter of fact he has just gone off with Mrs Maclintick to whom he is paying what used to be called marked attentions.'

'That is one of the things Amy is worried about. Amy has an eye like a hawk, you know.'

I was certainly surprised to hear that Mrs Foxe had taken in the circumstances of the party so thoroughly as even to have included Mrs Maclintick in her survey. As a hostess, she gave no impression of observing the room meticulously (at least not with the implication of fear pedantic use of that term implies), nor did she seem in the smallest degree disturbed when we came up to her.

'Oh, Mr Jenkins,' she said, 'dear Charles has arrived, as you know since you have been talking to him. I thought you would not mind if I asked you to keep the smallest eye on him. His nerves are so bad nowadays. You have known him for such a long time. He is much more likely to agree to anything you suggest than to fall in with what I want him to do. He really ought not to stay up too late. It is not good for him.'

She said no more than that; gave no hint she required Stringham's immediate removal. That was just as well, because I should have had no idea how to set about any such dislodgement. I remembered suddenly that the last time a woman had appealed to me for help in managing Stringham was when, at her own party years before, Mrs Andriadis had said: 'Will you persuade him to stay?' Then it was his mistress; now, his mother. Mrs Foxe had been too discreet to say outright: 'Will you persuade him to go?' None the less, that was what she must have desired. Her discrimination in expressing this wish, her manner of putting herself into my hands, made her as successful as Mrs Andriadis in enlisting my sympathy; but no more effective as an ally. It was hard to see what could be done about Stringham. Besides, I had by then begun to learn – what I had no idea of at Mrs Andriadis's party – that to people like Stringham there is really no answer.

'Don't worry, Amy, darling,' said Chandler. 'Charles is perfectly all right for the time being. Don't feel anxious. Nick and I will keep an eye on him.'

'Will you? It would be so awful if something did go wrong. I should feel so guilty if the Morelands' party were spoiled for them.'

'It won't be.'

'I shall rely on you both.'

She gazed at Chandler with deep affection. They might have been married for years from the manner in which they talked to one another. Some people came up to say goodbye. I saw Isobel, and was about to suggest that we should look for Stringham, when Mrs Foxe turned from the couple to whom she had been talking.

'Isobel, my dear,' she said, 'I haven't seen you all the evening. Come and sit on the sofa. There are some things I want to ask you about.'

'Odd scenes in the next room,' Isobel said to me, before she joined Mrs Foxe.

I felt sure from her tone the scenes must be odd enough. I found Isobel had spoken without exaggeration. Stringham, Mrs Maclintick, Priscilla, and Moreland were sitting together in a semi-circle. The rest of the party had withdrawn from that corner of the room, so that this group was quite cut off from the other guests. They were laughing a great deal and talking about marriage, Stringham chiefly directing the flow of conversation, with frequent interruptions from Moreland and Mrs Maclintick. Stringham was resting his elbow on his knee in an attitude of burlesqued formality, from time to time inclining his head towards Mrs Maclintick, as he addressed her in the manner of a drawing-room comedy by Wilde or Pinero. These fulsome compliments and epigrammatic phrases may have been largely incomprehensible to Mrs Maclintick, but she looked thoroughly pleased with herself; indeed, seemed satisfied that she was half-teasing, half-alluring Stringham. Priscilla appeared enormously happy in spite of not knowing quite what was going on round her. Moreland was almost hysterical with laughter which he continually tried to repress by stuffing a handkerchief into his mouth. If he had fallen in love with Priscilla – the evidence for something of the sort having taken place had to be admitted – it was, I thought, just like him to prefer listening to this performance to keeping his girl to himself in some remote part of the room. This judgment was superficial, because, as I have said, Moreland could be secretive enough about his girls when he chose; while politeness and discretion called for some show of outwardly casual behaviour at this party. Even so, his behaviour that night could hardly be called discreet in general purport. It was obvious he was very taken with Priscilla from the way he was sitting beside her. He was clearly delighted by Stringham, of whose identity I felt sure he had no idea. When I approached, Mrs Maclintick was apparently describing the matrimonial troubles of some friends of hers.

'. . . and then,' she was saying, 'this first husband of hers used to come back at four o'clock in the morning and turn on the gramophone. As a regular thing. She told me herself.'

'Some women think one has nothing better to do than to lie awake listening to anecdotes about their first husband,' said Stringham. 'Milly Andriadis was like that – no doubt still is – and I must say, if one were prepared to forgo one's beauty sleep, one used to hear some remarkable things from her. Playing the gramophone is another matter. Your friend had a right to complain.'

'That was what the judge thought,' said Mrs Maclintick.

'What used he to play?' asked Priscilla.

'Military marches,' said Mrs Maclintick, 'night after night. Not surprising the poor woman had to go into a home after getting her divorce.'

'My mother would have liked that,' said Stringham. 'She adores watching troops march past. She always says going to reviews was the best part of being married to Piers Warrington.'

'Not in the middle of the night,' said Priscilla. 'He might have chosen something quieter. *Tales from Hoffmann* or Handel's *Cradle Song*.'

'Nonsense,' said Moreland. '*Aut Sousa aut Nihil* has always been my motto in cases of that sort. Think if the man had played Hindemith. At least he wasn't a highbrow.'

'He was just another musical husband,' said Mrs Maclintick fiercely. 'I am not saying he was any worse than Maclintick, I am not saying he was any better. I am just telling you the way musicians treat their wives. Telling you the sort of husband I have to put up with.'

'My own complaint about marriage is a very different one,' said Stringham. 'I admit my former wife was not musical. That might have made things worse. All the same, you never know. If she had been, she could have talked all the time about music while her sister, Anne, was chattering away about Braque and Dufy. It would have formed a counter-irritant. Poor Anne. Marrying Dicky Umfraville was a dreadful judgment on her. Still, a party is no place for vain regrets – certainly not vain regrets about one's ex-sister-in-law.'

'You should have seen Maclintick's sister,' said Mrs Maclintick, 'if you are going to grumble about your sister-in-law.'

'We will visit her, if necessary, dear lady, later in the evening,' said Stringham. 'The night is still young.'

'You can't,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'She's dead.'

'My condolences,' said Stringham. 'But, as I was saying, my former wife was not musical. Music did not run in the family. Mountfichet was not a house to stimulate music. You might compose a few dirges there, I suppose. Even they would have cheered the place up – the morning-room especially.'

'I was going to stay at Mountfichet once,' said Priscilla. 'Then Hugo got chicken-pox and we were all in quarantine.'

'You had a narrow escape, Lady Priscilla,' said Stringham. 'You are unaware of your good fortune. No, what I object to about marriage is not the active bad behaviour – like your musical friend playing the gramophone in the small hours. I could have stood that. I sleep abominably anyway. The gramophone would while away time in bed when one lies awake thinking about love. What broke me was the passive resistance. That was what got me down.'

Moreland began to laugh unrestrainedly again, thrusting the handkerchief in his mouth until it nearly choked him. He too had had a good deal to drink. Mrs Maclintick clenched her teeth in obvious approval of what Stringham had said. Stringham went on uninterrupted.

'It is a beautiful morning,' he said. 'For some reason you feel relatively well that day. You make some conciliatory remark. No answer. You think she hasn't heard. Still asleep perhaps. You speak again. A strangled sigh. What's wrong? You begin to go through in your mind all the awful things you might have done.'

'Maclintick never dreams of going through the awful things he has done,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'It would take far too long for one thing. Anyway, he never thinks about them at all. If you so much as mention one or two of them, he gets out of bed and sleeps on the sofa in his work-room.'

'Look here,' said Moreland, still laughing convulsively, 'I really cannot have my old friend Maclintick maligned in this manner without a word of protest. I know you are married to him, and marriage gives everyone all sorts of special rights where complaining is concerned——'

'You begin adding up your sins of commission and omission,' Stringham continued inexorably. 'Did one get tight? It seems months and months since one was tight, so it can't be that. Did one say something silly the night before? Much more likely. Not that remark about the colour of her father's face at breakfast? It couldn't have been that. She enjoyed that – even laughed a little. I don't know whether any of you ever met my former father-in-law, Major the Earl of Bridgnorth, late the Royal Horse Guards, by the way? His is a name to conjure with on the Turf. When I was married to his elder daughter, the beautiful Peggy, I was often to be seen conjuring with it on the course at Epsom, and elsewhere, but with little success, all among the bookies and Prince Monolulu and the tipster who wears an Old Harrovian tie and has never given a loser.'

'You are getting off the point, my dear sir,' said Moreland. 'We are discussing marriage, not racing. Matrimony is the point at issue.'

Stringham made a gesture to silence him. I had never before seen Moreland conversationally so completely mastered. It was hard to imagine what the two of them would have made of each other in more sober circumstances. They were very different. Stringham had none of Moreland's passionate self-identification with the arts; Moreland was without Stringham's bitter grasp of social circumstance. At the same time they had something in common. There was also much potential antipathy. Each would probably have found the other unsympathetic over a long period.

'And then,' said Stringham, lowering his voice and raising his eyebrows slightly, 'one wonders about making love . . . counts up on one's fingers . . . No . . . It can't be that . . .'

Mrs Maclintick gave a raucous laugh.

'I know!' Stringham now almost shouted, as if in sudden enlightenment. 'I've got it. It was going on about what a charming girl Rosie Manasch is. That was a bloody silly thing to do, when I know Peggy hates Rosie like poison. But I'm wandering . . . talking of years ago . . . of the days before Rosie married Jock Udall . . .'

'Heavens,' said Moreland. 'Do you know the Manasches? I once conducted at a charity concert in their house.'

Stringham ignored him.

'But then, on the other hand,' he went on, in a slower, much quieter voice, 'Rosie may have nothing whatever to do with it. One's wife may be ill. Sickening for some terrible disease. Something to which one has never given a thought. She is sinking. Wasting away under one's eyes. It is just one's own callousness about her state. That is all that's wrong. You begin to get really worried. Should you get up and summon a doctor right away?'

'The doctor always tells Maclintick to drink less,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'Always the same story. "Put a drop more water in it," he says, "then you will feel better." You might just as well talk to a brick wall. Maclintick is not going to drink less because a doctor tells him to. If he won't stop after what I've said to him, is it likely he will knock off for a doctor? Why should he?'

'Why, indeed, you little rogue?' said Stringham, tapping Mrs Maclintick's knee with a folded copy of the concert programme, which had somehow found its way into his hand. 'Well, of course, in the end you discover that all this ill humour is nothing to do with yourself at all. In fact your wife is hardly aware that she is living in the same house with you. It was something that somebody said about her to someone who gossiped to somebody she knew when that somebody was having her hair done. Neither less nor more than that. All the same, it is you, her husband, who has to bear the brunt of those ill-chosen remarks by somebody about something. I've talked it all over with Ted Jeavons and he quite agrees.'

'I adore Uncle Ted,' said Priscilla, anxious to show that she herself had perfectly followed this dissertation.

'And you, Black-eyed Susan,' said Stringham, turning again in the direction of Mrs Maclintick, at the same time raising the programme interrogatively, 'do you too suffer in your domestic life – of which you speak with such a wealth of disillusionment – from the particular malaise I describe: the judgment of terrible silences?'

That was a subject upon which Mrs Maclintick felt herself in a position to speak authoritatively; the discussion, if uninterrupted, might have proceeded for a long time. Moreland was showing some signs of restlessness, although he and the rest sitting there seemed to be finding some release from themselves, and their individual lives, in what was being said. The remainder of Mrs Foxe's guests, although in fact just round the corner, appeared for some reason infinitely far away. Then, all at once, I became aware that a new personality, an additional force, had been added to our group. This was a woman. She was standing beside me. How long she had been there, where she came from, I did not know.

It was Miss Weedon. She had probably avoided having herself announced in order to make quietly for the place where Stringham was to be found. In any case, her long association with the house as one of its inmates made such a formality almost inappropriate. As usual, she managed to look both businesslike and rather elegant, her large sharp nose and severe expression adding to her air of efficiency, suggesting on the whole a successful, fairly chic career woman. Enclosed in black, her dress committed her neither to night nor day; suitable for Mrs Foxe's party, it would have done equally well for some lesser occasion. She did not look at all like the former governess of Stringham's sister, Flavia, although there remained something dominating and controlling about Miss Weedon, hinting that she was used to exercising some form of professional authority. Undoubtedly her intention was to take Stringham home. No other objective could have brought her out at this hour of the night. Priscilla, who had probably met Miss Weedon more than once at the Jeavonses' – where Miss Weedon was a frequent guest before moving in as an occupant of the house itself – was the first to notice her.

'Hullo, Miss Weedon,' she said blushing.

Priscilla moved, probably involuntarily, further from Moreland, who was sitting rather close to her on the sofa. Miss Weedon smiled coldly. She advanced a little deeper into the room, her mysterious, equivocal presence casting a long, dark shadow over the scene.

'Why, hullo, Tuffy,' said Stringham, suddenly seeing Miss Weedon too. 'I am so glad you have turned up. I wondered if I should see you. I just dropped in to say good evening to Mamma, whom I hadn't set eyes on for ages, only to find the gayest of gay parties in progress. Let me introduce everyone. Lady Priscilla Tolland – you know Tuffy, of course. How silly of me. Now this is Mrs Maclintick, who has been telling me some really hair-raising stories about musical people. I shall never listen to an orchestra again without the most painful speculations about the home life of the players. Nick, of course, you've often met. I'm afraid I don't know your name, Mr——?'

'Moreland,' said Moreland, absolutely enchanted by Stringham's complete ignorance of his identity.

'Moreland!' said Stringham. 'This is Mr Moreland, Tuffy. Mr Moreland for whom the whole party is being given. What a superb *faux pas* on my part. A really exquisite blunder. How right it is that I should emerge but rarely. Well, there we are – and this, I nearly forgot to add, Mr Moreland, is Miss Weedon.'

He was still perfectly at ease. There was not the smallest sign to inform a casual observer that Stringham was now looked upon by his own family, by most of his friends, as a person scarcely responsible for his own actions; that he was about to be removed from his mother's house by a former secretary who had taken upon herself to look after him, because – I suppose – she loved him. All the same, although nothing outward indicated that something dramatic was taking place, Stringham himself, after he had performed these introductions, had risen from his chair with one of his random, easy movements, so that to me it was clear he knew the game was up. He knew that he must be borne away by Miss Weedon within the next few minutes to whatever prison-house now enclosed him. Moreland and Priscilla glanced at each other, recognising a break in the rhythm of the party, probably wanting to make a move themselves, but unaware quite what was happening. Mrs Maclintick, on the other hand, showed herself not at all willing to have the group disposed of in so arbitrary a manner. She turned a most unfriendly stare on Miss Weedon, which seemed by its contemptuous expression to recognise in her, by some unaccountable feminine intuition, a figure formerly subordinate in Mrs Foxe's household.

'We have been talking about marriage,' said Mrs Maclintick aggressively.

She addressed herself to Miss Weedon, who in return gave her a smile that cut like a knife.

'Indeed?' she said.

'This gentleman and I have been comparing notes,' said Mrs Maclintick, indicating Stringham.

'We have, indeed,' said Stringham laughing. 'And found a lot to agree about.'

He had dropped his former air of burlesque, now appeared completely sober.

'It sounds a very interesting discussion,' said Miss Weedon.

She spoke in a tone damaging to Mrs Maclintick's self-esteem. Miss Weedon was undoubtedly prepared to take anybody on; Mrs Maclintick; anybody. I admired her for that.

'Why don't you tell us what you think about marriage yourself?' asked Mrs Maclintick, who had drunk more champagne than I had at first supposed. 'They say the onlooker sees most of the game.'

'Not now,' said Miss Weedon, in the cosmically terminating voice of one who holds authority to decide when the toys must be returned to the toy-cupboard. 'I have my little car outside, Charles. I thought you might like a lift home.'

'But he is going to take me to a night-club,' said Mrs Maclintick, her voice rising in rage. 'He said that after we had settled a few points about marriage we would go to a very amusing place he knew of.'

Miss Weedon looked at Stringham without a trace of surprise or disapproval; just a request for confirmation.

'That was the suggestion, Tuffy.'

He laughed again. He must have known by experience that in the end Miss Weedon would turn out to hold all the cards, but he showed no sign yet of capitulation.

'The doctor begged you not to stay up too late, Charles,' said Miss Weedon, also smiling.

She was in no degree behind Stringham where keeping one's head was concerned.

'My medical adviser did indeed prescribe early hours,' said Stringham. 'You are right there, Tuffy. I distinctly recollect his words. But I was turning over in my mind the possibility of disregarding such advice. Ted Jeavons was speaking recently of some night haunt he once visited where he had all kind of unusual adventures. A place run by one, Dicky Umfraville, a bad character whom I used to see in my Kenya days and have probably spoken of. Something about the sound of the joint attracted me. I offered to take Mrs Maclintick there. I can hardly go back on my promise. Of course, the club has no doubt closed down by now. Nothing Dicky Umfraville puts his hand to lasts very long. Besides, Ted was a little vague about the year his adventure happened – it might have been during the war, when he was a gallant soldier on leave from the trenches. That all came in when he told the story. However, if defunct, we could always visit the Bag of Nails.'

Mrs Maclintick snatched facetiously at him.

'You know perfectly well I should hate any of those places,' she said gaily, 'and I believe you are only trying to get me there to make me feel uncomfortable.'

Miss Weedon remained unruffled.

'I had no idea you were planning anything like that, Charles.'

'It wasn't exactly planned,' said Stringham. 'Just one of those brilliant improvisations that come to me of a sudden. My career has been built up on them. One of them brought me here tonight.'

'But I haven't agreed to come with you yet,' said Mrs Maclintick, with some archness. 'Don't be too sure of that.'

'I recognise, Madam, I can have no guarantee of such an honour,' said Stringham, momentarily returning to his former tone. 'I was not so presumptuous as to take your company for granted. It may even be that I shall venture forth into the night – by no means for the first time in my chequered career – on a lonely search for pleasure.'

'Wouldn't it really be easier to accept my offer of a lift?' said Miss Weedon.

She spoke so lightly, so indifferently, that no one could possibly have guessed that in uttering those words she was issuing an order. There was no display of power. Even Stringham must have been aware that Miss Weedon was showing a respect for his own situation that was impeccable.

'Much, much easier, Tuffy,' he said. 'But who am I to be given a life of ease?

> Not for ever by still waters
> Would we idly rest and stay . . .

I feel just like the hymn. Tonight I must take the hard road that leads to pleasure.'

'We could give this lady a lift home too, if she liked,' said Miss Weedon.

She glanced at Mrs Maclintick as if prepared to accept the conveyance of her body at whatever the cost. It was a handsome offer on Miss Weedon's part, a very handsome offer. No just person could have denied that.

'But I am not much in the mood for going home, Tuffy,' said Stringham, 'and I am not sure that Mrs Maclintick is either, in spite of her protests to the contrary. We are young. We want to see life. We feel we ought not to limit our experience to musical parties, however edifying.'

There was a short pause.

'If only I had known this, Charles,' said Miss Weedon.

She spoke sadly, almost as if she were deprecating her own powers of dominion, trying to minimise them because their very hugeness embarrassed her; like the dictator of some absolutist state who assures journalists that his most imperative decrees have to take an outwardly parliamentary form.

'If only I had known,' she said, 'I could have brought your notecase. It was lying on the table in your room.'

Stringham laughed outright.

'Correct, as usual, Tuffy,' he said.

'I happened to notice it.'

'Money,' said Stringham. 'It is always the answer.'

'But even if I had brought it, you would have been much wiser not to stay up late.'

'Even if you had brought it, Tuffy,' said Stringham, 'the situation would remain unaltered, because there is no money in it.'

He turned to Mrs Maclintick.

'Little Bo-Peep,' he said, 'I fear our jaunt is off. We shall have to visit Dicky Umfraville's club, or the Bag of Nails, some other night.'

He made a movement to show he was ready to follow Miss Weedon.

'I didn't want to drag you away,' she said, 'but I thought it might save trouble as I happen to have the car with me.'

'Certainly it would,' said Stringham. 'Save a lot of trouble. Limitless trouble. Untold trouble. I will bid you all good night.'

After that, Miss Weedon had him out of the house in a matter of seconds. There was the faintest suspicion of a reel as he followed her through the door. Apart from that scarcely perceptible lurch, Stringham's physical removal was in general accomplished by her with such speed and efficiency that probably no one but myself recognised this trifling display of unsteadiness on his feet. The moral tactics were concealed almost equally successfully until the following day, when they became plain to me. The fact was, of course, that Stringham was kept without money; or at least on that particular evening Miss Weedon had seen to it that he had no more money on him than enabled buying the number of drinks that had brought him to his mother's house. He must have lost his nerve as to the efficacy of his powers of cashing a cheque; perhaps no longer possessed a cheque-book. Otherwise, he would undoubtedly have proceeded with the enterprise set on foot. Possibly fatigue, too, stimulated by the sight of Miss Weedon, had played a part in evaporating desire to paint the town red in the company of Mrs Maclintick; perhaps in the end Stringham was inwardly willing to 'go quietly'. That was the most likely of all. While these things had been happening, Moreland and Priscilla slipped away. I found myself alone with Mrs Maclintick.

'Who was she, I should like to know,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'Not that I wanted all that to go wherever it was he wanted to take me. Not in the least. It was just that he was so pressing. But what a funny sort of fellow he is. I didn't see why that old girl should butt in. Is she one of his aunts?'

I was absolved from need to explain about Miss Weedon to Mrs Maclintick, no easy matter to embark upon, by seeing Carolo drifting towards us. A dinner jacket made him look more melancholy than ever.

'Coming?' he enquired.

'Where's Maclintick?'

'Gone home.'

'Full of whisky, I bet.'

'You bet.'

'All right.'

Stringham had made no great impression on her. She must have seen him as one of those eccentric figures naturally to be encountered in rich houses of this kind. That was probably the most judicious view of Stringham for her to take. Certainly there was no way for Mrs Maclintick to guess that a small, violent drama had been played out in front of her; nor would she have been greatly interested if some explanation of the circumstances could have been revealed. Now – in her tone to Carolo – she re-entered, body and soul, the world in which she normally lived. The two of them went off together. I began to look once more for Isobel. By the door Commander Foxe was saying goodbye to Max Pilgrim.

'Well,' said Commander Foxe, when he saw me, 'that was neatly arranged, wasn't it?'

'What was?'

'Persuading Charles to go home.'

'Lucky Miss Weedon happened to look in, you mean?'

'There was a good reason for that.'

'Oh?'

'I rang her up and told her to come along,' said Commander Foxe briefly.

That answer was such a simple one that I could not imagine why I had not guessed it without having to be told.

Those very obvious tactical victories are always the victories least foreseen by the onlooker, still less the opponent. Mrs Foxe herself might feel lack of dignity in summoning Miss Weedon to remove her own son from the house; for Buster, no such delicacy obstructed the way. Indeed, this action could be seen as a beautiful revenge for much owed to Stringham in the past; the occasion, for example, when Buster and I had first met in the room next door, and Stringham, still a boy, had seemed to order Buster from the house. No doubt other old scores were to be paid off. The relationship between Commander Foxe and Miss Weedon herself was also to be considered. Like two rival powers – something about Miss Weedon lent itself to political metaphor – who temporarily abandon their covert belligerency to combine against a third, there was a brief alliance; but also, for Miss Weedon, diplomatically speaking, an element of face-losing. She had been forced to allow her rival to invoke the treaty which demanded that in certain circumstances she should invest with troops her own supposedly pacific protectorate or mandated territory. In fact there had been a victory for Commander Foxe all round. He was not disposed to minimise his triumph.

'Pity about poor old Charles,' he said.

'I'll have to say good night.'

'Come again soon.'

'That would be nice.'

A general movement to leave was taking place among the guests. Mrs Maclintick and Carolo had already disappeared. Gossage still remained deep in conversation with Lady Huntercombe. There was no sign of the Morelands, or of Priscilla. Isobel was talking to Chandler. We went to find our hostess and say goodbye. Mrs Foxe was listening to the famous conductor, like Gossage, unable to tear himself away from the party.

'I do hope the Morelands enjoyed themselves,' said Mrs Foxe. 'It was so sad Matilda should have had a headache and had to go home. I am sure she was right to slip away. She is such a wonderful wife for someone like him. As soon as he heard she had gone, he said he must go too. Such a strain for a musician to have a new work performed. Like a first night – and Norman tells me first nights are agony.'

Mrs Foxe spoke the last word with all the feeling Chandler had put into it when he told her that. Robert joined us in taking leave.

'It was rather sweet of Charles to look in, wasn't it?' said Mrs Foxe. 'I would have asked him, of course, if I hadn't known parties were bad for him. I saw you talking to him. How did you think he was?'

'I hadn't seen him for ages. He seemed just the same. We had a long talk.'

'And you were glad to see him again?'

'Yes, of course.'

'I think he was right to go back with Tuffy. He can be rather difficult sometimes, you know.'

'Well, yes.'

'I do hope everyone enjoyed themselves,' said Mrs Foxe. 'There was a Mr Maclintick who had had rather a lot to drink by the time he left. I think he is a music critic. He was so sweet when he came to say goodbye to me. He said: "Thank you very much for asking me, Mrs Foxe. I don't like grand parties like this one and I am not coming to another, but I appreciate your kindness in supporting Moreland as a composer." I said I so much agreed with him about grand parties – which I *simply* hate – but I couldn't imagine why he should think this was one. All the same, I said, I should arrange it quite differently if I ever gave another, and I hoped he would change his mind and come. "Well, I shan't come," he said. I told him I knew he would because I should ask him so nicely. He said: “I suppose you are right, and I shall.” Then he slipped down two or three steps. I do hope he gets home all right. Such a relief when people speak their minds.’

‘What’s happened to Priscilla?’ Isobel asked Robert.

‘Somebody gave her a lift.’

At that moment Lord Huntercombe broke in between us. Carrying a piece of china in his hand, he was delighted by some discovery he had just made. Mrs Foxe turned towards him.

‘Amy,’ he said, ‘are you aware that this quatrefoil cup is a forgery?’

4

IF SO TORTUOUS a comparison of mediocre talent could ever be resolved, St John Clarke was probably to be judged a 'better' writer than Isbister was painter. However, when St John Clarke died in the early spring, he was less well served than his contemporary in respect of obituaries. Only a few years before, Isbister had managed to capture, perhaps helped finally to expend, what was left of an older, more sententious tradition of newspaper panegyric. There were more reasons for this than the inevitably changing taste in mediocrity. The world was moving into a harassed era. At the time of St John Clarke's last illness, the National Socialist Party of Danzig was in the headlines; foreign news more and more often causing domestic events to be passed over almost unnoticed. St John Clarke was one of these casualties. If Mark Members was to be believed, St John Clarke himself would have seen this unfair distribution of success, even posthumous success, as something in the nature of things. In what Members called 'one of St J.'s breakfast table agonies of self-pity', the novelist had quite openly expressed the mortification he felt in contrasting his old friend's lot with his own.

'Isbister was beloved of the gods, Mark,' he had cried aloud, looking up with a haggard face from *The Times* of New Year's Day and its list of awards, 'R.A. before he was forty-five – Gold Medallist of the Paris Salon – Diploma of Honour at the International Exhibition at Amsterdam – Commander of the Papal Order of Pius IX – refused a knighthood. Think of it, Mark, a man the King would have delighted to honour. What recognition have I had compared with these?'

'Why did Isbister refuse a knighthood?' Members had asked.

'To spite his wife.'

'That was it, was it?'

'Those photographs the Press resurrected of Morwenna standing beside him looking out to sea,' said St John Clarke, 'they were antediluvian – diluvian possibly. It was the Flood they were looking at, I expect. They'd been living apart for years when he died. Of course Isbister himself said he had decided worldly honours were unbefitting an artist. That didn't prevent him from telling everyone of the offer. Absolutely everyone. He had it both ways.'

In those days Members was still anxious to soothe his employer.

'Well, you've had a lot of enjoyable parties and country house visits to look back on, St J.,' he said. 'Rather a different life from Isbister's, but a richer one in my eyes.'

'One week-end at Dogdene twenty years ago,' St John Clarke had answered bitterly. 'Forced to play croquet with Lord Lonsdale . . . Two dinners at the Huntercombes', both times asked the same night as Sir Horrocks Rusby . . .'

This was certainly inadequate assessment of St John Clarke's social triumphs, which, for a man of letters, had been less fruitless than at that moment his despair presented them. Members, knowing what was expected of him, brushed away with a smile such melancholy reminiscences.

'But it will come . . .' he said.

'It will come, Mark. As I sit here, the Nobel Prize will come.'

'Alas,' said Members, concluding the story, 'it never does.'

As things fell out, the two most alert articles to deal with

St John Clarke were written, ironically enough, by Members and Quiggin respectively, both of whom spared a few crumbs of praise for their former master, treating him at no great length as a 'personality' rather than a writer: Members, in the weekly of which he was assistant literary editor, referring to 'an ephemeral, if almost painfully sincere, digression into what was for him the wonderland of *fauviste* painting'; Quiggin, in a similar, rather less eminent publication to which he contributed when hard up, guardedly emphasising the deceased's 'underlying, even when patently bewildered, sympathy with the Workers' Cause'. No other journal took sufficient interest in the later stages of St John Clarke's career to keep up to date about these conflicting aspects of his final decade. They spoke only of his deep love for the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens and his contributions to Queen Mary's Gift Book. Appraisal of his work unhesitatingly placed *Fields of Amaranth* as the peak of his achievement, with *E'en the Longest River* or *The Heart is Highland* – opinion varied – as a poor second. *The Times Literary Supplement* found 'the romances of Renaissance Italy and the French Revolution smacked of Wardour Street, the scenes from fashionable life in the other novels tempered with artificiality, the delineations of poverty less realistic than Gissing's'.

I was surprised by an odd feeling of regret that St John Clarke was gone. Even if an indifferent writer, his removal from the literary scene was like the final crumbling of a well-known landmark; unpleasing perhaps, at the same time possessed of a deserved renown for having withstood demolition for so long. The anecdotes Members and Quiggin put round about him had given St John Clarke a certain solidity in my mind; more, in a way, than his own momentary emergence at Lady Warminster's. This glimpse of him, then total physical removal, brought home, too, the blunt postscript of death. St John Clarke had merely looked ill at Hyde Park Gardens; now, like John Peel, he had gone far, far away, with his pen and his press-cuttings in the morning; become one of those names to which the date of birth and death may be added in parentheses, as their owners speed to oblivion from out of reference books and 'literary pages' of the newspapers.

As an indirect result of Mrs Foxe's party, relations with the Morelands were complicated by uncertainty and a little embarrassment. No one really knew what was happening between Moreland and Priscilla. They were never seen together, but it was very generally supposed some sort of a love affair was in progress between them. Rather more than usual Priscilla conveyed the impression that she did not want to be bothered with her relations; while an air of discomfort, faint but decided, pervaded the Moreland flat, indicating something was amiss there. Moreland himself had plunged into a flood of work. He took the line now that his symphony had fallen flat – to some extent, he said, deservedly – and he must repair the situation by producing something better. For the first time since the early days when I had known him, he seemed interested only in professionally musical affairs. We heard at second-hand that Matilda was to be tried out for the part of Zenocrate in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*. This was confirmed by Moreland himself when I met him by chance somewhere. The extent of the gossip about Moreland and Priscilla was revealed to me one day by running into Chips Lovell travelling by Underground. Lovell had by now achieved his former ambition of getting a job on a newspaper, where he helped to write the gossip column, one of a relatively respectable order. He was in the best of form, dressed with the greatest care, retaining that boyish, innocent look that made him in different ways a success with both sexes.

'How is Priscilla?' he asked.

'All right, so far as I know.'

'I heard something about her and Hugh Moreland.'

'What sort of thing?'

'That they were having a walk-out together.'

'Who said so?'

'I can't remember.'

'I didn't know you knew Moreland.'

'I don't. Only by name.'

'It doesn't sound very probable, does it?'

'I have no idea. People do these things.'

Although I liked Lovell, I saw no reason to offer help so far as his investigation of the situation of Moreland and Priscilla. As a matter of fact I had not much help to offer. In any case, Lovell, inhabiting by vocation a world of garbled rumour, was to be treated with discretion where the passing of information was concerned. I was surprised at the outspokenness with which he had mentioned the matter. His enquiry seemed stimulated by personal interest, rather than love of gossip for its own sake. I supposed he still felt faint dissatisfaction at having failed to make the mark to which he felt his good looks entitled him.

'I always liked Priscilla,' he said, using a rather consciously abstracted manner. 'I must see her again one of these days.'

'What has been happening to you, Chips?'

'Do you remember that fellow Widmerpool you used to tell me about when we were at the film studio? His name always stuck in my mind because he managed to stay at Dogdene. I took my hat off to him for getting there. Uncle Geoffrey is by no means keen on handing out invitations. You told me there was some talk of Widmerpool marrying somebody. A Vowchurch, was it? Anyway, I ran into Widmerpool the other day and he talked about you.'

'What did he say?'

'Just mentioned that he knew you. Said it was sensible of you to get married. Thought it a pity you couldn't find a regular job.'

'But I've got a regular job.'

'Not in his eyes, you haven't. He said he feared you were a bit of a drifter with the stream.'

'How was he otherwise?'

'I never saw a man so put out by the Abdication,' said Lovell. 'It might have been Widmerpool himself who'd had to abdicate. My goodness, he had taken it to heart.'

'What specially upset him?'

'So far as I could gather, he had cast himself for a brilliant social career if things had worked out differently.'

'The Beau Brummell of the new reign?'

'Not far short of that.'

'Where did you run across him?'

'Widmerpool came to see me in my office. He wanted me to slip in a paragraph about certain semi-business activities of his. One of those quiet little puffs, you know, which don't cost the advertising department anything, but warm the heart of the sales manager.'

'Did you oblige?'

'Not me,' said Lovell.

By no means without a healthy touch of malice, Lovell had also a fine appreciation of the power-wielding side of his job.

'I hear your brother-in-law, Erry Warminster, is on his way home from Spain,' he said.

'First I've heard of it.'

'Erry's own family are always the last to hear about his goings-on.'

'What's your source?'

'The office, as usual.'

'Is he bored with the Spanish war?'

'He is ill – also had some sort of row with his own side.'

'What is wrong with him?'

'Touch of dysentery, someone said.'

'Serious?'

'I don't think so.'

We parted company after arranging that Lovell should come and have a drink with us at the flat in the near future. The following day, I met Quiggin in Members's office. He was in a sulky mood. I told him I had enjoyed his piece about St John Clarke. Praise was usually as acceptable to Quiggin as to most people. That day the remark seemed to increase his ill humour. However, he confirmed the news about Erridge.

'Yes, yes,' he said impatiently. 'Of course it is true that Alfred is coming back. Don't his family take any interest in him? They might at least have discovered that.'

'Is he bad?'

'It is a disagreeable complaint to have.'

'But a whole skin otherwise. That is always something if there is a war on.'

'Alfred is too simple a man to embroil himself in practical affairs like fighting an ideological war,' said Quiggin severely. 'A typical aristocratic idealist, I'm afraid. Perhaps it is just as well his health has broken down. He has never been strong, of course. He is the first to admit it. In fact he is too fond of talking about his health. As I have said before, Alf is rather like Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot*.'

I was surprised at Quiggin's attitude towards Erridge's illness. I tried to work out who Quiggin himself would be in Dostoevsky's novel if Erridge was Prince Myshkin and Mona – presumably – Nastasya Filippovna. It was all too complicated. I could not remember the story with sufficient clarity. Quiggin spoke again.

'I have been hearing something of Alf's difficulties from one of our own agents just back from Barcelona,' he said. 'Alf seems to have shown a good deal of political obtuseness – perhaps I should say childlike innocence. He appears to have treated POUM, FAI, CNT, and UGT, as if they were all the same left-wing extension of the Labour Party. I was not surprised to hear that he was going to be arrested at the time he decided to leave Spain. If you can't tell the difference between a Trotskyite-Communist, an Anarcho-Syndicalist, and a properly paid-up Party Member, you had better keep away from the barricades.'

'You had, indeed.'

'It is not fair on the workers.'

'Certainly not.'

'Alfred's place was to organise in England.'

'Why doesn't he go back to his idea of starting a magazine?'

'I don't know,' said Quiggin, in a voice that closed the subject.

Erridge was in Quiggin's bad books; a friend who had disappointed Quiggin to a degree impossible to conceal; a man who had failed to rise to an historic occasion. I supposed that Quiggin regarded Erridge's imminent return, however involuntary, from the Spanish war in the light of a betrayal. This seemed unreasonable on Quiggin's part, since Erridge's breakdown in health was, after all, occasioned by an attempt to further the cause Quiggin himself had so energetically propagated by word of mouth. Even if Erridge had not fought in the field (where Howard Cragg's nephew had already been killed), he had taken other risks in putting his principles into practice. If it was true that he was marked down for arrest, he might have been executed behind the lines. Quiggin had staked less on his enthusiasms. However, as things turned out there was probably a different reason that afternoon for Quiggin's displeasure on Erridge's account.

Erridge himself arrived in London a day or two later. He was not at all well, and went straight into a nursing home; the nursing home, as it happened, in the passages of which I had encountered Moreland, Brandreth, and Widmerpool. This accommodation was found for her brother by Frederica, ideologically perhaps the furthest removed from Erridge, in certain other respects the closest of the Tollands to him, both from nearness in age and a shared rigidity of individual opinion. The two of them might disagree; they understood each other's obstinacies. When Erridge had settled down at the nursing home, his brothers and sisters visited him there. They were given a lukewarm welcome. Erridge was one of those egotists unable effectively to organise to good effect his own egotism, to make a public profit out of it. He had no doubt enjoyed unusual experiences. These he was unable, or unwilling, to share with others. Isobel brought back a description of a ragged beard protruding over the edge of sheets entirely covered by what appeared to be a patchwork quilt of Boggis & Stone publications dealing with different aspects of the Spanish predicament. Norah, who shared to some extent Erridge's political standpoint, was openly contemptuous.

'Erry always regards himself as the only person in the world who has ever been ill,' she said. 'His time in Spain seems to have been a total flop. He didn't get up to the front and he never met Hemingway.'

Erridge, as Norah – and Quiggin before her – had remarked, was keenly interested in his own health; in general not good. Now that he was ill enough for his condition to be recognised as more than troublesome, this physical state was not unsympathetic to him. The sickness gave his existence an increased reality, a deeper seriousness, elements

Erridge felt denied him by his family. Certainly he could now claim to have returned from an area of action. Although he might prefer to receive his relations coldly, he was at least assured of being the centre of Tolland attention. However, as it turned out, he enjoyed this position only for a short time, when his status was all at once prejudiced by his brother Hugo's motor accident.

Hugo Tolland had 'come down' from the university not long before this period, where, in face of continual pressure of a threatening kind from the authorities, he had contrived to stay the course for three years; even managing, to everyone's surprise, to scrape some sort of degree. The youngest of the male Tollands, Hugo was showing signs of becoming from the family's point of view the least satisfactory. Erridge, it was true, even before his father died, had been written off as incurably odd; but Erridge was an 'eldest son'. Even persons of an older generation – like his uncle, Alfred Tolland – who preferred the conventions to be strictly observed, would display their own disciplined acceptance of convention by recognising the fact that Erridge's behaviour, however regrettable, was his own affair. An eldest son, by no means beyond the reach of criticism, was at the same time excluded from the utter and absolute public disapproval which might encompass younger sons. Besides, no one could tell how an eldest son might turn out after he 'succeeded'. This was a favourite theme of Chips Lovell's, who used to talk of 'the classic case of Henry V and Falstaff'. Erridge might be peculiar; the fact remained he would be – now was – head of the family. Hugo was quite another matter. Hugo would inherit between three and four hundred a year when twenty-one and have to make his own way in the world.

While still at the university, Hugo showed no sign of wishing to prepare himself for that fate. Outwardly, he was a fairly intelligent, not very good-looking, unhappy, rather amusing young man, who kept himself going by wearing unusual clothes and doing perverse things. Because his own generation of undergraduates tended to be interested in politics and economics, both approached from a 'leftish' angle, Hugo liked to 'pose' – his own word – as an 'aesthete'. He used to burn joss-sticks in his rooms. He had bought a half-bottle of Green Chartreuse, a liqueur he 'sipped' from time to time, which, like the Widow's cruse, seemed to last for ever; for only during outbreaks of consciously bad behaviour was Hugo much of a drinker. At first Sillery had taken him up, no doubt hoping Hugo might prove an asset in the field where Sillery struggled for power with other dons. Hugo had turned out altogether intractable. Even Sillery, past master at dealing with undergraduates of all complexions and turning their fallibilities to his own advantage, had been embarrassed by Hugo's arrival at one of his tea parties laden with a stack of pro-Franco pamphlets, which he had distributed among the assembled guests. The company had included a Labour M.P. – a Catholic, as it happened – upon whom Sillery, for his own purposes, was particularly anxious to make a good impression. The story had been greatly enjoyed by Sillery's old enemy, Brightman, who used to repeat it night after night – *ad nauseam*, his colleagues complained, so Short told me – at High Table.

'Hugo will never find a place for himself in the contemporary world,' his sister Norah had declared.

Norah's conclusion, reached after an argument with Hugo about Spain, was not much at variance with the opinion of the rest of the family. However, this judgment turned out to be a mistaken one. Unlike many outwardly more promising young men, Hugo found a job without apparent difficulty. He placed himself with Baldwyn Hodges Ltd, antique dealers, a business which undertook a certain amount of interior decorating as a sideline. Although far from being the sort of firm Molly Jeavons would – or, financially speaking, could – employ for renovating her own house, its managing director, Mrs Baldwyn Hodges herself, like so many other unlikely people, had fetched up at the Jeavonses' one evening when Hugo was there. Very expert at handling rich people, Mrs Baldwyn Hodges was a middle-aged, capable, leathery woman, of a type Mr Deacon would particularly have loathed had he lived to see the rise of her shop, which had had small beginnings, to fashionable success. Hugo and Mrs Baldwyn Hodges got on well together at the Jeavonses'. They met again at the Surrealist Exhibition. Whatever the reason – probably, in fact, Hugo's own basic, though not then generally recognised, toughness – Mrs Baldwyn Hodges showed her liking for Hugo in a practical manner by taking him into her business as a learner. He did not earn much money at first; he may even have paid some sort of fee at the start; but he made something on commission from time to time and the job suited him. In fact Hugo had shown signs of becoming rather good at selling people furniture and advising them about their drawing-room walls. Chips Lovell (who had recently been told about Freud) explained that Hugo was 'looking for a mother'. Perhaps he was right. Mrs Baldwyn Hodges certainly taught Hugo a great deal.

All the same, Hugo's employment did not prevent him from frequenting the society of what Mr Deacon used to call 'naughty young men'. When out on an excursion with companions of this sort, a car was overturned and Hugo's leg was broken. As a result of this accident, Hugo was confined to bed for some weeks at Hyde Park Gardens, where he set up what he himself designated 'a rival *salon*' to Erridge's room at the nursing home. This situation, absurd as the reason may sound, had, I think, a substantial effect upon the speed of Erridge's recovery. Hugo even attempted to present his own indisposition as a kind of travesty of Erridge's case, pretending that the accident to the car had been the result of political sabotage organised by his sister Norah and Eleanor Walpole-Wilson. It was all very silly, typical of Hugo. At the same time, visiting Hugo in these circumstances was agreed to be more amusing than visiting Erridge. However, even if Erridge made no show of enjoying visitors, and was unwilling to reveal much of his Spanish experiences, he tolerated the interest of other people in what had happened to him in Spain. It was another matter if his relations came to his bedside only to retail the antics of his youngest brother, who represented to Erridge the manner of life of which he most disapproved. The consequence was that Erridge returned to Thrubworth sooner than expected. There he met with a lot of worry on arrival, because his butler, Smith, immediately went down with bronchitis.

At about the same time that Erridge left London, Moreland rang me up. Without anything being said on either side, our meetings had somehow lapsed. We had spoken together only at parties or on such occasions when other people had been around us. It was ages since we had had one of those long talks about life, or the arts, which had been such a predominant aspect of knowing Moreland in the past. On the telephone his voice sounded restrained, practical, colourless; as he himself would have said 'the sane Englishman with his pipe'.

'How is Matilda?'

'Spending a good deal of time out on her own with rehearsals and so on. She is going out with some of her theatre people tonight as a matter of fact.'

'Come and dine.'

'I can't. I'm involved in musical business until about ten. I said I would drop in on Maclintick then. I thought you might feel like coming too.'

'Why?'

'The suggestion was made to help myself out really. I agree it isn't a very inviting prospect.'

'Less inviting than usual? Do you remember our last visit?'

'Well, you know what has happened?'

'No.'

'Maclintick's wife has walked out on him.'

'I hadn't heard.'

'With Carolo.'

'How rash.'

'On top of that Maclintick has lost his job.'

'I never thought of him as having a job.'

'He did, all the same. Now he hasn't.'

'Did a paper sack him?'

'Yes. I thought we might meet at a pub, then go on to see Maclintick at his house. He just sits there working all the time. I have been talking to Gossage about Maclintick. We are a bit worried. A visit might cheer him up.'

'I am sure he would much rather see you alone.'

'That is just what I want to avoid.'

'Why not take Gossage?'

'Gossage is busy tonight. Anyway, he is too old a friend. He gets on Maclintick's nerves.'

'But so do I.'

'In a different way. Besides, you don't know anything about music. It is musical people Maclintick can't stand.'

'I only see Maclintick once every two years. We never hit it off particularly well even spaced out at those intervals.'

'It is because Maclintick never sees you that I want you to come. I don't want an embarrassing time with him *têtc-à-tête*. I am not up to it these days. I have troubles of my own.'

'All right. Where shall we meet?'

Moreland, from his extensive knowledge of London drinking places, named a pub in the Maclintick neighbourhood. I told Isobel what had been arranged.

'Try and find out what is happening about Priscilla,' she said. 'For all we know, they may be planning to run away together too. One must look ahead.'

The Nag's Head, the pub named by Moreland, was a place of no great attraction. I recalled it as the establishment brought to Mrs Maclintick's mind by her husband's uncouth behaviour at Mrs Foxe's party. Moreland looked tired when he arrived. He said he had been trudging round London all day. I asked for further details about the Maclintick situation.

'There are none to speak of,' Moreland said. 'Audrey and Carolo left together one afternoon last week. Maclintick had gone round to have a talk with his doctor about some trouble he was having with his kidneys. Not flushing out properly or something. He found a note when he returned home saying she had gone for good.'

'And then he lost his job on top of it?'

'He had written rather an astringent article about a concert he was covering. The paper didn't put it in. Maclintick made a fuss. The editor suggested Maclintick might be happier writing for a periodical aiming at a narrower public. Maclintick agreed that he himself had been feeling that for some time. So they parted company.'

'He is absolutely broke?'

'Probably a few minor irons in the fire. I don't know. Maclintick is not a chap who manages his business affairs very well.'

'Is he looking for another job?'

'He has either been working at his book or knocking them back pretty hard since all this happened – and who shall blame him?'

We set off for Maclintick's house.

'When is Matilda's play coming on?'

'They don't seem to know exactly.'

Moreland showed no sign of wishing to pursue the subject of Matilda's stage career. I did not press the question. I wondered whether he knew that Matilda had told me of her former marriage to Carolo. We passed once more through those shadowy, desolate squares from which darkness had driven even that small remnant of life that haunted them by day. Moreland was depressed and hardly spoke at all. The evening before us offered no prospect to stimulate cheerfulness. At last we reached Maclintick's horrible little dwelling. There was a light upstairs. I felt at low ebb. However, when Maclintick opened the front door he appeared in better condition than I had been led to expect. He wore no collar and had not shaved for several days, but these omissions seemed deliberate badges of emancipation from the servitudes of marriage and journalism, rather than neglect provoked by grief or despair. On the contrary, the nervous tensions to which he had been subjected during the previous few days had to some extent galvanised his normally crabbed manner into a show of geniality.

'Come in,' he said. 'You'll need a drink.'

There was a really colossal reek of whiskey as we crossed the threshold.

'How are things?' said Moreland, sounding not very sure of himself.

'Getting the sack keeps you young,' said Maclintick. 'You ought to try it, both of you. I have been able to settle down to some real work at last, now that I am quit of that bloody rag – and freer in other respects too, I might add.'

In spite of this rather aggressive equanimity displayed by Maclintick himself, an awful air of gloom hung over the house. The sitting-room was unspeakably filthy, dirty tea cups along the top of the glass-fronted bookcase, tumblers stained with beer dregs among the hideous ornaments of the mantelpiece. In the background, an atmosphere of unmade beds and unwashed dishes was dominated by an abominable, indefinable smell. As people do when landed in a position of that sort, Maclintick began at once to discuss his own predicament; quite objectively, as if the experience was remote from himself, as if – which in a sense was true – there was no earthly point in our talking of anything else but Maclintick's personal affairs.

'When I realised she had gone,' he said, 'I heaved a great sigh of relief. That was my first reaction. Later, I grasped the fact that I had to get my own supper. Found something I liked for a change – sardines and plenty of red pepper – and a stiff drink with them. Then I started turning things over in my mind. I began to think of Carolo.'

Moreland laughed uneasily. He was a person not well equipped to deal with human troubles. His temperament was without that easy, unthinking sympathy which reacts in a simple manner, indicating instinctively the right thing to say to someone desperately unhappy. He also lacked that subjective, ruthless love of presiding over other people's affairs which often makes basically heartless people adept at offering effective consolation. 'I never know the right moment to squeeze the bereaved's arm at a funeral,' he had once said. 'Some people can judge it to a nicety.' In short, nothing but true compassion for Maclintick's circumstances could have brought Moreland to the house that night. It was an act of friendship of some magnitude.

'Is Carolo in a job?' Moreland asked.

'Carolo taking a job seems to have touched off matters,' said Maclintick, 'or perhaps *vice versa*. He has at last decided that his genius will allow him to teach. Somewhere in the North-Midlands, I was told, his own part of the world. I can't remember now. He spoke about it a short time before they went off together. Left without paying his rent, need I say? I wonder how he and Audrey will hit it off. I spent yesterday with a solicitor.'

'You are getting a divorce?'

Maclintick nodded.

'Why not,' he said, 'when you've got the chance? She might change her mind. Let me fill your glasses.'

All this talk was decidedly uncomfortable. I did not think Moreland, any more than myself, knew whether Maclintick was in fact glad to have ridded himself of his wife, or, on the contrary, was shattered by her leaving him. Either state was credible. To presume that because they were always quarrelling, Maclintick necessarily wished to be parted from her could be wholly mistaken. In the same way, it was equally difficult to know whether Maclintick was genuinely relieved at ceasing to work for the paper that had employed him until the previous week, or was, on the contrary, desperately worried at the prospect of having to look for another job. So far as the job was concerned, both states of mind probably existed simultaneously; perhaps so far as the wife was concerned too. Moreland clearly felt uncertain what line to take in his replies to Maclintick, who himself appeared to enjoy keeping secret his true feelings while he discussed the implications of his own position.

'Did I ever tell you how I met Audrey?' he asked suddenly.

We had been talking for a time about jobs on papers. Moreland had been pronouncing on the subject of musical journalism in particular; but sooner or later Maclintick abandoned the subject in hand, always returning to the matter of his wife. The question did not make Moreland look any happier.

'Never,' he said.

'It was through Gossage,' Maclintick said.

'How very unexpected.'

'There was a clerk in Gossage's bank who was keen on Sibelius,' said Maclintick. 'They used to talk about music together whenever Gossage went to the bank to cash a cheque or have a word about his overdraft – if Gossage ever has anything so irregular as an overdraft, which I doubt.'

'When Gossage went there to bank the bribes given him by corrupt musicians who wanted good notices,' suggested Moreland.

'Possibly,' said Maclintick. 'I wish some of them offered an occasional bribe to me. Well, Gossage invited this young man, Stanley by name, to come with him to a private performance of some chamber music.'

Moreland laughed loudly at this, much louder than the story demanded at this stage. That was from nerves. I found myself laughing a lot too.

'Stanley asked if he might bring his sister along,' said Maclintick. 'I too had to go to the chamber music for my sins. The sister turned out to be Audrey.'

Moreland seemed as much surprised by this narration as I was myself. To produce such autobiographical details was altogether unlike Maclintick. The upheaval in his life had changed his whole demeanour.

'I took a fancy to her as soon as I set eyes on her,' Maclintick said. 'Funny that, because she hasn't much in the way of looks. That was a bad day for me – a bad day for both of us, I suppose.'

'What happened?' asked Moreland.

His curiosity had been aroused. Even Moreland, who knew Maclintick so much better than myself, found these revelations surprising.

'Do you know,' said Maclintick, speaking slowly as if still marvelling at his own ineptitude in such matters, 'do you know I did not exchange a word with her the whole evening. We were just introduced. I couldn't think of anything to say. She drifted off somewhere. I went home early.'

'What did you do next?'

'I had to make Gossage arrange another meeting. It took the hell of a lot of doing. Gossage didn't care for the idea at all. He liked Stanley, but he didn't want to get mixed up with his sister.'

'And then?'

'I didn't know anything about the machinery for taking women out, even when Gossage brought us together again.'

'How did you manage to get married then?'

'God knows,' said Maclintick. 'I often wonder.'

'There must have been a moment when some agreement was reached.'

'There was never much agreement about it,' said Maclintick. 'We started having rows straight away. But one thing is interesting. Gossage told me afterwards that on the night of the chamber music Audrey only opened her lips once – that was to ask him to tell her my name again and enquire what I did for a living.'

'No use fighting against fate,' said Moreland laughing. 'I've always said it.'

'Gossage told her I was a musician,' said Maclintick. 'Her comment was "Oh, God".'

'I find that a very natural one to make,' said Moreland.

'She isn't absolutely tone-deaf,' said Maclintick, speaking as if he had given the matter deep thought. 'She has her likes and dislikes. Quite good at remembering facts and contradicting you about them later. She'd been dragged by her brother to the chamber music. I never quite know why.'

'Brought her as a chaperone,' said Moreland.

'All the music in the family went into Stanley,' said Maclintick. 'I shall miss seeing Stanley once in a while. We used to have beer evenings together twice a year. Stanley can't drink Irish whiskey. But you know, it's astonishing what technical jargon women will pick up. Audrey would argue about music with me – with anyone. I've heard her make Gossage contradict himself about his views on *Les Six*. Odd the way music comes out in a family. I get it through my mother who was half Jewish. My father and grandfather were in the linen trade. They may have gone to a concert occasionally. That was about the extent of it.'

Moreland took this opportunity to guide conversation back into general channels.

'You can't tell what families are going to throw up,' he said. 'Look at Lortzing whose family were hereditary hangmen in Thuringia for two hundred years. Then suddenly the Lortzings cease to be hangmen and produce a composer.'

'You could be a musical hangman, I suppose,' said Maclintick. 'Hum tunes while you worked.'

'I could well imagine some of the musicians one knows becoming hangmen,' said Moreland.

'Surprising Lortzing didn't become a critic with an ancestry like that,' said Maclintick. 'Had it in his blood to execute people when need be – would also know the right knot to tie when it came to his own turn to shuffle off this mortal coil. Lortzing wrote an opera about your friend Casanova, didn't he? Do you remember that night at Casanova's Chinese Restaurant years ago? We talked about seducers and Don Juan and that sort of thing. That painter, Barnby, was there. I believe you were with us too, weren't you, Jenkins? For some reason I have often thought of that evening. I was thinking of it again last night, wondering if Carolo was one of the types.'

Moreland winced slightly. I did not know whether or not Maclintick was aware that Carolo had once been married to Matilda. Probably did not know that, I decided. Maclintick was a man who normally took little interest in the past history of other people. It was even surprising to find him showing such comparative interest in his own past history.

'Carolo doesn't come into the Casanova-Don Juan category,' said Moreland. 'He hasn't the vitality. Too passive. Passivity is not a bad method, all the same. Carolo just sits about until some woman either marries him, or runs away with him, from sheer desperation at finding nothing whatever to talk about.'

Maclintick nodded his head several times, showing ponderous enjoyment at this view of Carolo's technique in seduction. He filled the glasses.

'I suppose one of the tests of a man is the sort of woman he wants to marry,' he said. 'You showed some sense, Moreland, and guessed right. I should have stayed out of the marriage market altogether.'

'Marriage is quite a problem for a lot of people,' Moreland said.

'You know Audrey was my ideal in a sort of way,' said Maclintick, who after drinking all day – probably several days – was becoming thick in his speech and not always absolutely coherent. 'I've no doubt that was a mistake to start off with. There is probably something wrong about thinking you've realised your ideal – in art or anywhere else. It is a conception that should remain in the mind.'

'It wasn't for nothing that Petrarch's Laura was one of the de Sade family,' said Moreland.

'My God, I bet it wasn't,' said Maclintick. 'She'd have put him through it if they'd married. I shall always think of her being a de Sade whenever I see that picture of them again. You know the one. It is always to be found on the walls of boarding houses.'

'The picture you are thinking of, Maclintick, represents Dante and Beatrice,' Moreland said, 'not Petrarch and Laura. But I know the one you mean – and I expect the scene in question was no less unlike what actually happened than if depicting the other couple.'

'You are absolutely right, Moreland,' said Maclintick, now shaking with laughter. 'Dante and Beatrice – and a bloody bad picture, as you say. As a matter of fact, it's the sort of picture I rather like. Pictures play no part in my life. Music fulfils my needs, with perhaps a little poetry, a little German philosophy. You can keep the pictures, whether they tell a story or not.'

'Nowadays you can have both,' said Moreland, cheered by the drink and at last recovering his spirits. 'The literary content of some Picassos makes *The Long Engagement* or *A Hopeless Dawn* seem dry, pedantic studies in pure abstraction.'

'You might as well argue that *Ulysses* has more "story" than *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *The Rosary*,' said Maclintick. 'I suppose it has in a way. I find all novels lacking in probability.'

'Probability is the bane of the age,' said Moreland, now warming up. 'Every Tom, Dick, and Harry thinks he knows what is probable. The fact is most people have not the smallest idea what is going on round them. Their conclusions about life are based on utterly irrelevant – and usually inaccurate – premises.'

'That is certainly true about women,' said Maclintick. 'But anyway it takes a bit of time to realise that all the odds and ends milling about round one are the process of living. I used to feel with Audrey: "this can't be marriage" – and now it isn't.'

Suddenly upstairs the telephone bell began to ring. The noise came from the room where Maclintick worked. The sound was shrill, alarming, like a deliberate warning. Maclintick did not move immediately. He looked greatly disturbed. Then, without saying anything, he took a gulp from his glass and went off up the stairs. Moreland looked at me. He made a face.

'Audrey coming back?' he said.

'We ought to go soon.'

'We will.'

We could faintly hear Maclintick's voice; the words inaudible. It sounded as if Maclintick were unable to understand what he was being asked. That was likely enough considering the amount he had drunk. A minute later he returned to the sitting-room.

'Someone for you, Moreland,' he said.

Moreland looked very disturbed.

'It can't be for me,' he said. 'No one knows I'm here.'

'Some woman,' said Maclintick.

'Who on earth can it be?'

'She kept on telling me I knew her,' said Maclintick, 'but I couldn't get hold of the name. It was a bloody awful line. My head is buzzing about too.'

Moreland went to the stairs. Maclintick heaved himself on to the sofa. Closing his eyes, he began to breathe heavily. I felt I had had a lot to drink without much to show for it. We remained in silence. Moreland seemed to be away for centuries. When he returned to the room he was laughing.

'It was Matilda,' he said.

'Didn't sound a bit like Matilda,' said Maclintick, without opening his eyes.

'She said she didn't know it was you. You sounded quite different.'

'I'm never much good at getting a name on the bloody telephone,' said Maclintick. 'She said something about her being your wife now I come to think of it.'

'Matilda forgot her key. I shall have to go back at once. She is on the doorstep.'

'Just like a woman, that,' said Maclintick. 'There was always trouble about Carolo's key.'

'We'll have to go.'

'You don't expect me to see you out, do you? Kind of you to come.'

'You had better go to bed, Maclintick,' said Moreland. 'You don't want to spend the night on the sofa.'

'Why not?'

'Too cold. The fire will be out soon.'

'I'll be all right.'

'Do move, Maclintick,' said Moreland.

He stood looking down with hesitation at Maclintick. Moreland could be assertive about his own views, was said to be good at controlling an orchestra; he was entirely without the power of assuming authority over a friend who needed 'managing' after too much to drink. I remembered the scene when Widmerpool and I had put Stringham to bed after the Old Boy Dinner, and wondered whether an even odder version of that operation was to be re-enacted here. However, Maclintick rolled himself over into a sitting position, removed his spectacles, and began to rub his eyes just in the manner of my former housemaster, Le Bas, when he could not make up his mind whether or not one of his pupils was telling the truth.

'Perhaps you are right, Moreland,' Maclintick said.

'Certainly I am right.'

'I will move if you insist.'

'I do insist.'

Then Maclintick made that harrowing remark that established throughout all eternity his relationship with Moreland.

'I obey you, Moreland,' he said, 'with the proper respect of the poor interpretative hack for the true creative artist.'

Moreland and I both laughed a lot, but it was a horrible moment. Maclintick had spoken with that strange, unearthly dignity that a drunk man can suddenly assume. We left him making his way unsteadily upstairs. By a miracle there was a taxi at the other end of the street.

'I hope Maclintick will be all right,' said Moreland, as we drove away.

'He is in rather a mess.'

'I am in a mess myself,' Moreland said. 'You probably know about that. I won't bore you with the complications of my own life. I hope Matty will not be in too much of a fret when I get there. What can she be thinking of, forgetting her key? Something Freudian, I suppose. I am glad we went to see Maclintick. What did you think about him?'

'I thought he was in a bad way.'

'You did?'

'Yes.'

'Maclintick is in a bad way,' said Moreland. 'It is no good pretending he isn't. I don't know where it will end, I don't know where anything will end. It was strange Maclintick bringing up Casanova's Chinese Restaurant.'

'Dragging up your past.'

'Barnby went straight to the point,' said Moreland. 'I was struck by that. One ought to make decisions where women are concerned.'

'What are your plans – roughly?'

'I have none, as usual. You are already familiar with my doctrine that every man should have three wives. I accept the verdict that under the existing social order such an arrangement is not viable. That is why so many men are in such a quandary.'

We drove on to where I lived. Moreland continued in the taxi on his way to find Matilda. Isobel was asleep. She woke up at one moment and asked: 'Did you hear anything interesting?' I told her, 'No'. She went to sleep again. I went to sleep for an hour or two, then woke up with a start, and lay there thinking how grim the visit to Maclintick had been; not only grim, but curiously out of focus; a pocket in time; an evening that pertained in character to life some years before. Marriage reduced in number interludes of that kind. They belonged by their nature to an earlier period: the days of the Mortimer and Casanova's Chinese Restaurant. Maclintick's situation was infinitely depressing; yet people found their way out of depressing situations. Nothing was more surprising than man's capacity for survival. Before one could look round, Maclintick would be in a better job, married to a more tolerable wife. All the same, I felt doubtful about that happening. Thinking uneasy thoughts, I fell once more into a restless, disenchanted sleep.

The atmosphere of doom that hung over Maclintick's house, indeed over the whole quarter in which he lived – or so it seemed the night Moreland and I had called on him – proved categorical enough. Two or three days later a paragraph appeared in the evening paper stating that Maclintick's body had been found 'in a gas-filled room': no doubt the room in which he worked designated by his wife as the 'only one where you can keep warm in the house'. The escape of gas had been noticed; the police broke in. The paper described Maclintick as a 'writer on musical subjects'. As with the passing of St John Clarke, new disturbing developments of the European situation prevented Maclintick's case from gaining the attention that a music critic's suicide might attract in more peaceful times. The news was horrifying, yet there was no shock about it. It was cold, slow-motion horror, the shaping of a story recognisably unfinished. I tried to get in touch with Moreland. There was no reply to the telephone. The Morelands' flat seemed always empty. Then one day when I tried again, Matilda answered. She began talking about Moreland at once.

'The poor boy has been having an awful time about Maclintick,' she said. 'You know how he hates even the mildest business talks. Now he is landed with inquests and goodness knows what.'

Matilda had always got on well with Maclintick. He was one of those uncomfortably poised men whom she handled to perfection. There was every reason to suppose that Maclintick's death would distress her. At the same time, I was immediately aware from the sound of her voice on the line that she was pleased about something; the fact of Maclintick's suicide had eased her life for one reason or another. We talked for a time about Maclintick and his affairs.

'Poor old Carolo,' she said.

'You think he is in for it?'

'He has caught something this time.'

'And your play?'

'Coming on soon. I think it will be a success.'

I arranged to see Moreland. The meeting took place a day or two later. He looked as if he had been having a disagreeable time. I asked about Maclintick.

'Gossage and I had to do all the clearing up,' Moreland said. 'It was pretty good hell.'

'Why you two?'

'There did not seem to be anyone else. I can't tell you what we were let in for. It was an awful thing to happen. Of course, one saw it coming. Nothing more certain. That didn't make it any better. Maclintick was a great friend of mine in a way. He could be tiresome. He had some very good points too. It was nice of him not to have done himself in, for example, the night we left him there. That would have been even more awkward.'

'It certainly would.'

'I've no reason to suppose he didn't feel just as much like taking the jump then as three days later.'

'Do you remember when he talked of suicide in Casanova's?'

'Suicide was always one of Maclintick's favourite subjects.'

'It was?'

'Of course.'

'He said then that he gave himself five years.'

'He lasted about eight or nine. Gossage has been very good about sorting the musical stuff. There is a mass of it to deal with.'

'Any good?'

Moreland shook his head.

'The smell in the house was appalling,' he said. 'Absolutely frightful. Gossage had to go and stand in the street for a time to recover.'

'Anything been heard of Mrs Maclintick?'

'I had a line from her asking me to deal with certain things. I think Carolo wants to keep out of it as much as possible for professional reasons – rather naturally.'

'Do you think Maclintick just could not get on without that woman?'

'Maclintick always had his fair share of melancholia, quite apart from anything brought on by marriage or the lack of it.'

'But his wife clearing out brought matters to a head?'

'Possibly. It must be appalling to commit suicide, even though one sometimes feels a trifle like it. Anyway, the whole Maclintick business has made certain things clearer to me.'

'As for example?'

'Do you remember when we used to talk about the Ghost Railway and say how like everyday life it was – or at least one's own everyday life?'

'You mean rushing downhill in total darkness and crashing through closed doors?'

'Yes – and the body lying across the line. The Maclintick affair has reminded me of the disagreeable possibilities of the world one inhabits; the fact that the fewer persons one involves in it the better.'

'How do you mean? However you live there are always elements of that sort.'

'I know, but you get to know the material you yourself have to cope with. You may have heard that I have been somewhat entangled with a person not far removed from your own family circle.'

'Rumours percolate.'

'So I supposed.'

'But you would be surprised to learn my own ignorance of detail.'

'Glad to hear it. Need I say more? You must surely appreciate the contrast between the sort of thing I have been engaged upon in connexion with poor old Maclintick's mortal remains during the last few days, and the kind of atmosphere one prefers when attempting to conduct an idyllic love affair.'

'I can see that.'

'I do not suggest my daily routine comes within several million light-years of an idyll – but it normally rises a few degrees above what life has been recently.'

I began to understand the reason why Matilda had sounded relieved when we had spoken on the telephone a day or two before.

'The fact is,' said Moreland, 'very few people can deal with more than a limited number of emotional problems at any given moment. At least I can't. Up to a point, I can walk a tightrope held at one end by Matilda, and at the other by the person of whom you tell me you are already apprised. But I can't carry Maclintick on my back. Maclintick gassing himself was just a bit too much.'

'But what are you explaining to me?'

'That any rumours you hear in future can be given an unqualified denial.'

'I see.'

'Forgive my bluntness.'

'It suits you.'

'I hope I have made myself clear.'

'You haven't, really. There is still a lot I should like to know. For example, did you really contemplate terminating your present marriage?'

'It looked like that at one moment.'

'With the agreement of the third party?'

'Yes.'

'And now she knows you think differently?'

'She sees what I mean.'

'And thinks the same?'

'Yes.'

I too could see what he meant. At least I thought I could. Moreland meant that Maclintick, in doing away with himself, had drawn attention, indeed heavily underlined, the conditions of life to which Moreland himself was inexorably committed; a world to which Priscilla did not yet belong, even if she were on her way to belonging there. I do not think Moreland intended this juxtaposition of lot to be taken in its crudest aspect; that is to say in the sense that Priscilla was too young, too delicate a flower by birth and upbringing to be associated with poverty, unfaithfulness, despair, and death. If he supposed that – which I doubt –

Moreland made a big mistake. Priscilla, like the rest of her family, had a great deal of resilience. I think Moreland's realisation was in the fact of Maclintick's desperate condition; Maclintick's inability to regulate his own emotional life; Maclintick's lack of success as a musician; in short the mess of things Maclintick had made, or perhaps had had visited upon him. Moreland was probably the only human being Maclintick had whole-heartedly liked. In return, Moreland had liked Maclintick; liked his intelligence; liked talking and drinking with him. By taking his own life, Maclintick had brought about a crisis in Moreland's life too. He had ended the triangular relationship between Moreland, Priscilla, and Matilda. Precisely in what that relationship consisted remained unrevealed. What Matilda thought, what Priscilla thought, remained a mystery. All sides of such a situation are seldom shown at once, even if they are shown at all. Only one thing was certain. Love had received one of those shattering jolts to which it is peculiarly vulnerable from extraneous circumstance.

'This Maclintick business must have held up all work.'

'As you can imagine, I have not done a stroke. I think Matilda and I may try and go away for a week or two, if I can raise the money.'

'Where will you go?'

'France, I suppose.'

The Morelands went abroad the following week. That Sunday, Isobel's eldest sister, Frederica, rang up and asked if she could come to tea. This suggestion, on the whole a little outside the ordinary routine of things with Frederica, who was inclined to make plans some way ahead, suggested she had something special to say. As it happened, Robert, too, had announced he would look in that afternoon; so the day took on a distinctly family aspect. Frederica and Robert could be received at close quarters, be relied upon to be reasonably cordial to one another. That would not have been true of Frederica and Norah. Hugo was another dangerous element, preferably to be entertained without the presence of his other brothers and sisters. With Frederica and Robert there was nothing to worry about.

As soon as Frederica arrived, it was evident she had recently learnt something that had surprised her a great deal. She was a person of controlled, some – Chips Lovell, for example – thought even rather forbidding exterior; a widow who showed no sign of wanting to remarry and found her interests, her work and entertainment, in her tours of duty as Lady-in-Waiting. However, that afternoon she was freely allowing herself to indulge in the comparatively undisciplined relaxation of arousing her relations' curiosity.

'I expect you have heard of a writer called St John Clarke,' she said, almost as soon as she had sat down.

This supposition, expressed by some of my friends, would have been a method of introducing St John Clarke's name within a form of words intended to indicate that in their eyes, no doubt equally in my own, St John Clarke did not grade as a sufficiently eminent literary figure for serious persons like ourselves ever to have heard of him. The phrase would convey no sense of enquiry; merely a scarcely perceptible compliment, a very minor demonstration of mutual self-esteem. With Frederica, however, one could not be sure. She had received a perfectly adequate education, indeed rather a good one, to fit her for her position in life, but she did not pretend to 'know' about writing. Indeed, she was inclined to pride herself on rising above the need to discuss the ways and means of art in which some of her relations and friends interminably indulged.

'I like reading books and going to plays,' she had once remarked, 'but I do not want to talk about them all the time.'

If Frederica had, in practice, wholly avoided an uninstructed predisposition to lay down the law on aesthetic matters, there would have been much to be said for this preference. Unhappily, you could never be certain of her adherence to such a rule of conduct. She seemed often to hold just as strong views on such matters as those who felt themselves most keenly engaged. Besides, her disinclination to discuss these subjects in general, left an area of uncertainty as to how far her taste, for example, in books and plays, had taken her; her self-esteem could be easily, disastrously, impaired by interpreting too literally her disavowal of all intellectual interests. In the same way, Frederica lumped together in one incongruous, not particularly acceptable agglomeration all persons connected with painting, writing and music. I think she suspected them, in that time-honoured, rather engaging habit of thought, of possessing morals somehow worse than other people's. Her mention of St John Clarke's name was for these reasons unexpected.

'Certainly I have heard of St John Clarke,' I said. 'He has just died. Isobel and I met him lunching at Hyde Park Gardens not long before he was taken ill.'

'Not me,' said Isobel, 'I was being ill myself.'

'St John Clarke used to lunch at Hyde Park Gardens?' said Frederica. 'I did not know that. Was he often there?'

'He used to turn up at Aunt Molly's too,' said Isobel. 'You must remember the story of Hugo and the raspberries——'

'Yes, yes,' said Frederica, showing no sign of wishing to hear that anecdote again, 'I had forgotten it was St John Clarke. But what about him?'

'Surely you read *Fields of Amaranth* secretly when you were growing up?' said Isobel. 'There was a copy without the binding in that cupboard in the schoolroom at Thrubworth.'

'Oh, yes,' said Frederica, brushing off this literary approach as equally irrelevant. 'But what sort of a man was St John Clarke?'

That was a subject upon which I felt myself something of an expert. I began to give an exhaustive, perhaps too exhaustive, account of St John Clarke's life and character. No doubt this searching analysis of the novelist was less interesting to others – certainly less interesting to Frederica – than to myself, because she broke in almost immediately with a request that I should stop.

'It really does not matter about all that,' she said. 'Just tell me what he was like.'

'That was what I was trying to tell you.'

I felt annoyed at being found so inadequate at describing St John Clarke. No doubt it would have been better to have contained him in one single brief, brilliant epigram; I could not think of one at that moment. Besides, that was not the kind of conversational technique Frederica approved. I was attempting to approach St John Clarke from another angle, when Robert arrived. Whatever Frederica had been leading up to was for the moment abandoned. Robert, in his curiously muted manner, showed signs of animation.

'I have got a piece of news,' he said.

'What?' said Frederica. 'Have you heard too, Robert?'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Robert. 'So far as I am aware, I am the sole possessor of this particular item.'

'What is it?'

'You will all know pretty soon anyway,' said Robert, in a leisurely way, 'but one likes to get in first. We are going to have a new brother-in-law.'

'Do you mean Priscilla is engaged?'

'Yes,' said Robert. 'Priscilla – not Blanche.'

'Who to?'

'Who do you think?'

A few names were put forward.

'Come on,' said Isobel. 'Tell us.'

'Chips Lovell.'

'When did this happen?'

'This afternoon.'

'How did you find out?'

'Chips had just been accepted when I arrived back at the house.'

'He was almost a relation before,' said Frederica.

On the whole she sounded well disposed, at least looking on the bright side; because there must have been much about Chips Lovell which did not recommend itself to Frederica. She may have feared worse. Moreland's name was unlikely to have reached her, but she could have heard vague, unsubstantiated gossip stemming ultimately from the same source.

'I guessed something must be in the air when Priscilla told me she was leaving that opera job of hers,' said Robert. 'At one moment she thought of nothing else.'

We talked about Chips Lovell for a time.

'Now,' said Frederica, 'after that bit of news, I shall get back to my own story.'

'What is your story?' asked Robert. 'I arrived in the middle.'

'I was talking about St John Clarke.'

'What about him?'

'Whom do you think St John Clarke would leave his money to?' said Frederica.

'That is a big question, Frederica,' I said.

Revelation coming from Frederica on the subject of St John Clarke's last will and testament would be utterly unexpected. I had certainly wondered, at the time of St John Clarke's death, who would get his money. Then the matter had gone out of my head. The beneficiary was unlikely to be anyone I knew. Now, at Frederica's words, I began to speculate again about what surprising bequest, or bequests, might have been made. St John Clarke was known to possess no close relations. Members and Quiggin had often remarked on that fact after they left his employment, when it was clear that neither of them could hope for anything but a small legacy for old times' sake; and even that was to the greatest degree improbable. There was the German secretary, Guggenbühl. He had moved on from St John Clarke without a quarrel, although with some encouragement, so Quiggin said, because of St John Clarke's growing nervousness about the orthodoxy of Guggenbühl's Marxism. The choice was on this account unlikely to have fallen on Guggenbühl. There remained the possibility of some forgotten soul from that earlier dynasty of secretaries – back before the days of Members and Quiggin – who might have been remembered in St John Clarke's last months; a line whose names, like those of prehistoric kings, had not survived, or at best were to be met with only in the garbled forms of popular legend, in this case emanating from the accumulated conflux of St John Clarke myth propagated by Members and Quiggin. Again, the Communist Party was a possible legatee; St John Clarke seeking amends for his days of bourgeois licence, like a robber baron endowing the Church with his lands.

Even if St John Clarke had left his worldly goods to 'the Party', Frederica would scarcely bother about that, even though such a bequest might confirm her distrust for men of letters. I was at a loss to know what had happened. Frederica saw she had said enough to command attention. To hold the key to information belonging by its essential nature to a sphere quite other than one's own gives peculiar satisfaction. Frederica was well aware of that. She paused for a second or two. The ransoming of our curiosity was gratifying to her.

'Who?' I asked.

'Whom do you think?'

'We can't spend the afternoon guessing things,' said Isobel. 'Our invention has been exhausted by Priscilla's possible fiancés.'

Robert, who probably saw no reason to concern himself with St John Clarke's affairs, and was no doubt more interested in speculating on the prospect of Chips Lovell as a brother-in-law, began to show loss of interest. He strolled across the room to examine a picture. Frederica saw that to hold her audience, she must come to the point.

'Erridge,' she said.

That was certainly an eye-opener.

'How did you discover this?'

'Erry told me himself.'

'When?'

'I stayed a night at Thrubworth. There were some legal papers of mine Erry had to sign. Taking them there seemed the only way of running him to earth. He just let out this piece of information quite casually as he put his pen down.'

'How much is it?' asked Robert, brought to heel by the nature of this disclosure.

'That wasn't so easy to find out.'

'Roughly?'

'St John Clarke seems to have bought an annuity of some sort that no one knew about,' said Frederica. 'So far as I can gather, there is about sixteen or seventeen thousand above that. It will be in the papers, of course, when the will is proved.'

'Which Erry will get?'

'Yes.'

'He will hand it over to his Spanish friends,' said Robert tranquilly.

'Oh, no, he won't,' said Frederica, with some show of bravado.

'Don't be too sure.'

'One can't be sure,' said Frederica, speaking this time more soberly. 'But it sounded as if Erry were not going to do that.'

'Why not?'

'He didn't leave Spain on very good terms with anyone.'

'The money would pay off the overdraft on the estate account,' said Isobel.

'Exactly.'

'And the woods would not have to be sold.'

'In fact,' said Robert, 'this windfall might turn out to be most opportune.'

'I don't want to speak too soon,' said Frederica, 'especially where Erry is concerned. All the same, so far as I could see, there seemed hope of his showing some sense for once.'

'But will his conscience allow him to show sense?' said Robert.

I understood now why Quiggin had been so irritable when we had last met. He must already have known of St John Clarke's legacy to Erridge. By that time Quiggin could scarcely have hoped himself for anything from St John Clarke, but that this golden apple should have fallen at Erridge's feet was another matter. To feel complete unconcern towards the fact of an already rich friend unexpectedly inheriting so comparatively large a capital sum would require an indifference to money that Quiggin never claimed to possess. Apart from that was the patron-protégé relationship existing between Erridge and Quiggin, complicated by the memory of Mona's elopement. Quiggin's ill humour was not surprising in the circumstances. It was, indeed, pretty reasonable. If St John Clarke had been often provoked by Members and Quiggin during his life, the last laugh had to some extent fallen to St John Clarke after death. At the same time, it was not easy to see what motives had led St John Clarke to appoint Erridge his heir. He may have felt that Erridge was the most likely among the people he knew to use the money in some manner sympathetic to his own final fancies. On the other hand, he may have reverted on his death-bed to a simpler, more old-world snobbery of his early years, or to that deep-rooted, time honoured tradition that money should go to money. It was impossible to say. These, and many other theories, were laid open to speculation by this piece of news, absurd in its way; if anything to do with money can, in truth, be said to be absurd.

'Did Chips mention when he and Priscilla are going to be married?' asked Isobel.

The question reminded me that Moreland, at least in a negative manner, had taken another decisive step. I thought of his recent remark about the Ghost Railway. He loved these almost as much as he loved mechanical pianos. Once, at least, we had been on a Ghost Railway together at some fun fair or on a seaside pier; slowly climbing sheer gradients, sweeping with frenzied speed into inky depths, turning blind corners from which black, gibbering bogeys leapt to attack, rushing headlong towards iron-studded doors, threatened by imminent collision, fingered by spectral hands, moving at last with dreadful, ever increasing momentum towards a shape that lay across the line.

The Kindly Ones

for

R. W. K. C.

1

ALBERT, FLESHY, SALLOW, BLUE CHINNED, breathing hard, sweating a little, fitted an iron bar into sockets on either side of the wooden shutters he had just closed across the final window of the stable-block. Rolled shirt-sleeves, green baize apron, conferred a misleadingly businesslike appearance, instantly dispelled by carpet-slippers of untold shabbiness which encased his large, chronically tender feet. All work except cooking abhorrent to him, he went through the required movements with an air of weariness, almost of despair. In those days he must have been in his middle to late thirties. We were on good terms, although he possessed no special liking for children. Indeed. I was supposedly helping him lock up these outbuildings for the night, a task in principle all but completely accomplished, for some unknown reason, in late afternoon. Up to that moment, it is true, I had done no more than examine a coloured picture, fastened to the wall by four rusting drawing-pins, of Mr Lloyd George, fancifully conceived as extending from his mouth an enormous scarlet tongue, on the liquescent surface of which a female domestic servant in cap and apron, laughing heartily as if she much enjoyed the contact, was portrayed vigorously moistening the gum of a Health Insurance stamp. I was still contemplating this lively image of state-aided social service – which appeared in some manner to hint at behaviour unseemly, even downright improper – when night, as if arbitrarily induced at that too early hour by Albert's lethargic exertions, fell abruptly in the shuttered room, blurring all at once the outlines of the anonymous artist's political allegory. Albert withdrew ponderously from the dusk now surrounding us. I followed him into the broad daylight of the yard, where tall pine trees respired on the summer air a resinous, somehow alien odour, gently disinfectant like the gardens of a sanatorium in another country than England.

'Don't want any of them Virgin Marys busting in and burning the place down,' Albert said.

Aware of a faint sense of horror at the prospect of so monstrous a contingency – enigmatic, no less than unhallowed, in its heretical insistence on plurality – I asked explanation.

'Suffragettes.'

'But they won't come here?'

'Never know.'

'Do you think they will?'

'Can't tell what those hussies will do next.'

I felt in agreement with Albert that the precariousness of life was infinite. I pondered his earlier phrase. It was disconcerting. Why had he called suffragettes 'Virgin Marys'? Then I remembered a fact that might throw light on obscurity. At lessons that morning – the subject classical mythology – Miss Orchard had spoken of the manner in which the Greeks, because they so greatly feared the Furies, had named them the Eumenides – the Kindly Ones – flattery intended to appease their terrible wrath. Albert's figure of speech was no doubt employed with a similar end in view towards suffragettes. He was by nature an apprehensive man; fond, too, of speaking in riddles. I recalled Miss Orchard's account of the Furies. They inflicted the vengeance of the gods by bringing in their train war, pestilence, dissension on earth; torturing, too, by the stings of conscience. That last characteristic alone, I could plainly see, made them sufficiently unwelcome guests. So feared were they, Miss Orchard said, that no man mentioned their names, nor fixed his eyes upon their temples. In that respect, at least, the Furies differed from the suffragettes, whose malevolence was perpetually discussed by persons like Edith and Mrs Gullick, the former of whom had even seen suffragette processions on the march under their mauve-and-green banners. At the same time, the nature of suffragette aggression seemed to bear, in other respects, worthy comparison with that of the Furies, feminine, too, so far as could be judged, equally the precursors of fire and destruction. Thought of them turned my mind to other no less awe-inspiring, in some ways even more fascinating, local terrors with which we might have to contend during the hours of darkness.

'Has Billson seen the ghost again?'

Albert shook his head, giving the impression that the subject of spectres, generally speaking, appealed to him less than to myself. He occupied one of the two or three small rooms beyond the loose-boxes, where he slept far away from the rest of the household. The occasional intrusion of Bracey into another of the stable rooms offered small support where ghosts were concerned. Bracey's presence was intermittent, and, in any case, there was not enough fellow-feeling between the two of them to create a solid resistance to such visitations. It was, therefore, reasonable enough, since he inhabited such lonely quarters, for Albert to prefer no undue emphasis to be laid on the possibilities of supernatural appearance even in the house itself. To tell the truth, there was always something a little frightening about the stable-block in daytime too. The wooden bareness of its interior enjoyably reconstructed – in my own unrestricted imagination – a log cabin or palisade, loop-holed and bullet-scarred, to be defended against Zulus or Red

Indians. In such a place, after nightfall, the bravest might give way to nameless dread of the occult world; more to be feared, indeed, than any crude physical onslaught from suffragettes, whose most far-fetched manifestations of spite and perversity would scarcely extend to an incendiary attack on the Stonehurst stables.

The 'ghosts' of Stonehurst, on the other hand, were a recognised feature of the place, almost an amenity in my own eyes, something far more real than suffragettes. Billson, the parlourmaid, had waked at an early hour only a week or two before to find a white shape of immense height standing beside her bed, disappearing immediately before she had time to come fully to her senses. That, in itself, might have been dismissed as a wholly imaginary experience, something calling for banter rather than sympathy or interest. Billson, however, confessed she had also on an earlier occasion found herself confronted with this or another very similar apparition, a spectre unfortunately reported in much the same terms by Billson's immediate predecessor. In short, it looked very much as if the house was undeniably 'haunted'. Maids were, in any case, disinclined to stay in so out-of-the-way a place as Stonehurst. Ghosts were likely to be no encouragement. Perhaps it was a coincidence that two unusually 'highly strung' persons had followed each other in that particular maid's bedroom. Neither Albert himself, nor Mercy, the housemaid, had at present been subjected to such an ordeal. On the other hand, my nurse, Edith (herself, before my own day, a housemaid), had from time to time heard mysterious rappings in the night-nursery, noises which could not – as first supposed – be attributed to myself. What was more, my mother admitted to a recurrent sense, sometimes even in the day, of an uncomfortable presence in her bedroom. At night, there, she had waked once or twice overwhelmed with an inexplicable feeling of doom and horror. I record these things merely as a then-accepted situation. Such circumstances might have been disregarded in a more rationalistic family; in one less metaphysically flexible, they could have caused agitation. In my own, they were received without scepticism, at the same time without undue trepidation. Any discussion on the subject took place usually behind closed doors, simply in order that the house should not acquire a reputation which might dry up entirely the sources of domestic staff. No effort was made to keep such talk from my own ears. My mother – together with her sisters in their unmarried days – had always indulged a taste for investigation of the Unseen World, which even the threatened inconveniences of the Stonehurst 'ghosts' could not entirely quench. My father, not equally on terms with such hidden forces, was at the same time no less imbued with belief. In short, the 'ghosts' were an integral, an essential part of the house; indeed, its salient feature.

All the same, hauntings were scarcely to be expected in this red-tiled bungalow, which was almost capacious, or so it seemed in those days, on account of its extreme, unnatural elongation. It had been built only thirteen or fourteen years before – about 1900, in fact – by some retired soldier, anxious to preserve in his final seclusion tangible reminder of service in India, at the same time requiring nothing of architecture likely to hint too disturbingly of the exotic splendours of Eastern fable. Stonehurst, it was true, might be thought a trifle menacing in appearance, even ill-omened, but not in the least exotic. Its configuration suggested a long, low Noah's Ark, come uncomfortably to rest on a heather-grown, coniferous spur of Mount Ararat; a Noah's Ark, the opened lid of which would reveal myself, my parents, Edith, Albert, Billson, Mercy, several dogs and cats, and, at certain seasons, Bracey and Mrs Gullick.

'Tell her to give over,' said Albert, adverting to the subject of Billson and her 'ghost'. 'Too much cold pork and pickles. That's all the matter. Got into trouble with the indigestion merchants, or off her nut, one or the other. She'll find herself locked up with the loonies if she takes on so.'

'Billson said she'd give notice if it happened again.'

'Give notice, I don't think.'

'Won't she, then?'

'Not while I'm here she won't give notice. Don't you believe it.'

Albert shook off one of his ancient bedroom-slippers, adjusting the thick black woollen sock at the apex of the foot, where, not over-clean, the nail of a big toe protruded from a hole at the end. Albert was an oddity, an exceptional member of the household, not only in himself and his office, but in relation to the whole character of my parents' establishment. He had started life as hall-boy – later promoted footman – in my mother's home before her marriage. After my grandmother's death – the dissolution, as it always seemed in Albert's reminiscence, of an epoch – he had drifted about from place to place, for the most part unhappily. Sometimes he quarrelled with the butler; sometimes his employers made too heavy demands on his time; sometimes, worst of all, the cook, or one of the maids, fell in love with him. Love, of course, in such cases, meant marriage. Albert was not, I think, at all interested in love affairs of an irregular kind; nor, for that matter, did he in the least wish to take a wife. On that subject, he felt himself chronically persecuted by women, especially by the most determined of his tormentors (given to writing him long, threatening letters), whom he used to call 'the girl from Bristol'. This preoccupation with the molestations of the opposite sex probably explained his fears that evening of suffragette attack.

In the end, after moving from London to the country, from the country back to London, up to Cumberland, down to Cardigan, Albert had written to my mother – habitually in touch with almost everyone who had ever worked for her – suggesting that, as she was soon to lose a cook, he himself should exchange to that profession, which had always appealed to him, the art of cooking running in his blood through both parents. He was, indeed, known, even in his days as footman, for proficiency in cooking, which had come to him almost by the light of nature. His offer was, therefore, at once accepted, though not without a few privately expressed reservations as to the possibility of Albert's turning out a 'handful'. 'Handful' to some extent he was. Certainly his cooking was no disappointment. That was soon clear. The question why he should prefer employment with a family who lived on so unpretentious a scale, when he might have found little or no difficulty in obtaining a situation as chef in much grander circumstances, with more money and greater prestige, is not easily resolved. Lack of enterprise, physical indolence, liking for the routine of a small domestic community, all no doubt played a part; as also, perhaps, did the residue from a long-forgotten past, some feudal secretion, dormant, yet never entirely defunct within his bones, which predisposed him towards a family with whom he had been associated in his early days of service. That might have been. At the same time, such sentiments, even if they existed, were certainly not to be romantically exaggerated. Albert had few, if any, illusions. For example, he was not at all keen on Stonehurst as a place of residence. The house was little to his taste. He often said so. In this opinion there was no violent dissent from other quarters. Indeed, all concerned agreed in thinking it just as well we should not have to live at Stonehurst for ever, the bungalow being rented 'furnished' on a short renewable lease, while my father's battalion was stationed in the Aldershot Command.

The property stood in country partaking in general feature of the surroundings of that uniquely detestable town, although wilder, more deserted, than its own immediate outskirts. The house, built at the summit of a steep hill, was reached by a stony road – the uneven, treacherous surface of pebbles probably accounting for the name – which turned at a right-angle halfway up the slope, running between a waste of gorse and bracken, from out of which emerged an occasional ivy-strangled holly tree or withered fir: landscape of seemingly purposeful irresponsibility, intentional rejection of all scenic design. In winter, torrents of water gushed over the pebbles and down the ruts of this slippery route (perilous to those who, like General Conyers, attempted the journey in the cars of those days) which continued for two or three hundred yards at the top of the hill, passing the Stonehurst gate. The road then bifurcated, aiming in one direction towards a few barely visible roofs, clustered together on the distant horizon; in the other, entering a small plantation of pine trees, where Gullick, the Stonehurst gardener (fascinatingly described once by Edith in my unobserved presence as 'born out of wedlock'), lived in his cottage with Mrs Gullick. Here, the way dwindled to a track, then became a mere footpath, leading across a vast expanse of heather, its greyish, pinkish tones stained all the year round with great gamboge patches of broom: country taking fire easily in hot summers.

The final limits of the Stonehurst estate, an extensive wired-in tract of desert given over to the devastations of a vast brood of much interbred chickens, bordered the heath, which stretched away into the dim distance, the heather rippling in waves like an inland sea overgrown with weed. Between the chickens and the house lay about ten acres of garden, flower beds, woodland, a couple of tennis courts. The bungalow itself was set away from the road among tall pines. Behind it, below a bank of laurel and Irish yews, espaliered roses sloped towards a kitchen-garden, where Gullick, as if gloomily contemplating the accident of his birth, was usually to be found pottering among the vegetables, foretelling a bad season for whichever crop he stood among. Beyond the white-currant bushes, wild country began again, separated from Stonehurst civilisation by only a low embankment of turf. This was the frontier of a region more than a little captivating – like the stables – on account of its promise of adventure. Dark, brooding plantations of trees; steep, sandy slopes; soft, velvet expanses of green moss, across which rabbits and weasels incessantly hurried on their urgent business: a terrain created for the eternal campaign of warring armies, whose unceasing operations justified recognition of Albert's sleeping-quarters as the outworks of a barbican, or stockade, to be kept in a permanent state of defence. Here, among these woods and clearings, sand and fern, silence and the smell of pine brought a kind of release to the heart, together with a deep-down wish for something, something more than battles, perhaps not battles at all; something realised, even then, as nebulous, blissful, all but unattainable: a feeling of uneasiness, profound and oppressive, yet oddly pleasurable at times, at other times so painful as to be almost impossible to bear.

'General and Mrs Conyers are coming next week,' I said.

'It was me told you that,' said Albert.

'Will you cook something special for them?'

'You bet.'

'Something *very* special?'

'A mousse, I 'spect.'

'Will they like it?'

'Course they will.'

'What did Mrs Conyers's father do to you?'

'I told you.'

'Tell me again.'

'All years ago, when I was with the Alfords.'

'When you helped him on with his overcoat——'

'Put a mouse down the sleeve.'

'A real one?'

'Course not – clockwork.'

'What did you do?'

'Let out a yell.'

'Did they all laugh?'

'Not half, they did.'

'Why did he do it?'

'Used to tell me, joking like, "I've got a grudge against you, Albert, you don't treat me right, always telling me her Ladyship's not at home when I want most to see her. I'm going to pay you out" – so that's what he did one day.'

'Perhaps General Conyers will play a trick on Bracey.'

'Not him.'

'Why not?'

'Wasn't General Conyers put the mouse down the sleeve, it were Lord Vowchurch. No one's going to do a thing like that to Bracey – let alone General Conyers.'

'When does Bracey come back from leave?'

'Day-after-tomorrow.'

'Where did he go?'

'Luton.'

'What did he do there?'

'Stay with his sister-in-law.'

'Bracey said he was glad to get back after his last leave.'

'Won't be this time if the Captain has something to say to him about that second-best full-dress tunic put away in the wrong place.'

Bracey was the soldier-servant, a man unparalleled in smartness of turn-out. His appearance suggested a fox-terrier, a clockwork fox-terrier perhaps (like Lord Vowchurch's clockwork mouse), since there was much of the automaton about him, especially when he arrived on a bicycle. Sometimes, as I have said, he was quartered in the stables with Albert. Bracey and Albert were not on the best of terms. That was only to be expected. Indeed, it was a 'miracle' – so I had heard my parents agree – that the two of them collaborated even so well as they did, 'which wasn't saying much'. Antagonism between soldier-servant and other males of the establishment was, of course, traditional. In the case of female members of the staff, association might, still worse, become amorous. Indeed, this last situation existed to some extent at Stonehurst, where the endemic difficulties of a remote location were increased by the burden of Bracey's temperament, moody as Albert's, though in an utterly different manner.

Looking back, I take Bracey to have been younger than Albert, although, at Stonehurst, a large moustache and face shiny with frenzied scrubbing and shaving made Bracey seem the more time-worn. Unmarried, he was one of those old-fashioned regular soldiers with little or no education – scarcely able to read or write, and on that account debarred from promotion – whose years of spotless turn-out and absolute reliability in minor matters had won him a certain status, indeed, wide indulgence where his own idiosyncrasies were concerned. These idiosyncrasies could be fairly troublesome at times. Bracey was the victim of melancholia. No one seemed to know the precise origin of this affliction: some early emotional mishap; heredity; self-love allowed to get out of hand – any of these could have caused his condition. He came of a large family, greatly dispersed, most of them earning a respectable living; although I once heard Edith and Billson muttering together about a sister of Bracey's said to have been found drowned in the Thames estuary. One brother was a bricklayer in Cardiff; another, a cabman in Liverpool. Bracey liked neither of these brothers. He told me that himself. He greatly preferred the sister-in-law at Luton, who was, I think, a widow. That was why he spent his leave there.

Bracey's periodic vexation of spirit took the form of his 'funny days'. Sometimes he would have a 'funny day' when on duty in the house. These always caused dismay. A 'funny day' in barracks, however trying to his comrades, could not have been equally provoking in that less intimate, more spacious accommodation. Perhaps Bracey had decided to become an officer's servant in order that his 'funny days' should enjoy their full force. On one of these occasions at Stonehurst, he would sit on a kitchen-chair, facing the wall, speaking to no one, motionless as a man fallen into a state of catalepsy. This would take place, of course, only after he had completed all work deputed to him, since he was by nature unyieldingly industrious. The burden of his melancholy was visited on his colleagues, rather than my parents, who had to put up with no more than a general air of incurable glumness diffused about the house, concentrated only whenever Bracey himself was addressed by one or other of them. My father would sometimes rebel against this aggressive, even contagious, depression – to which he was himself no stranger – and then there would be a row. That was rare. In the kitchen, on the other hand, they had to bear with Bracey. On such occasions, when mealtimes approached, Bracey would be asked, usually by Billson, if he wanted anything to eat. There would be silence. Bracey would not turn his head.

'Albert has made an Irish stew,' Billson – as reported by Edith – might say. 'It's a nice stew. Won't you have a taste, Private Bracey?'

At first Bracey would not answer. Billson might then repeat the question, together with an inquiry as to whether Bracey would accept a helping of the stew, or whatever other dish was available, from her own hand. This ritual might continue for several minutes, Billson giggling, though with increased nervousness, because of the personal element involved in Bracey's sadness. This was the fact that he was known to be 'sweet on' Billson herself, who refused to accept him as a suitor. Flattered by Bracey's attentions, she was probably alarmed at the same time by his melancholic fits, especially since her own temperament was a nervous one. In any case, she was always very self-conscious about 'men'.

'I'll have it, if it is my right,' Bracey would at last answer in a voice not much above a whisper.

'Shall I help you to a plate then, Private Bracey?'

'If it's my right, I'll have a plate.'

'Then I'll give you some stew?'

'If it's my right.'

'Shall I?'

'Only if it's my right.'

So long as the 'funny day' lasted, Bracey would commit himself to no more gracious acknowledgment than those words, spoken as if reiterating some charm or magical formula. No wonder the kitchen was disturbed. Behaviour of this sort was very different from Albert's sardonic, worldly dissatisfaction with life, his chronic complaint of persecution at the hands of women.

'I haven't had one of my funny days for a long time,' Bracey, pondering his own condition, would sometimes remark.

There was usually another 'funny day' pretty soon after self-examination had revealed that fact. Indeed, the observation in itself could be regarded as a very positive warning that a 'funny day' was on the way. He was a great favourite with my father, who may have recognised in Bracey some of his own uncalm, incurious nature. From time to time, as I have said, there was an explosion: dire occasions when Bracey would be ordered back to the regiment at twenty-four hours' notice, usually after a succession of 'funny days' had made kitchen society so unendurable that life in the world at large had also become seriously contaminated with nervous strain. In the end, he was always forgiven. Afterwards, for several weeks, every object upon which a lustre could possibly be imposed that fell into Bracey's hands would be burnished brighter than ever before, reduced almost to nothingness by energetic scouring.

'Good old Bracey,' my father would say. 'He has his faults, of course, but he does know the meaning of elbow-grease. I've never met a man who could make top-boots shine like Bracey. They positively glitter.'

'I'm sure he would do anything for *you*,' my mother would say.

She held her own, never voiced, less enthusiastic, views on Bracey.

'He worships you,' she would add.

'Oh, nonsense.'

'He does.'

'Of course not.'

'I say he does.'

'Don't be silly.'

This apparently contrary opinion of my father's – the sequence of the sentences never varied – conveyed no strong sense of disagreement with the opinion my mother had expressed. Indeed, she probably put the case pretty justly. Bracey certainly had a high regard for my father. Verbal description of everything, however, must remain infinitely distant from the thing itself, overstatement and understatement sometimes hitting off the truth better than a flat assertion of bare fact. Bearing in mind, therefore, the all but hopeless task of attempting to express accurately the devious involutions of human character and emotions, you might equally have said with some authenticity that Billson was loved by Bracey, while Billson herself loved Albert. Albert, for his part, possessed that touch of narcissism to be found in some artists whatever their medium – for Albert was certainly an artist in cooking – and apparently loved no one but himself. To make these clumsy statements about an immensely tenuous complex of relationships without hedging them in with every kind of limitation of meaning would be to give a very wrong impression of the kitchen at Stonehurst. At the same time, the situation must basically have resolved itself to something very like these uncompromising terms: a triangular connexion which, by its own awful, eternal infelicity, could almost be regarded by those most concerned as absolutely in the nature of things. Its implications confirmed, so to speak, their worst fears, the individual inner repinings of those three, Billson, Bracey and Albert: Albert believing, with some excuse, that 'the women were after him again'; Bracey, in his own unrequited affections, finding excuse for additional 'funny days'; Billson, in Albert's indifference and Bracey's aspirations, establishing corroboration of her burning, her undying, contempt for men and their lamentable goings-on.

'Just like a man,' Billson used to say, in her simile for human behaviour at its lowest, most despicable.

In spite of her rapid accumulation of experience, both emotional and supernatural, while living at Stonehurst, Billson had not been with us long, two or three months perhaps. Like Albert, she must have been in her late thirties, though my mother used to say Billson looked 'very young for her age'. Like Bracey, Billson, too, came of a large family, to whom, unlike Bracey, she was devoted. She talked without end about her relations, who lived, most of them, in Suffolk. Billson was fond of telling Edith that her people 'thought a lot of themselves'. Fair, not bad-looking, there was something ageless about Billson. Even as a child, I was aware of that. She had been employed at a number of 'good' houses in London: the only reason, so Albert used to imply, why he was himself so indulgent of her vagaries. A 'disappointment' – said to have been a butler – was known to have upset her in early life, made her 'nervy', too much inclined to worry about her health. One of the many doctors consulted at one time or another had advised a 'situation' in the country, where, so the physician told her, she would be less subject to periodical attacks of nausea, feelings of faintness. London air, Billson often used to complain, did not suit her. This condition of poorish health, especially her 'nerves', explained Billson's presence at Stonehurst, where maids of her experience were hard to acquire.

Behind her back (with reference to the supposed poverty of intellectual resource to be found in the county of her origin), Albert used to call Billson 'Silly Suffolk' and complain of her clumsiness, which was certainly notable. To her face, he was more respectful, not, I think, from chivalrous feelings, but because he feared too much badinage on his own part might be turned against himself, offering Billson indirect means of increasing their intimacy. Billson, in spite – perhaps because – of her often expressed disdain for men (even with Albert her love took a distinctly derisive shape), rated high her own capacity for raising desire in them. She would never, for example, mount a step-ladder (for some such purpose as to re-hang the drawing-room curtains) if my father, Albert or Bracey happened to be in the room. She always took care to explain afterwards that modesty – risk of exposing to a male eye even a minute area of female leg – was her reason for avoiding this physical elevation. I never learnt the precise form taken by her 'chasing after' Albert, about which even Edith – on the whole pretty discreet – was at times prepared to joke, nor, for that matter, the method – equally accepted by Edith – by which Bracey courted Billson. Bracey, it is true, would sometimes offer to clean the silver for her, a job he certainly performed better than she did. It was also true that Billson would sometimes tease Albert by subjecting him to her invariable, her all-embracing pessimism. She could also, of course, show pessimism about Bracey's affairs, but in a far less interested tone.

'Pity it's going to rain now your afternoon off's come round, Albert,' she would say. 'Not that you can want to go into Aldershot much after losing the money on that horse. Why, you must be stony broke. If you're not quick you'll miss the carrier again.'

To Bracey she would be more formal.

'I expect you'll have to go on one of those route-marches, Private Bracey, now the hot weather's come on.'

Billson would upset Albert fairly regularly every few weeks by her fearful forebodings of ill. Once, when she saw the local constable plodding up the drive, she had rushed into the kitchen in a state of uncontrolled agitation.

'Albert!' she had cried, 'what have you done? There's a policeman coming to the door.'

Albert, as I have said, was easily frightened himself. On this occasion, so Edith reported, he 'went as white as a sheet'. It was a relief to everyone when the subject of inquiry turned out to be nothing worse than a dog-licence. I did not, of course, know all these things at the time, certainly not the relative strength of the emotions imprisoned under the surface of passing events at Stonehurst. Even now, much remains conjectural. Edith and I, naturally, enjoyed a rather separate existence, segregated within the confines of night- and day-nursery. There was also, to take up one's time, Miss Orchard, who – teaching all children of the neighbourhood – visited the house regularly. Edith, reasonably enough, felt the boundaries of her own domain were not to be too far exceeded by intrusion on my part into kitchen routine; while Miss Orchard's 'lessons' occupied important expanses of the day. All the same, I did not propose to allow myself to be excluded utterly from a society in which life was lived with such intensity. Edith used to suffer from terrible 'sick headaches' every three or four weeks (not unlike Billson's bouts of nausea), and from what she herself called 'small aches and pains few people die of', so that, with Edith laid low in this manner, my parents away from home, Miss Orchard teaching elsewhere, the veil would be lifted for a short space from many things usually hidden. As a child you are in some ways more acutely aware of what people feel about one another than you are when childhood has come to an end.

For that reason, I always suspected that Billson would – to use her favourite phrase – 'get her own back' on Albert for calling her 'Silly Suffolk', even though I was at the same time unaware, of course, that her aggressiveness had its roots in love. Indeed, so far was I from guessing the true situation that, with some idea of arranging the world, as then known to me, in a neat pattern, I once suggested to Billson that she should marry Bracey. She laughed so heartily (like the maid damping the Insurance stamp on Mr Lloyd George's tongue) at this certainly very presumptuous suggestion, while assuring me with such absolute candour of her own determination to remain for ever single, that – not for the last time within similar terms of reference – I was completely taken in.

'Anyway,' said Billson, 'I wouldn't have a soldier. None of my family would ever look at a *soldier*. Why, they'd disown me.'

This absolute disallowance of the profession of arms as the calling of a potential husband could not have been more explicitly expressed. Indeed, Billson's words on that occasion gave substantial grounds for the defiant shape taken by Bracey's bouts of gloom. There was good reason to feel depression if this was what women felt about his situation. A parallel prejudice against even military companionship, much less marriage, was shared by Edith.

'Nice girls don't walk out with soldiers,' she said.

'Why not?'

'They don't.'

'Who says not?'

'Everybody says not.'

'But why not?'

'Ask anybody.'

'Not even the Life Guards?'

'No.'

'Nor the Blues?'

'Tommies are all the same.'

That seemed to settle matters finally so far as Bracey was concerned. There appeared to be no hope. There was Mercy, the housemaid, but even my own reckless projects for adjusting everyone else's personal affairs according to my whim did not include such a fate for Bracey. I could see that was not a rational proposition. In fact, it was out of the question. There were several reasons. In the first place, Mercy herself played little or no part in the complex of personalities who inhabited the Stonehurst kitchen – no emotional part, at least. Certainly Mercy herself had no desire to do so. She was a quite young girl from one of the villages in the neighbourhood, found for my mother by Mrs Gullick. Together with her parents, Mercy belonged to a local religious sect, so small that it embraced only about twenty individuals, all related to one another.

'They don't believe anyone else is going to Heaven,' Edith said of this communion.

'No one at all?'

'Not a single soul.'

'Why not?'

'They say they're the only ones saved.'

'Why?'

'Call themselves the Elect.'

'They aren't the only people going to Heaven.'

'I should just about think not.'

'They are silly to say that.'

'Silly, no error.'

Billson went still further than Edith on the same theological issue.

'That girl won't be saved herself,' he said. 'Not if she goes about repeating such things of her neighbours. God won't want her.'

The positivist character of Mercy's religious beliefs, more especially in relation to the categorical damnation of the rest of mankind, was expressed outwardly in a taciturn demeanour, defined by Edith as 'downright disobliging', her creed no doubt discouraging frivolous graces of manner. In personal appearance, she was equally severe, almost deliberately unprepossessing.

'*Her* face will never be her fortune,' Albert once remarked, when Mercy had left the kitchen in a huff after some difference about washing up.

Even Bracey, with all his unvoiced disapproval of Albert, was forced to laugh at the wit, the aptness of this observation. Bracey was, in any case, cheerful enough between his 'funny days'. If his spirits, at the lowest, were very low indeed, they also rose, at other moments, to heights never attained by Albert's. On such occasions, when he felt all comparatively well with the world, Bracey would softly hum under his breath:

'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday,
May be merry and bright.
But I'm going to be married on Sunday;
Oh, I wish it was Sunday night.'

Earlier in the year, during one of these bursts of cheerfulness, Bracey had offered to take me to see a football match. This was an unexpected, a highly acceptable invitation. It always seemed to me a matter of complaint that, although my father was a soldier, we saw at Stonehurst, in practice, little or nothing of the army, that is to say, the army as such. We lived on this distant hilltop, miles away from the daily activities of troops, who were to be sighted only very occasionally on some local exercise to which summer manœuvres had fortunately brought them. Even so much as the solitary outline of a Military Policeman was rare, jogging his horse across the heather, a heavy brushstroke of dark blue, surmounted by a tiny blob of crimson, moving in the sun through a Vuillard landscape of pinkish greys streaked with yellow and silver. I had mentioned to Bracey the sight of one of these lonely riders. He showed no warmth.

'Them Redcaps ain't loved all that.'

'Aren't they?'

'Not likely.'

'What do they do?'

'Run a bloke in soon as look at him.'

'What for?'

'They'll find somethink.'

'What happens to him?'

'Does a spell of clink.'

'What's that?'

'Put behind bars.'

'But they let him out sometime?'

'Twenty-eight days, might be, if he's lucky.'

'In prison?'

'Some blokes want to get even when they comes out.'

'How?'

'Waits behind a hedge on a dark night.'

'And then——'

'Takes the Redcap unawares like. Makes an ambush like. Give him a hiding.'

I accepted this picture of relaxed discipline in the spirit offered by Bracey, that is to say, without expression of praise or blame. Clearly he had described one of those aspects of army life kept, generally speaking, in the background, a world of violent action from which Stonehurst seemed for ever excluded.

Nor was our separation from the army only geographical. Military contacts were further lessened by my mother's distaste – her morbid horror, almost – of officers' wives who were 'regimental' – ladies who speculated on the Battalion's chances of winning the Cup, or discussed with too exact knowledge the domestic crises in the life of Mrs Colour-Sergeant Jones. My mother did not, in fact, enjoy any form of 'going out', military or civilian. Before marriage, she had been keen enough on parties and balls, but, my father having little or no taste for such amusements, she forgot about them herself, then developed greater dislike than his own. Even in those distant days my parents had begun to live a life entirely enclosed by their own domestic interests. There was a certain amount of routine 'calling', of course; subalterns came to tennis-parties; children to nursery-tea.

Bracey's invitation to the football match was therefore welcome, not so much because I was greatly interested in football but more on account of the closer contact the jaunt offered with army life. Permission was asked for the projected excursion. It was accorded by authority. Bracey and I set off together in a dog-cart, Bracey wearing blue walking-out dress, with slight screws of wax at each end of his moustache, a small vanity affected by him on important occasions. I had hoped he would be armed with a bayonet, but was disappointed. It seemed just worthwhile asking if he had merely forgotten it.

'Only sergeants carries sidearms, walking out.'

'Why?'

'Regulation.'

'Don't you ever?'

'On parade.'

'Never else?'

'Reckon we will when the Germans comes.'

The humorous possibilities of a German invasion I had often heard adumbrated. Sometimes my father – in spite of my mother's extreme dislike of the subject, even in jest – would refer to this ludicrous, if at the same time rather sinister – certainly grossly insulting – incursion as something inevitable in the future, like a visit to the dentist or ultimately going to school.

'You'll carry a bayonet always if the Germans come?'

'You bet.'

'You'll need it.'

'Bayonet's a man's best friend in time of war,' said Bracey.

'And a rifle?'

'And a rifle,' Bracey conceded. 'Rifle and bayonet's a man's best friend when he goes to battle.'

I thought a lot about that remark afterwards. Clearly its implications raised important moral issues, if not, indeed, conflicting judgments. I used to ponder, for example, what appeared to be its basic scepticism, so different from the supreme confidence in the claims of heroic companionship put forward in all the adventure stories one read. (Thirty years later, Sunny Farebrother – in contrast with Bracey – told me that, even though he cared little for most books, he sometimes re-read *For Name and Fame; or Through Khyber Passes*, simply because Henty's narrative recalled to him so vividly the comradeship he had himself always enjoyed under arms.) Bracey shared none of the uplifting sentiments of the adventure stories. That was plain. Even within my own then strictly limited experience, I could see, unwillingly, that there might be something to be said for Bracey's point of view. All the same, I knew Bracey had himself seen no active service. His opinion on such subjects must be purely theoretical. In short, the door was not irretrievably closed on the romantic approach. I felt glad of that. During the rest of our journey to the Barracks, however, Bracey did not enlarge further upon the theme of weapons *versus* friendship.

We had a brief conversation at the gate with the Orderly Corporal, stabled the pony, set off across the parade-ground. The asphalt square was deserted except for three figures pacing its far side, moving briskly and close together, as if attempting to keep warm in the sharp weather of early spring. This trio marched up and down continually, always turning about at the same point in their beat. The two outside soldiers wore equipment; the central file was beltless, his right hand done up in a white bandage.

'Who are they?'

'Prisoner and escort.'

'What are they doing?'

'Exercising a bloke under arrest.'

'What's he done?'

'Chopped off his trigger finger.'

'By accident?'

'Course not.'

'How, then?'

'With a bill.'

'On purpose?'

'You bet.'

'Whatever for?'

'Saw his name in Orders on the draft for India.'

'Why didn't he like that?'

'Thought the climate wouldn't suit him, I reckon.'

'But he won't have any finger.'

'Won't have to go to India neither.'

'Were you surprised?'

'Not particular.'

'Why not?'

'Nothing those young blokes won't do.'

Once again Bracey expressed no judgment on the subject of this violent action, but I was aware on this occasion of a sense of disapproval stronger than any he had allowed to take shape in relation to assaulting Military Policemen. Here, certainly, was another story to make one ponder. I saw that the private soldier under arrest must have felt a very active dislike for the thought of army life in the East to have taken so extreme a step to avoid service there: a contrast with the builder of Stonehurst, deliberately reminding himself by the contents and architecture of his house of former Indian days. Like Bracey's picture of ambushed Redcaps, the three khaki figures, sharply advancing and retiring across the far side of the square, demonstrated a seamy, menacing side of army life, one which perhaps explained to some extent the reprobation in which Edith and Billson held soldiers as husbands. These haphazard – indeed, decidedly disreputable – aspects of the military career by no means entirely repelled me; on the contrary, they provided an additional touch of uneasy excitement. At the same time I saw that such episodes must have encouraged Bracey to form his own strong views as to the ultimate unreliability of human nature, his reliance on bayonets rather than comrades. In fact his unspoken attitude towards this painful, infinitely disagreeable, occurrence fitted perfectly with that philosophy. What use, Bracey seemed by implication to argue, would this bandaged soldier be as a companion in arms, if he preferred the loss of a forefinger to the completion of his military engagements when their circumstances threatened to be uncongenial to himself? That was Bracey's manner of looking at things, his inner world, perhaps to some extent the cause of his 'funny days'. A bugle, shrill, yet desperately sad, sounded far away down the lines.

'What is he blowing?'

'Defaulters.'

We passed through hutted cantonments towards the football field.

'Albert cut his finger the other day,' I said. 'There was a lot of blood.'

'Lot of fuss too,' said Bracey.

That was true. Albert's world of feeling was a very different one from Bracey's. A nervous man, he disliked violence, blood, suffragettes, anything of that kind. He was always for keeping the peace in the kitchen, even when his own scathing comments had started the trouble.

'I should not wish to cross the Captain in any of his appetites,' he had once remarked to my mother, when discussing with her what the savoury was to be for dinner that night.

Accordingly, Albert had been dreadfully alarmed when my father, on a day taken from duty to follow the local hounds, a rare occurrence (heaven knows what fox-hunting must have been like in that neighbourhood), having cut himself shaving that morning, managed in the course of breakfast, the wound reopening, to get blood all over his white breeches. Certainly the to-do made during the next half-hour justified perturbation on a cosmic scale. For my father all tragedies were major tragedies, this being especially his conviction if he were himself in any way concerned. On this occasion, he was beside himself. Bracey, on the other hand, showed calmness in the face of the appalling dooms fate seemed to have decreed on the bungalow and all its inhabitants. While my mother, distressed as ever by the absolutely unredeemed state of misery and rage that misfortune always provoked in my father's spirit, attempted to prepare infinitesimal morsels of cotton-wool to stem the equally small, no less obstinate, flux of blood, Bracey found another pair of riding-breeches, assembled the equipment for extracting my father from his boots, fitted the new breeches, slid him into his boots again. Finally, all this in a quite remarkably short space of time for the completion of so formidable, so complicated, so ultimately thankless a series of operations, Bracey gave my father a leg into the saddle. The worst was over; too much time had not been lost. Later, when horse and rider had disappeared from sight on the way to the meet, the nervous strain he had been through caused Bracey to remain standing at attention, on and off, for several minutes together before he retired to the kitchen. I think the day turned out, in any case, no great success: rain fell; hounds streamed in full cry through a tangle of wire; my father was thrown, retaining his eyeglass in his eye, but hurting his back and ruining his hat for ever. In short, evil influences – possibly the demons of Stonehurst or even the

Furies themselves – seemed malignantly at work. However, that was no fault of Bracey's.

'Why did you think it wrong of Billson to give the little boy a slice of cake?' I asked.

We were still looking at the match, which, to tell the truth, did not entirely hold my attention, since I have never had any taste for watching games.

'Not hers to give,' said Bracey, very sternly.

I can see now, looking back, that the question was hopelessly, criminally, lacking in tact on my own part. I knew perfectly well that Bracey and Albert did not get on well together, that they differed never more absolutely than on this particular issue. I had often, as I have said, heard my parents speak of the delicacy of the Albert–Bracey mutual relationship. There was really no excuse for asking something so stupid, a question to which, in any case, I had frequently heard the answer from other sources. All the same, the incident to which my inquiry referred had for some reason caught my imagination. In fact everything to do with 'Dr Trelawney's place', as it was called locally, always gave me an excited, uneasy feeling, almost comparable to that brought into play by the story of the bandaged soldier. Sometimes, when out for a walk with Edith or my mother, we would pass Dr Trelawney's house, a pebble-dashed, gabled, red-tiled residence, a mile or two away, somewhere beyond the roofs on the horizon faced by the Stonehurst gate.

Dr Trelawney conducted a centre for his own peculiar religious, philosophical – some said magical – tenets, a cult of which he was high priest, if not actually messiah. This establishment was one of those fairly common strongholds of unsorted ideas that played such a part in the decade ended by the war. Simple-lifers, utopian socialists, spiritualists, occultists, theosophists, quietists, pacifists, futurists, cubists, zealots of all sorts in their approach to life and art, later to be relentlessly classified into their respective religious, political, aesthetic or psychological categories, were then thought of by the unenlightened as scarcely distinguishable one from another: a collection of visionaries who hoped to build a New Heaven and a New Earth through the agency of their particular crackpot activities, sinister or comic, according to the way you looked at such things. Dr Trelawney was a case in point. In the judgment of his neighbours there remained an unbridgable margin of doubt as to whether he was a holy man – at least a very simple and virtuous one – whose unconventional behaviour was to be tolerated, even applauded, or a charlatan – perhaps a dangerous rogue – to be discouraged by all right-thinking people.

When out with his disciples, running through the heather in a short white robe or tunic, his long silky beard and equally long hair caught by the breeze, Dr Trelawney had an uncomfortably biblical air. His speed was always well maintained for a man approaching middle years. The disciples were of both sexes, most of them young. They, too, wore their hair long, and were dressed in 'artistic' clothes of rough material in pastel shades. They would trot breathlessly by, Dr Trelawney leading with long, loping strides, apparently making for nowhere in particular. I used to play with the idea that something awful had happened to me – my parents had died suddenly, for example – and ill chance forced me to become a member of Dr Trelawney's juvenile community. Casual mention of his name in conversation would even cause me an uneasy thrill. Once, we saw Dr Trelawney and his flock roaming through the scrub at the same moment as the Military Policeman on his patrol was riding back from the opposite direction. The sun was setting. This meeting and merging of two elements – two ways of life – made a striking contrast in physical appearance, moral ideas and visual tone-values.

My mother had once dropped in to the post office and general shop of a neighbouring village to buy stamps (perhaps the Health Insurance stamps commemorated in Albert's picture of Mr Lloyd George) and found Dr Trelawney already at the counter. The shop, kept by a deaf old woman, sold groceries, sweets, papers, almost everything, in fact, only a small corner behind a kind of iron hutch being devoted to postal business. Dr Trelawney was negotiating the registration of a parcel, a package no doubt too valuable – too sacred perhaps – to be entrusted to the hand of a neophyte. My mother had to wait while this laborious matter was contrived.

'He looked as if he was wearing his nightshirt,' she said afterwards, 'and a very short one at that.'

When the complicated process of registration had at last been completed, Dr Trelawney made a slight pass with his right hand, as if to convey benediction on the old woman who had served him.

'The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True,' he said in a low, but clear and resonant voice.

Then he left the shop, making a great clatter – my mother said – with his sandals. We heard later that these words were his invariable greeting, first and last, to all with whom he came in contact.

'Horrid fellow,' said my mother. 'He gave me a creepy feeling. I am sure Mr Deacon would know him. To tell the truth, when we used to visit Mr Deacon in Brighton, he used to give me just the same creepy feeling too.'

In saying this, my mother was certainly expressing her true sentiments, although perhaps not all of them. As I have said before, she had herself rather a taste for the occult (she loved delving into the obscurities of biblical history and prophecy), so that, however much Dr Trelawney may have repelled her, there can be no doubt that she also felt some curiosity, even if concealed, about his goings-on. She was right in supposing Mr Deacon would know about him. When I myself ran across Mr Deacon in later life and questioned him on the subject, he at once admitted that he had known Dr Trelawney slightly at some early point in their careers.

'Not a person with whom I ever wanted my name to be too closely associated,' said Mr Deacon, giving one of his deep, sceptical laughs. 'Too much abracadabra about Trelawney. He started with interests of a genuinely scientific and humane kind – full of idealism, you know – then gradually involved himself with all sorts of mystical nonsense, transcendental magic, goodness knows what rubbish. Made quite a good thing out of it, I believe. Contributions from the Faithful, women especially. Human beings are sad dupes, I fear. The priesthood would have a thin time of it were that not so. Now, I don't expect Trelawney has read a line of economics – probably never heard of Marx. "The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True," forsooth. Then you were expected to answer: "The Vision of Visions heals the Blindness of Sight." I was too free a spirit for Trelawney in spite of his denial of the World. Still, some of his early views on diet were on the right track.'

More than that, Mr Deacon would not say. He had given himself to many enthusiasms at one time or another, too many, he sometimes owned. By the time I met him, when Pacifism and Communism occupied most of the time he could spare from his antique shop, he was inclined to deride his earlier, now cast-down altars. All the same, he never wholly lost interest in Vegetarianism and Hygienic Clothing, even after he had come to look upon such causes as largely frivolous adjuncts to World Revolution.

As it happened, the Trelawney teaching on diet brought the Trelawney establishment more particularly to Stonehurst notice. These nutritional views played a part in local legend, simply because the younger disciples, several of whom were mere children, would from time to time call at the door of some house in the neighbourhood and ask for a glass of milk or a snack. Probably the fare at Dr Trelawney's, carefully thought out, was also unsubstantial, especially when it came to long, energetic rambles over the countryside, which stimulated hunger. In my own fantasies of being forced to become one of their number, semi-starvation played a macabre part. On one such occasion – it was a first visit by one of Dr Trelawney's flock to Stonehurst – Billson, answering the door, had, on request, dispensed a slice of rather stale seed-cake. She had done this unwillingly, only after much discussion with Albert. It was a moment when Bracey was having one of his 'funny days', therefore, by definition, unable to take part in any consultation regarding this benefaction. When the 'funny day' was over, however, and Bracey was, as it were, officially notified of the incident, he expressed the gravest disapproval. The cake, Bracey said, should never have been given. Billson asserted that she had Albert's support in making the donation. Always inclined to hysteria, she was thoroughly upset by Bracey's strictures, no doubt all the more severe on account of his own warm feelings for her. Albert, at first lukewarm on the subject, was driven into more energetic support of Billson by Bracey's now opening the attack on two fronts. In the end, the slice of seed-cake became a matter of bitter controversy in the kitchen, Bracey upholding the view that the dispensation of all charity should be referred to my parents; Billson sometimes defending, sometimes excusing her action; Albert of the opinion that the cake did not fall within the sphere of charity, because Dr Trelawney, whatever his eccentricities, was a neighbour, to whom, with his household, such small acts of hospitality were appropriate.

No doubt Albert's experience of a wider world gave him a certain breadth and generosity of view, not in the least sentimental, but founded on a fundamental belief in a traditional civilisation. Whether or not that was at the root of his conclusions, the argument became so heated that at last Billson, in tears, appealed to my mother. That was before the 'ghost' appeared to Billson. Indeed, it was the first serious indication of her highly-strung nerves. She explained how much it upset her to be forced to make decisions, repeated over and over again how she had never wanted to deal with the 'young person from Dr Trelawney's'. My mother, unwilling to be drawn into the controversy, gave judgment that dispensation of cake was 'all right, if it did not happen too often'. There the matter rested. Even so, Billson had to retire to bed for a day. She felt distraught. In the same way, my mother's ruling made no difference whatever to Bracey's view of the matter; nor was Bracey to be moved by Albert's emphasis on the undeniable staleness of the cake. It did not matter that Edith and Mrs Gullick supported my mother, or that Mercy did not care, since in her eyes donor and beneficiary were equally marked out for damnation. Bracey maintained his position. From this conflict, I lived to some extent apart, observing mainly through the eyes of Edith, a medium which left certain facts obscure. Getting Bracey alone was therefore an opportunity to learn more, even if an opportunity better disregarded. The fact was, I wanted to hear Bracey's opinion from his own lips.

'She didn't ought to have done it,' Bracey said.

'But Albert thought it was all right.'

'Course he thought it was all right. What's it matter to him?'

'Billson said the little boy was very grateful.'

Bracey did not even bother to comment on this last aspect of the transaction. He only sniffed, one of his habits when displeased. Billson's statement must have struck him as beneath discussion. In fact that foolish question of mine came near to ruining the afternoon. The match ended. There was some ragged cheering. We passed once more across the barrack-square, from which prisoner and escort had withdrawn to some other sphere of penal activity. Bracey was silent all the way home. I knew instinctively that a 'funny day' – almost certainly provoked by myself – could not be far off. This presentiment proved correct. Total spleen was delayed, though stormily, until the following Friday, when a sequence of 'funny days' of the most gruelling kind took immediate shape. These endured for the best part of a week, causing much provocation to Albert, who used to complain that Bracey's 'funny days' affected his own culinary powers, for example, in the mixing of mayonnaise, which – making mayonnaise being a tricky business – could well have been true.

Billson's tactics to entrap Albert matrimonially no doubt took place to some considerable extent in his own imagination, but, as I have said, even Edith accepted the fact that there was a substratum of truth in his firm belief that 'she had her eye on him', hoped to make him 'hang up his hat'. Billson may have refused to admit even to herself the strength of her passion, which certainly showed itself finally in an extreme, decidedly inconvenient form. Anxiety about her own health no doubt amplified a tendency in her to abandon all self-control when difficult situations arose: the loneliness of Stonehurst, its 'ghosts', also working adversely on her nerves. For the occasion of her breakdown Billson could not, in some ways, have picked a worse day; in others, she could not have found a better one. It was the Sunday when General and Mrs Conyers came to luncheon.

Visitors were rare at Stonehurst. No one but a relation or very, very old friend would ever have been invited to spend the night under its roof, any such bivouac (sudden descent of Uncle Giles, for example) being regarded as both exceptional and burdensome. This was in part due to the limited accommodation there, which naturally forbade large-scale entertaining. It was also the consequence of the isolated life my parents elected to live. Neither of them was lacking in a spirit of hospitality as such, my father especially, when in the right mood, liking to 'do well' anyone allowed past the barrier of his threshold. Even so, guests were not often brought in to meals. That was one of Albert's grievances. If he cooked, he liked to cook on as grand a scale as possible. There was little opportunity at Stonehurst. Indeed, Albert's art was in general largely wasted on my parents: my mother's taste for food being simple, verging on the ascetic; my father – again in certain moods – liking sometimes to dwell on the delights of the gourmet, more often crotchety about what was set before him, dyspeptic in its assimilation.

However, General Conyers was regarded as 'different', not only as a remote cousin of my mother's – although very much, as my brother-in-law, Chips Lovell, would have said, a cousin *à la mode de Bretagne* – but also for his countless years as an old, if never particularly close, friend of the family. Even at the date of which I speak, Aylmer Conyers was long retired from the army (in the rank of brigadier-general), having brought to a close, soon after he married, a career that might have turned out a brilliant one. Mrs Conyers, quite twenty years younger than her husband, was also on good terms with my mother – they would usually exchange letters if more than a year passed without meeting – although, again, their friendship could never have been called intimate. Bertha Conyers, rather sad and apologetic in appearance, had acquired, so people said, a persecuted manner in girlhood from her father's delight in practical jokes (like the clockwork mouse he had launched on Albert), and also from his harrying of his daughters for failing to be born boys. In spite of this air of having spent a lifetime being bullied, Mrs Conyers was believed to exercise a firm influence over her husband, to some extent keeping his eccentricities in check.

'Aylmer Conyers used to have rather a roving eye,' my father would say. 'That's all changed since his marriage. Wouldn't look at another woman.'

'He's devoted to Bertha, certainly,' my mother would agree, perhaps unwilling to commit her opinion in that respect too definitely.

For my father, the Conyers visit presented, like so many other elements of life, a sharp diffusion of sentiment. By introducing my father a short time earlier in the guise, so to speak, of a fox-hunter wearing an eyeglass, I risk the conveyance of a false impression, indeed, a totally erroneous one. The eyeglass was on account of extreme short sight, for, although he had his own brand of dandyism, that dandyism was not at all of the eyeglass variety. Nor was hunting his favourite pastime. He rode fairly well ('blooded' at the age of nine out with the Belvoir, his own father being an unappeasable fox-hunter), but he took little pleasure in horses, or any outdoor occupation. It is true that he liked to speak of hunting in a tone of expertise, just as he liked to talk of wine without greatly caring to drink it. He had little natural aptitude for sport of any sort and his health was not good. What did he like? That is less easy to say. Consecrated, in one sense, to his profession, he possessed at the same time none of that absolute indifference to his own surroundings essential to the ambitious soldier. He was saddled with the equally serious military – indeed, also civilian – handicap of chronic inability to be obsequious to superiors in rank, particularly when he found them uncongenial. He was attracted by the Law, like his brother Martin; allured by the stock-market, like his brother Giles. One of the least 'intellectual' of men, he took intermittent pleasure in pictures and books, especially in such aspects of 'collecting' as rare 'states' of prints, which took his fancy, or 'first editions' of comparatively esoteric authors: items to be safely classified in their own market, without excessive reference, critically speaking, to their standing as works of art or literature. In these fields, although by no means a reactionary in aesthetic taste, he would recognise no later changes of fashion after coming to his own decision on any picture or school of painting. After a bout of buying things, he would almost immediately forget about them, often, a year or two later purchasing another copy (sometimes several copies) of the same volume or engraving; so that when, from time to time, our possessions were taken out of store, duplicates of most of his favourite works always came to light. He used to read in the evenings, never with much enjoyment or concentration.

'I like to rest my mind after work,' he would say. 'I don't like books that make me think.'

That was perfectly true. In due course, as he grew older, my father became increasingly committed to this exclusion of what made him think, so that finally he disliked not only books, but also people – even places – that threatened to induce this disturbing mental effect. Perhaps that attitude of mind – one could almost say process of decay – is among many persons more general than might be supposed. In my father's case, this dislike for thought seemed to stem from a basic conviction that his childhood had been an unhappy one. His melancholy was comparable, even though less eccentrically expressed, with Bracey's, no doubt contributing to their mutual understanding. Much the youngest of his family, his claim to have been neglected was probably true. Happy marriage did not cure him. Painfully sensitive to criticism, he was never (though he might not show this) greatly at ease with other men; in that last characteristic resembling not a few of those soldiers, who, paradoxically, reach high rank, positively assisted by their capacity for avoiding friendship, too close personal ties which can handicap freedom of ascent.

'These senior officers are like a lot of ballerinas,' said my friend Pennistone, when, years later, we were in the army together.

Certainly the tense nerves of men of action – less notorious than those of imaginative men – are not to be minimised. This was true of my father, who, like many persons who believe primarily in the will – although his own will was in no way remarkable – hid in his heart a hatred of constituted authority. He did his best to conceal this antipathy, because the one thing he hated, more than constituted authority itself, was to hear constituted authority questioned by anyone but himself. This is perhaps an endemic trait in all who love power, and my father had an absolute passion for power, although he was never in a position to wield it on a notable scale. In his own house, only he himself was allowed to criticise – to use a favourite phrase of his – 'the powers that be'. In private, he would, for example, curse the Army Council (then only recently come into existence); in the presence of others, even those 'in the Service' with whom he was on the best of terms, he would defend to the last ditch official policy of which in his heart he disapproved.

These contradictory veins of feeling placed my father in a complex position *vis-à-vis* General Conyers, whom Uncle Giles, on the other hand, made no secret of finding 'a bit too pleased with himself'. As a much older man, universally recognised as a first-rate soldier, the General presented a figure to whom deference on my father's part was obviously due. At the same time, the General held revolutionary views on army reform, which he spared no opportunity of voicing in terms utterly uncomplimentary to 'the powers that be', military or civil. My father, of course, possessed his own especial likes and dislikes throughout the hierarchy of the army, both individual and general, but deplored too plain speaking even when he was to some considerable extent in agreement.

'Aylmer Conyers is fond of putting everyone right,' he used to complain. 'If he'd stayed in the Service a few years longer, instead of devoting his life to training poodles as gun-dogs, and scraping away at that 'cello of his, he might have discovered that the army has changed a little since the Esher Report.'

Uncle Giles would immediately have been reproved for making so open a criticism of a senior officer, but my father must have felt that to criticise General Conyers was the only method of avoiding apparent collusion in an attack on the whole Army Council. In any case, Uncle Giles's unsatisfactory mode of life, not to mention his dubious political opinions, radical to the point of anarchism, put him out of court in most family discussions. He was at this period employed in a concern fascinatingly designated a 'bucket-shop'. My father had, in truth, never forgiven his brother for transferring himself, years before – after some tiff with his commanding officer – to the Army Service Corps.

'It's not just snobbishness on my part,' my father used to say, long after Uncle Giles had left that, and every other, branch of the army. 'I know they win a lot of riding events at gymkhanas, but I can't stick 'em. They're such an unco-operative lot of beggars when you have to deal with 'em about stores. I date all Giles's troubles from leaving his regiment.'

However, I mention Uncle Giles at this point only to emphasise the manner in which the Conyers visit was regarded for a number of reasons with mixed feelings by my parents. There were good aspects; there were less good ones. Albert, for instance, would be put into an excellent humour for several weeks by this rare opportunity for displaying his talents. He would make his mousse. He would recall Lord Vowchurch's famous practical joke with the clockwork mouse, one of the great adventures of Albert's life, not only exciting but refreshingly free from the artifices of women – although Mrs Conyers herself was allowed some reflected glory from her father's act.

Mrs Conyers was one of the few people with whom my mother liked to chat of 'old times': the days before she set out on the nomadic existence of a soldier's wife. Mrs Conyers's gossip, well informed, gently expressed, was perfectly adapted to recital at length. This mild manner of telling sometimes hair-raising stories was very much to the taste of my mother, never at ease with people she thought to be 'worldly', at the same time not unwilling to enjoy an occasional glimpse of 'the world', viewed through the window briefly opened by Mrs Conyers. The General had become a Gentleman-at-Arms after leaving the army, so that her stories included, with a touch of racing at its most respectable, some glimpse of the outskirts of Court life.

'Bertha Conyers has such an amusing way of putting things,' my mother would say. 'But I really don't believe all her stories, especially the one about Mrs Asquith and the man who asked her if she danced the tango.'

The fact that General Conyers was occasionally on duty at palaces rather irked my father, not so much because the General took this side of his life too seriously – to which my father would have been quite capable of objecting – but because he apparently did not take his court duties seriously enough.

'If I were the King and I heard Aylmer Conyers talking like that, I'd sack him,' he once said in a moment of irritation.

The General and his wife were coming to Stonehurst after staying with one of Mrs Conyers's sisters, whose husband commanded a Lancer regiment in the area. Rather adventurously for that period, they were undertaking the journey by motor-car, a vehicle recently acquired by the General, which he drove himself. Indeed, the object of the visit was largely to display this machine, to compare it with the car my father had himself bought only a few months before. There was a good deal of excitement at the prospect of seeing a friend's 'motor', although I think my father a little resented the fact that a man so much older than himself should be equally prepared to face such grave risks, physical and financial. As a matter of fact, General Conyers, who always prided himself on being up-to-date, was even rumoured to have been 'up' in a flying machine. This story was dismissed by my parents as being unworthy of serious credence.

'Aylmer Conyers will never get to the top of that damned hill,' said my father more than once during the week before their arrival.

'Did you tell him about it?' said my mother.

'I warned him in my letter. He is a man who never takes advice. I'm told he was just the same at Pretoria. Just a bit of luck that things turned out as well as they did for him – due mostly to Boer stupidity, I believe. Obstinate as a mule. Was up before Bobs himself once for disobeying an order. Talked himself out of it, even got promotion a short time after. Wonderful fellow. Well, so much the worse for him if he gets stuck – slip backwards more likely. That may be a lesson to him. Bad luck on Bertha Conyers if there's an accident. It's her I feel sorry for. I've worried a lot about it. He's a selfish fellow in some ways, is old Aylmer.'

'Do you think I ought to write to Bertha again myself?' asked my mother, anxious to avoid the awful mishaps envisaged by my father.

'No, no.'

'But I will if you think I should.'

'No, no. Let him stew in his own juice.'

The day of the Conyerses' luncheon came. I woke up that morning with a feeling of foreboding, a sensation to which I was much subject as a child. It was Sunday. Presentiments of ill were soon shown to have good foundation. For one thing, Billson turned out to have seen the 'ghost' again on the previous night; to be precise, in the early hours of that morning. The phantom had taken its accustomed shape of an elongated white figure reaching almost to the ceiling of the room. It disappeared, as usual, before she could rub her eyes. Soon after breakfast, I heard Billson delivering a first-hand account of this psychical experience to Mrs Gullick, who used to lend a hand in the kitchen, a small, elderly, red-faced woman, said to 'give Gullick a time', because she considered she had married beneath her. Mrs Gullick, although a staunch friend of Billson's, was not prepared to accept psychic phenomena at any price.

'Don't go saying such ignorant things, dear,' was her comment. 'You need a tonic. You're run down like. I thought you was pale when you was drinking your cup of tea yesterday. See the doctor. That's what you want to do. Don't worry about that ghost stuff. I never heard such a thing in all my days. You're sickly, that's what you are.'

Billson seemed partially disposed to accept this display of incredulity, either because it must have been reassuring to think she had been mistaken about the 'ghost', or because any appeal to her own poor state of health was always sympathetic to her. At that early stage of the day, she was in any case less agitated than might have been expected in the light of the supernatural appearance she claimed to have witnessed. She was excited, not more than that. It was true she muttered something about 'giving notice', but the phrase was spoken without force, obviously making no impression whatever on Mrs Gullick. For me, it was painful to find people existed who did not 'believe' in the Stonehurst ghosts, whose uneasy shades provided an exciting element of local life with which I did not at all wish to dispense. My opinion of Mrs Gullick fell immediately, even though she was said by Edith to be the only person in the house who could 'get any work out of' Mercy. I found her scepticism insipid. However, a much more disturbing incident took place a little later in the morning. My mother had just announced that she was about to put on her hat for church, when Albert appeared at the door. He looked very upset. In his hand was a letter.

'May I have a word with you, Madam?'

I was sent off to get ready for church. When I returned, my mother and Albert were still talking. I was told to wait outside. After a minute or two, Albert came out. My mother followed him to the door.

'I do quite understand, Albert,' she said. 'Of course we shall all be very, very sorry.'

Albert nodded heavily several times. He was too moved to speak.

'Very sorry, indeed. It has been a long time . . .'

'I thought I'd better tell you first, ma'am,' said Albert, 'so you could explain to the Captain. Didn't want it to come to him as a shock. He takes on so. I've had this letter since yesterday. Couldn't bring myself to show you at first. Haven't slept for thinking of it.'

'Yes, Albert.'

My father was out that morning, as it happened. He had to look in at the Orderly Room that Sunday, for some reason, and was not expected home until midday. Albert swallowed several times. He looked quite haggard. The flesh of his face was pouched. I could see the situation was upsetting my mother too. Albert's voice shook when he spoke at last.

'Madam,' he said, 'I've been goaded to this.'

He shuffled off to the kitchen. There were tears in his eyes. I was aware that I had witnessed a painful scene, although, as so often happens in childhood, I could not analyse the circumstances. I felt unhappy myself. I knew now why I had foreseen something would go wrong as soon as I had woken that morning.

'Come along,' said my mother, turning quickly and giving her own eyes a dab, 'we shall be late for church. Is Edith ready?'

'What did Albert want?'

'Promise to keep a secret, if I tell you?'

'I promise.'

'Albert is going to get married.'

'To Billson?'

My mother laughed aloud.

'No,' she said, 'to someone he knows who lives at Bristol.'

'Will he go away?'

'I'm afraid he will.'

'Soon?'

'Not for a month or two, he says. But you really must not say anything about it. I ought not to have told you, I suppose. Run along at once for Edith. We are going to be dreadfully late.'

My mother was greatly given to stating matters openly. In this particular case, she was probably well aware that Albert himself would not be slow to reveal his future plans to the rest of the household. No very grave risk was therefore run in telling me the secret. At the same time, such news would never have been disclosed by my father, a confirmed maker of mysteries, who disliked imparting information of any but a didactic kind. If forced to offer an exposé of any given situation, he was always in favour of presenting the substance of what he had to say in terms more or less oracular. Nothing in life – such was his view – must ever be thought of as easy of access. There is something to be said for that approach. Certainly few enough things in life are easy. On the other hand, human affairs can become even additionally clouded with obscurity if the most complicated forms of definition are always deliberately sought. My father really hated clarity. This was a habit of mind that sometimes led him into trouble with others, when, unable to appreciate his delight in complicated metaphor and ironic allusion, they had not the faintest idea what he was talking about. It was, therefore, by the merest chance that I was immediately put in possession of the information that Albert was leaving. I should never have learnt that so early if my father had been at home. We went off to church, my mother, Edith and I. The morning service took about an hour. We arrived home just as my father drove up in the car on his return from barracks. Edith disappeared towards the day-nursery.

'It's happened,' said my mother.

'What?'

My father's face immediately became very grave.

'Albert.'

'Going?'

'Getting married at last.'

'Oh, lord.'

'We thought it was coming, didn't we?'

'Oh, lord, how awful.'

'We'll get someone else.'

'Never another cook like Albert.'

'We may find someone quite good.'

'They won't live up here.'

'Don't worry. I'll find somebody. I'll start on Monday.'

'I knew this was going to happen.'

'We both did.'

'That doesn't help.'

'Never mind.'

'But today, of all days, oh, lord.'

Their reception of the news showed my parents were already to some extent prepared for this blow to fall, anyway accepted, more or less philosophically, that Albert's withdrawal into married life was bound to come sooner or later. Nevertheless, it was a disturbing state of affairs: the termination of a long and close relationship. However, no more was said at that moment because – a very rare occurrence – the telegraph-boy pedalled up on his bicycle. My parents were still standing on the doorstep.

'Name of Jenkins?'

My father took the telegram with an air of authority. His face had lightened a little now that he was resigned to Albert's departure, but his features became overcast again as he tore open the envelope, as if the news it brought must inevitably be bad.

'Who can it be?' said my mother, no less disturbed.

My father studied the message. He went suddenly red with annoyance.

'Wait a moment,' he said to the boy, in a voice of command.

My mother followed him into the hall. I hung about in the background.

'For goodness' sake say what's happened,' begged my mother, in an agony of fearing the worst.

My father read aloud the words, his voice shaking with irritation:

'Can you house me Sunday night talk business arrive teatime Giles.'

He held the telegram away from him as if fear of some awful taint threatened him by its contact. There was a long pause. Disturbing situations were certainly arising.

'Really too bad of him,' said my mother at last.

'Damn Giles.'

'Inconsiderate, too, to leave it so late.'

'He can't come.'

'We must think it over.'

'There is no time. I won't have him.'

'Where is he?'

'It's sent from Aldershot.'

'Quite close then.'

'What *the devil* is Giles doing in Aldershot?'

My parents looked at each other without speaking. Things could not be worse. Uncle Giles was not much more than a dozen miles away.

'We heard there was some trouble, didn't we?'

'Of course there is trouble,' said my father. 'Was there ever a moment when Giles was not in trouble? Don't be silly.'

There was another long pause.

'The telegram was reply-paid,' said my mother at last, not able to bear the thought that the boy might be bored or inconvenienced by this delay in drafting an answer. 'The boy is still waiting.'

'Damn the boy.'

My father was in despair. As I have said, all tragedies for him were major tragedies, and here was one following close on the heels of another.

'With the Conyerses coming too.'

'Can't we put Giles off?'

'He may really need help.'

'Of course he needs help. He always needs help.'

'Difficult to say he can't come.'

'Just *like* Giles to choose this day of all days.'

'Besides, I never think Giles and Aylmer Conyers get on very well together.'

'Get on well together,' said my father. 'They can't stand each other.'

The thought of this deep mutual antipathy existing between his brother and General Conyers cheered my father a little. He even laughed.

'I suppose Giles will have to come,' he admitted.

'No way out.'

'The Conyerses will leave before he arrives.'

'They won't stay late if they are motoring home.'

'Shall I tell Giles he can come?'

'We must, I think.'

'It may be just as well to know what he is up to. I hope it is not a serious mess this time. I wouldn't trust that fellow an inch who got him the bucket-shop job.'

Uncle Giles did not at all mind annoying his relations. That was all part of his policy of making war on society. In fact, up to a point, the more he annoyed his relations, the better he was pleased. At the same time, his interests were to some extent bound up with remaining on reasonably good terms with my father. Since he had quarrelled irretrievably with his other brother, my father – also on poorish terms with Uncle Martin, whom we never saw – represented one of the few stable elements in the vicissitudes of Uncle Giles's life. He and my father irritated, without actually disliking, each other. Uncle Giles, the older; my father, the more firmly established; the honours were fairly even, when it came to conflict. For example, my father disapproved, probably rightly, of the form taken by his brother's 'outside broking', although I do not know how much the firm for which Uncle Giles worked deserved the imputation of sharp practice. Certainly my father questioned its bona fides and was never tired of declaring that he would advise no friend of his to do business there. At the same time, his own interest in the stock market prevented him from refraining entirely from all financial discussion with Uncle Giles, with whom he was in any case indissolubly linked, financially speaking, by the terms of a will. Their argument would often become acrimonious, but I suspect my father sometimes took Uncle Giles's advice about investments, especially if a 'bit of a gamble' was in the air.

'Shall I say *Expect you teatime today*?'

'How is Giles going to get here?'

'I won't fetch him. It can't be done. The Conyerses may not leave in time.'

My mother looked uncertain.

'Do you think I should?'

'You can't. Not with other guests coming.'

'Giles will find his way.'

'We can be sure of that.'

My mother was right in supposing Uncle Giles perfectly capable of finding his way to any place recommended by his own interests. She was also right in thinking that Albert, after confiding his marriage plans to herself, would immediately reveal them in the kitchen. Edith described the scene later. She was having a cup of tea before church when Albert made the official announcement of his engagement. Billson had at once burst into tears. Bracey was having a 'funny day' – though a mild one – brought on either by regret at the necessity of resuming his duties, or, more probably, as a consequence of nervous strain after a spell in the house of his Luton sister-in-law. Accordingly, he showed no interest in the prospect of being left, as it were, in possession of the field so far as Billson was concerned. After issuing his pronouncement, Albert turned his attention to the mousse, the cooking of which always caused him great anxiety. Billson moved silently from kitchen to dining-room, and back again, laying the table miserably, red-eyed, white-faced, looking as much like a ghost as any she had described. She had taken badly Albert's surrender to the 'girl from Bristol'. The house had an uneasy air. I retired to my own places of resort in the garden.

The Conyers party was scheduled to arrive about one o'clock, but the notorious uncertainty of motor-cars had given rise to much head-shaking on the probability of their lateness. However, I was loitering about the outskirts of the house, not long after the telegraph-boy had disappeared on his bicycle over the horizon, when a car began painfully to climb the lower slopes of the hill. It could only contain General and Mrs Conyers. This was an unexpected excitement. I watched their slow ascent, which was jerky, like the upward movement of a funicular, but, contrary to my father's gloomy forecast, the steep incline was negotiated without undue difficulty. I was even able to open the Stonehurst gate to admit the vehicle. There could be no doubt now of the identity of driver and passenger. By that period, of course, motorists no longer wore the peaked cap and goggles of their pioneering days, but, all the same, the General's long check ulster and deerstalker seemed assumed to some extent ritualistically.

'It is always cold motoring,' my mother used to say.

The car drew up by the front door. The General, leaping from it with boundless energy, came to meet me, leaving his wife to extract herself as best she could from a pile of wraps and rugs, sufficient in number to perform a version of the Dance of the Seven Veils. Tall, distinguished, with grey moustache and flashing eyes, he held out his hand.

'How do you do, Nicholas?'

He spoke gravely, in a tone no different from that to be used with a contemporary. There was about him a kind of fierceness, combined with a deep sense of understanding.

'We are a little earlier than I expected,' he said. 'I hope your father and mother will not mind. I drove rather fast, as your mother said you lived at the back of beyond, and I am always uncertain of my own map-reading. I see now what she meant. How are they educating you up here? Do you go to school?'

'Not yet. I have lessons with Miss Orchard.'

'Oh, yes. Miss Orchard is the governess who teaches all the children round here. I know her well by name. What children are they?'

'The Fenwicks, Mary Barber, Richard Vaughan, the Westmacott twins.'

'Fenwick in the Gloucesters?'

'Yes, I think so – the regiment that wears a badge at the back of their cap.'

'And Mary Barber's father?'

'He's in the Queen's. Richard Vaughan's is in the "Twenty-Fourth" – the South Wales Borderers.'

'What about the father of the Westmacott twins?'

'A Gunner.'

'What sort of a Gunner?'

'Field, but Thomas and Henry Westmacott say their father is going to get his "jacket" soon, so he may be Royal Horse Artillery by now.'

'An exceedingly well-informed report,' said the General. 'You have given yourself the trouble to go into matters thoroughly, I see. That is one of the secrets of success in life. Now take us to your parents.'

This early arrival resulted in my seeing rather more of General and Mrs Conyers than I should have done had they turned up at their appointed hour. First of all there was a brief examination of the Conyers car, a decidedly grander affair than that owned by my father, a fact which possibly curtailed the period spent over it. Since there was still time to kill before luncheon, the guests were shown round the garden. Permitted to accompany the party, I walked beside my mother and Mrs Conyers, the General and my father strolling behind.

'Has your ghost appeared again?' asked Mrs Conyers. 'Aylmer was fascinated when I told him your parlourmaid had seen one. He is very keen on haunted houses.'

Her husband was famous for the variety of his interests. In this particular connection – the occult one – there was some story, probably mythical, about General Conyers having taken advantage of his appointment to the Body Guard to investigate on the spot some allegedly ghostly visitation at Windsor or another of the royal palaces. This intellectually inquisitive side of the General's character specially irked Uncle Giles, who liked to classify irreparably everyone he knew, hating to be forced to alter the pigeon-hole in which he had himself already placed any given individual.

'Aylmer Conyers may be a good tactician,' he used to say, 'at least that is what he is always telling everyone – never knew such a fellow for blowing his own trumpet – but I can't for the life of me see why he wants to lay down the law about all sorts of other matters that don't concern him in the least. The last thing I heard was that he had taken up "psychical research", whatever that may be.'

My father, although he would never have admitted as much to Uncle Giles, was inclined to agree with his brother in the view that General Conyers would be a more dignified figure if he accepted for himself a less universal scope of interests; so that when the General began to make inquiries about the Stonehurst 'ghost', my father tried to dismiss the subject out of hand.

'A lot of nonsense, General,' he said, 'I assure you.'

General Conyers would have none of that.

'External agency,' he said, 'that's the point. Find it hard to believe in actual entities myself. Ought to be looked into more. One heard some strange stories when one was in India. The East is full of that sort of thing – a lot pure invention, of course.'

'I believe ghosts are thought-forms,' said Mrs Conyers, as if that settled the whole matter.

'If you are experiencing hallucination,' said her husband, 'then something must cause the hallucination. Telepathic side, too, of course. I've never had the opportunity to cross-question first-hand someone who'd seen a ghost. What sort of a girl is this parlourmaid of yours?'

'Oh, please don't cross-question her,' said my mother. 'We have such dreadful difficulties in getting servants here, and we are losing Albert as it is. She is not by any means a girl. You will see her waiting at table. Very hysterical. All the same, the maid we had before used to tell the same story.'

'Indeed? Did she? Did she?'

'I must say I think there is something peculiar about the house myself,' said my mother. 'I shall not be altogether sorry when the time comes to leave it.'

'What about the people who let it to you?'

'The fellow who built the place is dead,' said my father, now determined to change the subject, come what may. 'The lease was arranged through executors. We got it rather cheap on that account. He was in the Indian Army – Madras cavalry, I believe. What do you think about the reorganisations in India, by the way, General? Some people say the latest concentrations of command are not working too well.'

'We want mobility, mobility, and yet more mobility,' said General Conyers, 'in India and everywhere else, more especially since the Baghdad Agreement. If the Germans continue the railway to Basra, that amounts to our recognising the northern area of Mesopotamia as a German sphere of influence.'

'How much does Mesopotamia matter?' enquired my father, unaware that he would soon be wounded there.

'Depends on when and where Germany decides to attack.'

'That will be soon, you think?'

'Between the Scylla of her banking system, and the Charybdis of her Socialist Party, Germany has no alternative.'

My father nodded respectfully, at the same time a trifle ironically. Although, in principle, he certainly agreed that war must come sooner or later – indeed, he was often saying it would come sooner – I am not sure that he truly believed his own words. He did not, in truth, much care for talking politics, national or international, unless in the harmless form of execration of causes disliked by himself. Certainly he had no wish to hear strategic situations expressed in classical metaphor, with which he was not greatly at ease. He had merely spoken of the Indian Army as a preferable alternative to discussing the Stonehurst 'ghosts'. The General, however, showed no sign of wishing to abandon this new subject.

'One of these fine mornings the Germans will arrive over here,' he said, 'or walk into France. Can't blame them if they do. Everyone is asking for it. We shall be squabbling with the Irish, or having a coal strike, or watching cricket. In France, Cabinet Ministers will be calling each other out to duels, while their wives discharge pistols at newspaper editors. And when the Germans come, it will be a big show – Clausewitz's Nation in Arms.'

'Able fellow, Clausewitz,' my father conceded.

'You remember he said that war was in the province of chance?'

'I do, General.'

'We are a great deal too fond of accepting that principle in this country,' said General Conyers. 'All the same, I thank God for the mess we made in South Africa. That brought a few people to their senses. Even the Treasury.'

My father, equally unwilling to admit the Boer War to have been prosecuted without notable brilliance, or that the light of reason or patriotism could penetrate, in however humble a degree, into the treasonable madhouse of the Treasury, did not answer. He gave a kind of half-sneer, half-grunt. I think my mother must have thought there had been enough talk of war for the time being, because she suggested a return to the house. The hour of luncheon was in any case approaching. I departed to the nursery.

'Everyone's in a taking today,' said Edith, herself rather ruffled when I arrived at table. 'I don't know what has come over the house. It's all your Uncle Giles coming to stay without warning, I suppose. Albert says it's just like him. Now, don't begin making a fuss because the gravy is too thick. I haven't given you much of it.'

In the subsequent rather sensational events of the afternoon, I played no direct part. They were told to me later, piecemeal; most of the detail revealed by my mother only many years after. She herself could never repeat the story without her eyes filling with tears, caused partly by laughter, perhaps partly by other memories of that time. All the same, my mother always used to insist that there had been nothing to laugh about at the moment when the incident took place. Then her emotion had been shock, even fear. The disturbing scene in question was enacted while Edith and I were out for our traditional Sunday 'walk', which took its usual form that afternoon of crossing the Common. We were away from home about an hour and a half, perhaps two hours. Meanwhile, my parents and their guests had moved from dining-room to drawing-room, after what was agreed later to rank as one of the best meals Albert had ever cooked.

'Aylmer Conyers does love his food,' my mother used to say. When announcing that fact, she would speak as if kindly laughter were the only possible manner of passing off lightly so distressing a frailty in friend or relation. Indeed, the General's pride in his own appreciation of the pleasures of the table was regarded by people like my parents, in the fashion of that day, as a tendency to talk rather more than was decent of eating and drinking. On this occasion he had certainly been full of praise for Albert. Possibly his eulogies continued too long entirely to please my father, who grew easily tired of hearing another man, even his own cook, too protractedly commended. Besides, apart from anything he might feel about the General, the impending arrival of Uncle Giles had justifiably set my father's nerves on edge, in fact thoroughly upset him. As a result he was very fretful by the middle of the afternoon. He freely admitted that afterwards; feeling, indeed, always rather proud of being easily irritated. Mrs Conyers and my mother, come to the end of their gossip, had begun to discuss knitting techniques. Conversation between the two men must have dragged, because the General returned to Near Eastern affairs.

'We haven't heard the last of Enver and his Young Turks,' he said.

'Not by a long chalk,' agreed my father.

'You remember Skobeloff's dictum?'

'Quite so, General, quite so.'

My father rarely, if ever, admitted to ignorance. He could, in any case, be pretty certain of the calibre of any such quotation offered in the circumstances. However, the General was determined there should be no misunderstanding.

'The road to Constantinople leads through the Brandenburger Tor.'

My father had visited Munich, never Berlin. He was, therefore, possibly unaware of the precise locality of the monument to which Skobeloff referred. However, he could obviously grasp the gist of such an assertion in the mouth of one he rightly judged to be a Russian general, linking the aphorism immediately in his own mind with the recent Turkish request for a German officer of high rank to reorganise the Ottoman forces.

'If Liman von Sanders——' began my father.

He never finished the sentence. The name of that militarily celebrated, endlessly discussed, internationally disputed, Britannically unacceptable, German General-Inspector of the Turkish Army was caught, held, crystallised in mid-air. Just as the words left my father's lips, the door of the drawing-room opened quietly. Billson stood on the threshold for a split second. Then she entered the room. She was naked.

'It's always easy to be wise after the event.' My mother used invariably to repeat that saying when the incident was related – and it was to be related pretty often in years to come – implying thereby criticism of herself. Her way was habitually to accept responsibilities which she considered by their nature to be her own, her firm belief being that most difficulties in life could be negotiated by tactful handling. In this case, she ever afterwards regarded herself to blame in having failed to notice earlier that morning that things were far from well with Billson. My mother had, it was true, suspected during luncheon that something was amiss, but by then such suspicion was too late. Billson's waiting at table that day had been perceptibly below – a mere parody of – her accustomed standard. Indeed, her shortcomings in that field had even threatened to mar the good impression otherwise produced on the guests by Albert's cooking. Not only had she proffered vegetables to the General in a manner so entirely lacking in style that he had let fall a potato on the carpet, but she had also caused Mrs Conyers to 'jump' painfully – no doubt in unconscious memory of her father's hoaxes – by dropping a large silver ladle on a Sheffield plate dish-cover. Later, when she brought in the coffee, Billson 'banged down' the tray as if it were red-hot, 'scuttling' from the room.

'I made up my mind to speak to her afterwards about it,' my mother said. 'I thought she wasn't looking at all well. I knew she was a great *malade imaginaire*, but, after all, she had seen the ghost, and her nerves are not at all good. It really is not fair on servants to expect them to sleep in a haunted room, although I have to myself. Where else could we put her? She can't be more frightened than I am sometimes. Then Aylmer Conyers stared at her so dreadfully with those very bright blue eyes of his. I was not at all surprised that she was nervous. I was terrified myself that he was going to begin asking her about the ghost, especially after she had made him drop the potatoes on the floor.'

In short, Billson's maladroitness had been judged to be no more than a kind of minor derangement to be expected from her for at least twenty-four hours after her 'experience', although, as I have said, listening in the first instance to the story about the 'ghost', my mother had been pleased, surprised even, by the calm with which Billson had spoken of the apparition.

'I really thought familiarity was breeding contempt,' said my mother. 'I certainly hoped so, with parlourmaids so terribly hard to come by.'

Albert's announcement of impending marriage was scarcely taken into account. Probably Billson's passion for him had never been accepted very seriously – as, indeed, few passions are by those not personally suffering from them. Possibly I myself knew more of it, from hints dropped by Edith, than did my mother. On top of everything, the prospective arrival of Uncle Giles had distracted attention from whatever else was happening in the house. However, even if the extent of Billson's distress at Albert's decision to marry had been adequately gauged – added, as it were morally speaking, to the probable effect of seeing a ghost that morning – no one could have foreseen so complete, so deplorable, a breakdown.

'I thought it was the end of the world,' my mother said.

I do not know to what extent she intended this phrase, so far as her own amazement was concerned, to be taken literally. My mother's transcendental beliefs were direct, yet imaginative, practical, though possessing the simplicity of complete acceptance. She may have meant to imply, no more, no less, that for a second of time she herself truly believed the Last Trump (unheard in the drawing-room) had sounded in the kitchen, instantly metamorphosing Billson into one of those figures – risen from the tomb, given up by the sea, swept in from the ends of the earth – depicted in primitive paintings of the Day of Judgment. If, indeed, my mother thought that, she must also have supposed some awful, cataclysmic division from on High just to have taken place, violently separating Sheep from Goats, depriving Billson of her raiment. No doubt my mother used only a figure of speech, but circumstances gave a certain aptness to the metaphor.

'Joking apart,' my mother used to say, 'it was a dreadful moment.'

There can be no doubt whatever that the scene was disturbing, terrifying, saddening, a moment that summarised, in the unclothed figure of Billson, human lack of co-ordination and abandonment of self-control in the face of emotional misery. Was she determined, in the habit of neurotics, to try to make things as bad for others as for herself? In that, she largely succeeded. There seemed no solution for the people in the room, no way out of the problem so violently posed by Billson in the shape of her own nude person. My father always confessed afterwards that he himself had been utterly at a loss. He could throw no light whatever on the reason why such a thing should suddenly have happened in his drawing-room, see no way of cutting short this unspeakable crisis. In telling – and re-telling – the highlights of the story, he contributed only one notable phrase.

'She was stark,' he used to say, '*absolutely stark*.'

This was a relatively small descriptive ornament to the really vast saga that accumulated round the incident; at the same time, it was for some reason not without a certain narrative force.

'I've come to give notice, m'm,' Billson said. 'I don't want to stay if Albert is leaving your service, and besides, m'm, I can't stand the ghosts no longer.'

Stonehurst, as I have said, was a 'furnished' house, the furniture, together with pictures, carpets, curtains, all distinctly on the seedy side, all part of the former home of people not much interested in what the rooms they lived in looked like. However, India, one way and another, provided a recurrent theme that gave a certain cohesion to an otherwise undistinguished, even anarchic style of decoration. In the hall, the brass gong was suspended from the horn or tusk of some animal; in the dining-room hung water-colours of the Ganges at Benares, the Old Fort at Calcutta, the Taj Mahal; in the smoking-room, a small revolving bookcase contained only four books: Marie Corelli's *Sorrows of Satan*, St John Clarke's *Never to the Philistines*, an illustrated volume of light verse called *Lays of Ind*, a volume of coloured pictures of Sepoy uniforms; in the drawing-room, the piano was covered with a Kashmir shawl of some size and fine texture, upon which, in silver frames, photographs of the former owner of Stonehurst (wearing a pith helmet surmounted with a spike) and his family (flanked by Indian servants) had stood before being stowed away in a drawer.

In human life, the individual ultimately dominates every situation, however disordered, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. On this occasion, as usual, all was not lost. There was a place for action, a display of will. General Conyers took in the situation at a glance. He saw this to be no time to dilate further upon Turkish subjection to German intrigue. He rose – so the story went – quite slowly from his chair, made two steps across the room, picked up the Kashmir shawl from where it lay across the surface of the piano. Then, suddenly changing his tempo and turning quickly towards Billson, he wrapped the shawl protectively round her.

'Where is her room?' he quietly asked.

No one afterwards was ever very well able to describe how he transported her along the passage, partly leading, partly carrying, the shawl always decently draped round Billson like a robe. The point, I repeat, was that action had been taken, will-power brought into play. The spell cast by Billson's nakedness was broken. Life was normal again. Other people crowded round, eventually took charge. Mrs Gullick and Mercy appeared from somewhere. The doctor was summoned. It was probably just as well that Albert was having a nap in his room over at the stables, where Bracey, too, surrounded by saddlery, was prolonging his 'funny day'. By the time these two reappeared, the crisis was long at an end. Having taken the first, the essential step, General Conyers, like a military dictator, who, at the close of a successful *coup d'état*, freely transfers his power to the civil authority, now moved voluntarily into the background. His mission was over, the situation mastered. He could return to private life, no more than the guest who happened to have been fortunate enough to find the opportunity of doing his host and hostess a trifling good turn. That was the line the General took about himself when all was over. He would accept neither praise nor thanks.

'She made no trouble at all,' he said. 'More or less walked beside me – just as if we were going to sit out the next one in the conservatory.'

In fact he dismissed as laughable the notion that any difficulty at all attached to the management of Billson in her 'state'. To what extent this modest assessment of his own agency truly represented his experience at the time is hard to estimate. He may have merely preferred to speak of it in that careless manner from dandyism, an unwillingness to admit that anything is difficult. I have sometimes speculated as to how much the General's so successful dislodgement of Billson was due to an accustomed habit of command over 'personnel', how much to a natural aptitude for handling 'women'. He was, after all, known to possess some little dexterity in the latter sphere before marriage circumscribed him.

'Aylmer Conyers couldn't keep away from the women as a young man,' Uncle Giles once remarked. 'They say some fellow chaffed him about it at a big viceregal bun-fight at Delhi – Henry Wilson or another of those talkative beggars who later became generals – "Aylmer, my boy," this fellow, whoever he was, said, "you're digging your grave in bed with Mrs Roxborough-Brown and the rest of them," he said. Conyers didn't give a damn. Not a damn. Went on just the same.'

Whether or not General Conyers would have done well to have heeded that warning, there can be little doubt that some touch of magic in his hand provided Billson with a particle of what she sought, a small substitute for Albert's love, making her docile when led to her room, calming her later into sleep. Certainly he had shown complete disregard for the risk of making a fool of himself in public. That is a merit women are perhaps quicker to appreciate than men. Not that Billson herself can be supposed to have sat in judgment on such subtleties at that uncomfortable moment; yet even Billson's disturbed spirit must have been in some manner aware of a compelling force that bound her to submit without protest to its arbitration.

'I'll just smoke another cigarette, if I may,' said the General, when everything had been accomplished, 'then Bertha and I really must set off in our motor-car. I've got to think about getting down that hill.'

Edith and I returned from the 'walk' just at the moment when General and Mrs Conyers were leaving. Their car had paused at the gate. My parents had come to the end of the drive to see the guests safely down the hill, my father full of advice about gears and brakes. Naturally enough, there was still a certain air of disturbance about the whole party. Even the General looked flushed. When Edith and I appeared, nothing of course was said, there and then, about what had taken place, but I could tell from my mother's face that something very out of the way had happened. The rather forced laughter, the apologies to be heard, confirmed that. The events of the day were by no means at an end, however. My father opened the gate. The Conyers car began to move slowly forward. As it entered the road over a hump in the ground, making rather a jerk, an unexpected impediment was suddenly put in the General's way. This was caused by a group of persons, unusually dressed, who were approaching from the left. They were running towards us. It was Dr Trelawney, followed by a pack of his disciples. They must suddenly have appeared over the brow of the hill. Without pausing to get breath they were now advancing up the road at a sharp pace, Dr Trelawney as usual leading. General Conyers, accelerating through the Stonehurst gate – an awkward one to negotiate – wheeled left, taking the corner in a wide arc, possibly owing to imperfect control of the steering. He had to apply his brakes sharply to avoid collision

Dr Trelawney jumped quickly aside. He was not hit. The car came to a standstill in the middle of the road. General Conyers opened the door and jumped out with all his habitual energy of movement. At first it might have been thought that he intended to call Dr Trelawney to order for obstructing the highway in this manner, strike him, kill him even, like a dog. Some tremendous altercation seemed about to take place. In due course, violence was shown to be far from the General's intention, although for a second or two, while he and Dr Trelawney stood facing each other, anything appeared possible. The same vivid contrast might have been expected, graphically speaking, as when the Military Policeman had ridden through Dr Trelawney's flock, like a hornet flying slowly through a swarm of moths. On the contrary, this pair, so far from being brought into vivid physical and moral opposition, had the air of being linked together quite strongly by some element possessed in common. The General's long, light ulster and helmet-like deerstalker, Dr Trelawney's white draperies and sandals, equally suggested temple ceremonial. The two of them might have met on that high place deliberately for public celebration of some rite or sacrifice. At first neither said a word. That seemed an age. At last Dr Trelawney took the initiative. Raising his right arm slightly, he spoke in a low clear voice, almost in the accents of one whose very perfect enunciation indicates that English is not his native tongue.

'The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True.'

Then a very surprising thing happened. General Conyers gave an almost imperceptible nod, at the same time removing his hands from the pockets of his ulster.

'The Vision of Visions,' he said, 'heals the Blindness of Sight.'

By that time most of Dr Trelawney's disciples had caught up with their master. They now clustered in the background, whispering together and staring at the car. Through its windscreen, Mrs Conyers gazed back at them a little nervously, perhaps again fearing that some elaborate practical joke was being staged for her benefit. From the gate my parents watched the scene without approval.

'Well, Trelawney,' said the General, 'I heard you had come to live in this part of the world, but I never thought we should have the luck to run across each other in this way.'

'If you journey towards the Great Gate, you encounter the same wayfarers on the road.'

'True enough, Trelawney, true enough.'

'You are approaching the Sublime Threshold.'

'Do you think so?'

'You should make good your promise to spend a rhythmical month under instruction, General. We have a vacancy in the house. There is no time like the present. You would be subjected to none but probationary exercises at first. Disciplines of the Adept would not be expected of you in the early days.'

'Look here, Trelawney,' said General Conyers, 'I'm a busy man at the moment. Besides, I have a strong conviction I should not commit myself too deeply for the rest of the year. Just one of those feelings you have in your bones. I want to be absolutely mobile at the moment.'

'Such instincts should be obeyed. I have heard others say the same recently. The portents are unfavourable. There is no doubt of that.'

'I will write to you one of these days. Nothing I'd like to see more than you and your people at work.'

'At Play, General. Truth is Play.'

'Give me a change of routine. Sort of thing I'm always meaning to do. Got very interested in such things in India. *Bodhisattvas* and such like, *Mahasatipatthana* and all that reflection. However, we shall have to wait. Sure I'm right to wait. Too much business on hand, anyway.'

'Business?' said Dr Trelawney. 'I think you need meditation, General, more than business. You must free the mind from external influences. You must pursue Oneness – the Larger Life.'

'Sure you're right about that too,' said the General. 'Absolutely certain you are right. All the same, something tells me to let Oneness wait for the time being. That doesn't mean I am not going to think Oneness over. Not in the least.'

'Think it over, you must, General. We know we are right. But first you must gain Spiritual Mastery of the Body.'

How long this unusual conversation would have continued in front of the Stonehurst gate, if interruption had not taken place, is hard to say. It was brought to a close by a new arrival, wearing a straw hat and flannel suit, who pushed his way unceremoniously between a group of long-haired boys in short Grecian tunics, who were eyeing the car as if they would very much like to open the bonnet. This person had a small fair moustache. He carried a rolled umbrella and Gladstone bag. The strangeness of Dr Trelawney's disciples clearly made no impression on him. He looked neither to the right nor to the left. The beings round him might just as well have been a herd of cows come to a stop in their amblings along the road. Instead of regarding them, he made straight for my parents, who at once offered signs of recognition. Here was Uncle Giles.

'Hope you did not mind my inviting myself at such short notice,' he said, as soon as he had greeted my mother. 'I wanted to have a word with *him* about the Trust.'

'You know we are always delighted to see you, Giles,' she said, probably even believing that true at the moment of speaking, because she always felt warmly towards hopeless characters like Uncle Giles when they were in difficulties. 'We live so far away from everything and everybody nowadays that it is quite an exception for you to have found Aylmer and Bertha Conyers lunching with us. They were driving away in their motor when——'

She pointed to the road, unable to put into words what was taking place.

'I see Aylmer standing there,' said Uncle Giles, who still found nothing at all unusual in the presence or costume of the Trelawney community. 'I must have a word with him before he leaves. Got a bit of news that might interest him. He is always very keen on what is happening on the Continent. Interest you, too, I expect. I had quite a good journey here. Was lucky enough to catch the carrier. Took me almost to the foot of the hill. Bit of a climb, but here I am.'

He turned to my father.

'How are you?'

Uncle Giles spoke as if he were surprised not to find my father in hospital, indeed, in his coffin.

'Pretty well, Giles,' said my father, with a certain rasp in his voice, 'pretty well. How has the world been wagging with you, Giles?'

That was a phrase my father tended to use when he was not best pleased; in any case his tone graded low as a welcoming manner.

'I wanted to have a talk about business matters,' said Uncle Giles, not at all put out by this reception. 'Mexican Eagles, among other things. Also the Limpopo Development Scheme. There has been rather a crisis in my own affairs. I'd like to ask your opinion. I value it. By the way, did I mention I heard a serious piece of news in Aldershot?'

'What on earth were you doing in Aldershot?' asked my father, speaking without alleviating the irony of his tone.

He must have seen that he was in for a bad time with his brother.

'Had to meet a fellow there. Soldiered together years ago.

Knowledgeable chap. I'll just go across now and have a brief word with Aylmer Conyers.'

Uncle Giles had set down his Gladstone bag by the gate. With characteristic inability to carry through any plan of campaign, he was deflected from reaching the General by the sight of Mrs Conyers sitting in the car. She still looked rather nervous. Uncle Giles stopped and began talking to her. By this time General Conyers himself must have noticed Uncle Giles's arrival. He brought to an end his conversation with Dr Trelawney.

'Well, Trelawney,' he said, 'I mustn't keep you any longer. You will be wanting to lead your people on. Mustn't take up all your day.'

'On the contrary, General, the day – with its antithesis, night – is but an artificial apportionment of what we artlessly call Time.'

'Nevertheless, Trelawney, Time has value, even if artificially apportioned.'

'Then I shall expect to hear from you, General, when you wish to free yourself from bonds of Time and Space.'

'You will, Trelawney, you will. Off you go now – at the double.'

Dr Trelawney drew himself up.

'The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True.'

The General replied with a jerk of his head.

'The Vision of Visions heals the Blindness of Sight.'

The words were scarcely finished before Dr Trelawney had again begun to hasten along the road, his flock trailing after him. A moment or two later, they were among the trees that concealed Gullick's cottage, where the road became a track. Then the last of them, a very small, pathetic child with a huge head, was finally lost to sight. No doubt they had reached the Common, were pursuing Oneness through the heather. Oneness perhaps also engaged the attention of

General Conyers himself, because, deep in thought, he turned towards the car. He stood there for a second or two, staring at the bonnet. Uncle Giles terminated his conversation with Mrs Conyers.

'I was admiring your new motor-car, General,' he said. 'Hope it is not bringing you as much trouble as most of them seem to cause their owners.'

Now that Dr Trelawney was out of the way, my parents moved towards the car themselves, perhaps partly to keep an eye on Uncle Giles in his relations with the General, still lost in reflection.

'Thought I'd better not introduce you,' said General Conyers, straightening himself as they came up to him. 'One never knows how people may feel about a fellow like Trelawney – especially if he lives in the neighbourhood. Not everybody cares for him. You hear some funny stories. I find him interesting myself. Nasty habits, some people say. Can't believe a word he says, of course. We met him years ago with a fellow I used to know in the Buffs who'd taken up yoga.'

The General lifted the starting-handle from the floor of the car.

'Are you an expert in these machines, Giles?' he asked.

He used the tone of one speaking to a child, not at all the manner of an equal in which he had addressed me earlier in the day. Knowing all about Uncle Giles, he was clearly determined not to allow himself to be irritated by him.

'Never driven one in my life,' said Uncle Giles. 'Not too keen on 'em. Always in accidents. Some royalty in a motor-car have been involved in a nasty affair today. Heard the news in Aldershot. Fellow I went to see was told on the telephone. Amazing, isn't it, hearing so soon. They've just assassinated an Austrian archduke down in Bosnia. Did it today. Only happened a few hours ago.'

Uncle Giles muttered, almost whispered these facts, speaking as if he were talking to himself, not at all in the voice of a man announcing to the world in general the close of an epoch; the outbreak of Armageddon; the birth of a new, uneasy age. He did not look in the least like the harbinger of the Furies.

'Franz-Ferdinand?' asked General Conyers sharply.

'And his morganatic wife. Shot 'em both.'

'When did you say this happened?'

'This afternoon.'

'And they're both dead?'

'Both of them.'

'There will be trouble about this,' said the General.

He inserted the starting-handle and gave several terrific turns.

'Bad trouble,' he said. 'They'll have to postpone tomorrow night's State Ball. Not a doubt of it. This was a Servian, I suppose.'

'They think so.'

'Was he an anarchist?' asked Mrs Conyers.

'One of those fellows,' said Uncle Giles.

'Mark my words,' said General Conyers, 'this is a disaster. Well, the engine has started. We'd better be off in case it stops again. Good-bye to you both, thank you again enormously. No, no, not another word. I only hope the whole matter settles down all right. Good-bye, Giles. Good-bye, Nicholas. I don't at all like the news.'

They went off down the hill. We all waved. My mother looked worried.

'I don't like the news either,' she said.

'Let me carry your bag, Giles,' said my father. 'You'll find things in a bit of a muddle in the house. One of the maids had an hysterical attack this afternoon.'

'I don't expect it's too easy to get staff up here,' said Uncle Giles. 'Is Bracey still your servant? Albert still cooking for you? You're lucky to have them both. Hope I see something of them. Very difficult to get yourself properly looked after these days. Several things I want to talk about. Rather an awkward situation. I think you may be able to help.'

The whole party was moving towards the house. Edith, who had been standing in the background, now detached me from the grown-ups. We diverged to the nursery. I suppose my father, in the course of the evening, helped to sort out the awkward situation, because Uncle Giles left the following day. No one yet realised that the Mute with the Bowstring stood at the threshold of the door, that, if they wanted to get anything done in time of peace, they must be quick about it. Already, the sands had almost run out. The doctor, for example, ordered a 'complete holiday' for Billson. Inquiries revealed that she had gone to rest in her room that afternoon, where, contemplating her troubles, she had fallen asleep to awaken later in a 'state', greatly disturbed, but about which she could otherwise remember little or nothing. No doubt one of those nervous shifts of control had taken place within herself, later to be closely studied, then generally regarded as a sudden display of 'dottiness'. It was, of course, agreed that she must go. Billson herself was insistent on that point. That decision on both sides was to be expected. Although the story passed immediately into legend, surprisingly little fuss was made about it at the time. A few days later – while the chancelleries of Europe entered into a ferment of activity – Billson, escorted by Edith, quietly travelled to Suffolk, where her family could take care of her for a time. Left alone with my mother during Edith's absence from home on that occasion, I first heard a fairly full and reliable account of the story, fragments of which had, of course, already reached me in more or less garbled versions, from other sources. A long time passed before all the refinements of the saga were recorded and classified.

I do not know for certain what happened to Billson. Even my mother, with all her instinct for not losing touch with the unfortunate, lost sight of her during the war. More than thirty years later, however, what may have been a clue took shape. When Rosie Manasch – or Rosie Udall, as she had then become – used to hold a kind of salon in her house in Regent's Park, she often told stories of a 'daily' she had employed during or just after the war, a former parlourmaid of the old-fashioned kind, who liked to talk about the people for whom she had worked. By then she was called 'Doreen', and said she was nearly seventy.

'She looked years younger,' Rosie said, 'perhaps in her fifties. A man behaved badly to her. I could never make out if he was a butler or a chef. She also had some rather good ghost-stories when she was on form.'

It was all too complicated to explain to Rosie, but this legendary lost love might well have been Albert incorporated – in the way myths are formed – with Billson's earlier 'disappointment'. Albert himself, as might be expected, was greatly outraged by Billson's behaviour that Sunday afternoon, even though he himself had suffered no inconvenience from the immediate circumstances of her 'breakdown'.

'I told you that girl would go off her crumpet,' he said more than once afterwards.

No doubt a series of 'funny days' would normally have been induced in Bracey, but, as things turned out, neither he nor Albert had much time to brood over Billson's surprising conduct. International events took their swift, their ominous, course, Bracey, characteristically, being swept into a world of action, Albert, firm as ever in his fight for the quiet life, merely changing the locality of his cooking-pots. To my mother, Mrs Conyers wrote:

'. . . I was *so glad* Aylmer did not make you meet that *very rum* friend of his with the beard. He would have been quite capable of introducing you! I do not encourage him to see *too much* of that person. I think between you and me there is something *very odd* about the man. I would rather you did not mention to anyone – unless you know them *very well* – that Aylmer sometimes talks of staying with *him*. Nothing would induce *me* to go! I do not think that Aylmer will ever pay the visit because he feels sure the house will be *very uncomfortable*. No bathroom! What a *dreadful* thing this murder in Austria-Hungary is. Aylmer is very much afraid it may lead to war. . . .'

General Conyers was right. Not many weeks later – by that time my father and Bracey had been shipped to France with the Expeditionary Force – squads of recruits began to appear on the Common, their evolutions in the heather performed in scarlet or dark blue, for in those early days of the war there were not enough khaki uniforms to go round. Some wore their own cloth caps over full-dress tunics or marched along in column of fours dressed in subfusc civilian suits, so that once more the colour values of the heath were transformed. These exercises of 'Kitchener's Army' greatly perturbed Albert, although his 'feet' precluded any serious suggestion of military service. He used to discuss with Gullick, the gardener, the advisability of offering himself, 'feet' or no 'feet', in the service of his country.

'If you don't volunteer, they'll come and take you,' he would say, 'they're going to put the blokes who haven't volunteered at the head of the column and march 'em along in their shame without any buttons to their uniforms – just to show they had to be forced to join.'

Gullick, silent, elderly, wizened, himself too old to be called to the colours except in the direst need, nodded grimly, showing no disposition to dissent from the menacing possibilities put forward.

'And I'll soon be a married man too,' said Albert, groaning aloud.

However, like my father, Uncle Giles and General Conyers, Albert survived the war. He spent melancholy years cooking in some large canteen, where there was no alternative to producing food at a level painful to his own standards. When peace came at last, he felt, perhaps justly, that he had suffered as much as many who had performed, at least outwardly, more onerous acts of service and sacrifice. He used to write to my mother every Christmas. The dreaded marriage turned out – as Albert himself put it – 'no worse than most'. It appeared, indeed, better than many. Others were less fortunate. Bracey's 'funny days' came to an end when he was killed in the retreat – or, as we should now say, the withdrawal – from Mons. The Fenwicks' father was killed; Mary Barber's father was killed; Richard Vaughan's father was killed; the Westmacott twins' father was killed. Was the Military Policeman who used to jog across the heather killed? Perhaps his duties kept him away from the line. Did the soldier who chopped off his trigger-finger save his own life by doing so? It is an interesting question. Dr Trelawney gave up his house. Edith was told by Mrs Gullick that she had heard as a fact that he had been shot as a spy at the Tower of London. We left Stonehurst and its 'ghosts', inexplicably mysterious bungalow, presaging other inexplicable mysteries of life and death. I never heard whether subsequent occupants were troubled, as Billson and others had been troubled, by tall white spectres, uncomfortable invisible presences. Childhood was brought suddenly, even rather brutally, to a close. Albert's shutters may have kept out the suffragettes: they did not effectively exclude the Furies.

2

IT IS ODD TO THINK THAT ONLY FOURTEEN or fifteen years after leaving Stonehurst, essentially a haunt of childhood, I should have been sitting with Moreland in the Hay Loft, essentially a haunt of maturity: odd, in that such an appalling volume of unavoidable experience had to be packed into the intervening period before that historical necessity could be enacted. Perhaps maturity is not quite the word; anyway, childhood had been left behind. It was early one Sunday morning in the days when Moreland and I first knew each other. We were discussing the roots and aims of action. The Hay Loft – now no more – was an establishment off the Tottenham Court Road, where those kept up late by business or pleasure could enjoy rather especially good bacon-and-eggs at any hour of the night. Rarely full at night-time, the place remained closed, I think, during the day. Certainly I never heard of anyone's eating there except in the small hours. The waiter, white-haired and magisterial, a stage butler more convincing than any to be found in private service, would serve the bacon-and-eggs with a flourish to sulky prostitutes, who, nocturnal liabilities at an end, infiltrated the supper-room towards dawn. Moreland and I had come from some party in the neighbourhood, displeasing, yet for some reason hard to vacate earlier. Moreland had been talking incessantly – by then a trifle incoherently – on the theme that action, stemming from sluggish, invisible sources, moves towards destinations no less indefinable.

'If action is to be one's aim,' he was saying, 'then is it action to write a symphony satisfactory to oneself, which no one else wants to perform, or a comic song every errand-boy whistles? A bad example – a comic song, obviously. Nothing I should like to do better, if I had the talent. Say some ghastly, pretentious half-baked imitation of Stravinsky that makes a hit and is hailed as genius. We know it's bad art. That is not the point. Is it action? Or *is* that the point? Is art action, an alternative to action, the enemy of action, or nothing whatever to do with action? I have no objection to action. I merely find it impossible to locate.'

'Ask the Surrealists. They are keen on action. Their magazine had a photograph on the cover the other day with the caption: *One of our contributors insulting a priest*.'

'Exactly,' said Moreland. 'Violence – revolt – sweep away the past. Abandon bourgeois values. Don't be a prisoner of outworn dogmas. I'm told on all sides that's how one should behave, that I must live intensely. Besides, the abominable question of musical interpretation eternally bedevils a composer's life. What could make one brood on action more than a lot of other people taking over when it comes to performance, giving the rendering of the work least sympathetic to yourself?'

'You might say that happens in love, too, when the other person takes charge of the performance in a manner unsympathetic to yourself.'

'All right,' said Moreland, 'love, then. Is it better to love somebody and not have them, or have somebody and not love them? I mean from the point of view of action – living intensely. Does action consist in having or loving? In having – naturally – it might first appear. Loving is just emotion, not action at all. But is that correct? I'm not sure.'

'It is a question Barnby would consider absurd.'

'Nevertheless, I put it to you. Can the mere haver be said to live more intensely than the least successful lover? That is, if action *is* to live with intensity. Or is action only when you bring off both – loving and having – leaving your money on, so to speak, like a double-event in racing. Speaking for myself, I get the worst of all worlds, failing to have the people I love, wasting time over the others, whom I equally fail to have.'

'You should commit a *crime passionnel* to liven things up.'

'When I read about *crimes passionnels* in the papers,' said Moreland, scraping his plate from which the last vestige of egg had already been long removed, 'I am struck not by the richness of the emotions, but by their desperate poverty. On the surface, the people concerned may seem to live with intensity. Underneath, is an abject egotism and lack of imagination.'

'Stendhal did not think so. He said he would rather his wife tried to stab him twice a year than greeted him every evening with a sour face.'

'Still, he remained unmarried. I've no doubt my own wife will do both. Besides, Stendhal was equally keen on the glance, the kiss, the squeeze of the hand. He was not really taken in by the tyranny of action.'

'But surely some *crimes passionnels* are fascinating. Suppose one of his girls murdered Sir Magnus Donners in fantastic circumstances – I leave the setting to your own fevered imagination.'

'Now, Sir Magnus Donners,' said Moreland. 'Is he a man of action? In the eyes of the world, certainly. But does he, in fact, live intensely?'

'Like Stendhal, he has never married.'

'Hardly a *sine qua non* of action,' said Moreland, now rubbing the plate with a lump of bread.

'But a testing experience, surely. The baronet's wife's subsequent married life with the gamekeeper opens up more interesting possibilities than any of their adulterous frolics.'

'D. H. Lawrence's ideas about sexual stimulation,' said Moreland, 'strike me as no less unreal – no less artificial, if you prefer – than any attributed to Sir Magnus Donners. Suburban, narcissistic daydreams, a phallic never-never-land for middle-aged women. However, that is beside the point, which is that I grant, within the sphere of marriage and family life, Sir Magnus has not lived intensely. Setting marriage aside, on the other hand, he has built up a huge fortune, risen to all but the highest peaks in politics, appreciates the arts in a coarse but perfectly genuine manner, always has a succession of pretty girls in tow. Is he to be styled no man of action because he has never married? The proposition is absurd. After all, we are not married ourselves.'

'And, what's more, must cease to live intensely. It's nearly three o'clock.'

'So it is. How time flies.'

'Raining, too.'

'And the buses have stopped.'

'We will return to action on another occasion.'

'Certainly, we will.'

The interest of this conversation, characteristic of Moreland in a discursive mood, lay, of course, in the fact that he subsequently married Matilda Wilson, one of Sir Magnus's 'girls'. The modest account he gave during this discussion at the Hay Loft of his own exploits at that period probably did Moreland less than justice. He was not unattractive to women. At the same time, his own romantic approach to emotional relationships had already caused him to take some hard knocks in that very knockabout sphere. At the moment when we were eating bacon-and-eggs, neither Moreland nor I had yet heard of Matilda. In those days, I think, she had not even come the way of Sir Magnus himself. In fact, that was about the stage in her life when she was married to Carolo, the violinist, a marriage undertaken when she was very young, lasting only about eighteen months. However, 'the great industrialist' – as Barnby used to call Sir Magnus – was already by then one of Moreland's patrons, having commissioned him not long before to write the incidental music for a highbrow film which had Donners backing. Barnby, too, was beginning to sell his pictures to Sir Magnus at about that date. Barnby often talked about 'the great industrialist', who was, therefore, a familiar figure to me – at least in song and story – although I had myself only seen Sir Magnus twice: once at a party of Mrs Andriadis, which I had attended quite fortuitously; a second time, spending a week-end with the Walpole-Wilsons, when I had been taken over to Stourwater. Later on, one heard gossip about a *jolie laide* (in contrast with the 'pretty girls' Moreland had adumbrated at the Hay Loft) with whom Sir Magnus used occasionally to appear. She was called Matilda Wilson, said to be an actress. Sir Magnus and Matilda had parted company – at least were no longer seen together in public – by the time Moreland first met her. Afterwards, when Matilda became Moreland's wife, I used sometimes to wonder whether Moreland himself ever recalled that Hay Loft conversation. If so, rather naturally, he never returned to the subject.

I think it would be true to say of Moreland that, up to a point, he did live with intensity. He worked hard at seasons, at others, concentrated whole-heartedly on amusing himself. This was within the limitations of the diffidence that enclosed him in dealings with women. There could be no doubt that Matilda herself had taken the decision that they should marry. Barnby used to say that women always take that decision. In any case, Matilda liked taking decisions. This taste of hers suited them both at the beginning of their married life, because Moreland was wholly without it, except where his own work was concerned.

'The arts derive entirely from taking decisions,' he used to say. 'That is why they make such unspeakably burdensome demands on all who practise them. Having taken the decisions music requires, I want to be free of all others.'

Moreland's childhood – since I have spoken at some length of childhood – had been a very different affair from my own. In the first place, music, rather than military matters, had been regarded as the normal preoccupation of those round him in the house of his aunt who brought him up. I mean music was looked upon there not only as an art, but also as the familiar means of earning a livelihood. In my own home, the arts, to some very considerable extent respected, were not at all regarded in that essentially matter-of-fact, no-nonsense, down-to-earth manner. When my father was attached to a cavalry regiment at Brighton before we moved to Stonehurst, my parents might attend an occasional concert at the Pavilion; meet Mr Deacon there, afterwards visit his flat. They would even be aware that Mr Deacon was a 'bad' painter. At the same time, painting, 'good' or 'bad' – like music, sculpture, writing and, of course, acting – would immutably remain for them an unusual, not wholly desirable, profession for an acquaintance. Indeed, a 'good' painter, certainly a well-known 'modern' painter (even though 'modernism' in the arts was by no means frowned upon by my father), would be considered even more of a freak than Mr Deacon himself, since being 'well-known' was, by its very nature, something of a social aberration. It was in Mr Deacon's Brighton flat that he produced those huge pictures that might have been illustrations to Miss Orchard's lessons about the gods of Olympus. Mr Deacon, in the words of his great hero, Walt Whitman, used to describe them as 'the rhythmic myths of the Greeks, and the strong legends of the Romans'. The Furies were probably never represented by his brush, because Mr Deacon shunned what Dicky Umfraville used always to call 'the female form divine'.

In the household of Moreland's aunt, on the other hand, although there might be no money to spare – keeping solvent in itself rather a struggle – relatively celebrated persons flourished, so to speak, just round the corner. Moreland himself rather reluctantly agreed that some of the musicians who turned up there were 'quite famous', even if the writers and painters 'showed an abysmal lack of talent'. 'Modernism' in the arts, if not much practised, was freely discussed. Life was seedy; it was also conducted on a plane in general more grown-up, certainly more easygoing, than existence at Stonehurst; for that matter at any of the other ever-changing residences I had known as a child. For Moreland, the war had been no more than a mysterious, disturbing inconvenience in the background, the disagreeable cause to which indifferent or inadequate food was always attributed. It was not the sudden conversion into action of an idea already to a great extent familiar – even though the stupendous explosion of that idea, rendered into action, had never wholly ceased to ring in one's ears. These were not the only dissimilarities of upbringing. From an early age, Moreland was looked upon by his aunt, and everyone else in their circle, as a boy destined to make a brilliant career in music. Even his childhood had been geared to that assumption. My own more modest ambition – not, as it happened, particularly encouraged by my parents – was to become a soldier. That obviously entailed a divergent manner of regarding oneself. In so far as we ever compared notes about our respective environments in early life, Moreland always maintained that mine sounded the stranger of the two.

'Ours was, after all, a very bourgeois bohemianism,' he used to say. 'Attending the Chelsea Arts Ball in absolutely historically correct Renaissance costume was regarded as the height of dissipation by most of the artists we knew. Your own surroundings were far more bizarre.'

Perhaps he was right. What Moreland and I possessed unexpectedly in common, however, was on the whole more remarkable than these obvious contrasts. With only a month or two between our ages, some accumulation of shared experience was natural enough: the dog following Edward VII's coffin, the Earls Court Exhibition, tents in Hyde Park for George V's coronation – those all found a place. There were, however, in addition to these public spectacles, certain unaccountable products of the *Zeitgeist* belonging to both childhoods, contributing some particle to each personal myth, so abundant in their way that Moreland and I sometimes seemed to have known each other long before meeting for the first time one evening in the saloon bar of the Mortimer.

For example, in the face of energetic protest at the time, neither, on grounds that the theme was too horrific for the eyes of young persons, had been allowed to attend that primitive of cinematographic art, the film version of Dante's *Inferno*. Later, less explicably, both had taken a passionate interest in the American Civil War and the Dreyfus Case, poring over pictures of those two very dissimilar historical events wherever their scenes and characters could be found illustrated. There were also aesthetic prejudices in common: animosity towards R. M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, capricious distaste for Raphael's *La Madonna della Sedia* in framed oval reproduction.

One of these altogether unwarrantable items in this eccentric scrapbook of faded mementoes that Moreland and I seemed to have pasted up together in the nursery (though Moreland always denied having had a nursery, certainly a nurse) was a precocious awareness of Dr Trelawney, for 'the Doctor' – as Moreland liked to call him – had never, in fact, suffered the fate, attributed to him by Mrs Gullick, of being shot in the Tower. Moreland's Trelawney experiences had been acquired earlier than my own, though still young enough to experience the same uneasy thrill, alarming, yet enjoyable, at the thought of his menacing shadow.

'I used to hear about Trelawney long before I saw him,' Moreland said. 'One of the down-at-heel poets we knew was a friend of his – indeed, the two of them were said to have enjoyed the favours of succubi together out on the Astral Plane. I first set eyes on him when we were living in rooms at Putney. The time is fixed in my mind because of a bit of trouble with the landlady. The fact was my aunt had bought tickets for a concert with money that ought to have gone in paying the rent. Trelawney was pointed out to me that afternoon in the Queen's Hall. He has musical interests, you know – I may add, of the most banal kind. I remember the wonderfully fraudulent look on his face as he sat listening to Strauss' *Death and Transfiguration*, dressed in a black cape, hair down to his shoulders, rather like photographs of Rasputin.'

'He must have changed his style since my day. Then he was a more outdoor type, with classical Greek overtones.'

'Trelawney was always changing his style – even his name, too, I believe, which is, of course, no more Trelawney than my own is. Nor does anyone know why he should be addressed as Doctor. What was more exciting, my aunt knew a girl who – to use her own phrase – fell into his clutches. She was said to be a promising pianist. That must have been before I went to the Royal College, because I remember being more impressed by the idea of a female pianist who was promising, than I should have been after emerging from that famous conservatoire.'

'What happened to the girl?'

'Rather dreadful. She cast herself from a Welsh mountain-top – Trelawney had a kind of temple at that time in a remote farmhouse in North Wales. There was quite a scandal. He was attacked in one of the Sunday papers. It passed off, as such attacks do.'

'What had he done to the girl?'

'Oh, the usual things, I suppose – no doubt less usual ones, too, since Trelawney is an unusual man. In any case, possibilities are so limited even for a thaumaturge. The point was her subsequent suicide. There was talk of nameless rites, drugs, disagreeable forms of discipline – the sort of thing that might rather appeal to Sir Magnus Donners.'

'Did you ever meet Trelawney yourself?'

'When I first knew Maclintick, who numbered among his acquaintances some of the most unlikely people, he offered to take me to see the Doctor, then living in Shepherd's Bush. In principle, Maclintick disapproved of persons like that, but he and Trelawney used to talk German philosophy together. They had been educated at the same German university – Bonn, I think – and it was a type of conversation hard to obtain elsewhere.'

'Did you go?'

'Somehow, I never found myself in the mood. I felt it might be embarrassing.

Oisive jeunesse
A tout asservie
Par délicatesse
J'ai perdu ma vie.

That was me in those days.'

'I shouldn't have thought much delicacy was required where Dr Trelawney was concerned.'

'My own occult interests are so sketchy. I've just thumbed over *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie*. Never participated in a Black Mass in my life, or as much as received an invitation to a witches' Sabbath.'

'But I thought Dr Trelawney was more for the Simple Life, with a touch of yoga thrown in. I did not realise he was committed to all this sorcery.'

'After you knew him, he must have moved further to the Left – or would it be to the Right? Extremes of policy have such a tendency to merge.'

'Trelawney must be getting on in age now – Cagliostro in his latter days, though he has avoided incarceration up to date.'

'What will happen to people like him as the world plods on to standardisation? Will they cease to be born, or find jobs in other professions? I suppose there will always be a position for a man with first-class magical qualifications.'

That conversation, too, had taken place long before either of us was married. I recalled it, years later, reading in a weekly paper a letter from Dr Trelawney protesting that some reviewer (Mark Members, as a matter of fact), in noticing a recently published work on prophecy and sortilege in which the author approached the subject in the light of psychiatry and telepathy, had confused the sayings of Paracelsus and Nostradamus. This letter (provoking a lively reply from Members) was composed in Dr Trelawney's most florid manner. I wondered if Moreland would see it. It was a long time since we had met. When we were first married, Moreland and Matilda, Isobel and I, used often to see one another. Now those dinners at Foppa's or the Strasbourg took place no longer. They seemed to form an historic period, distinct and definable, even though less remote in time, as the infinitely distant days when Moreland and I had loitered about Soho together.

To explain why you see less of a friend, though there has been no quarrel, no gradual feeling of coldness, is not always easy. In this case, the drawing apart seemed to date from the time when something had been 'on' between Moreland and Isobel's sister, Priscilla. During that period, with Moreland's own marriage in the balance, we had seen little or nothing of him, because the situation was inevitably an awkward one. Now, the Morelands seemed to have settled down again pretty well; Priscilla was married to Chips Lovell. However, married life must always be a little different after an upheaval of that kind. With the Morelands, certain changes were observable from the outside; within, no doubt even more radical adjustments had taken place. Now, as a matter of course, Matilda accepted such parts as she could obtain as an actress. She had made some success in the role of Zenocrate in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*. She was often away from home for weeks at a time. Moreland himself, moving inexorably into a world exclusively musical in its interests, spent increasing periods working in his room. That was at first the reason why we saw less of him than ever, even after the business with Priscilla had come to an end. By that time, as easily happens, the habit of regular meetings had already passed. We would sometimes talk on the telephone or run across each other casually. Then a further barrier was raised, when, to the surprise of his friends, Moreland announced that he had decided to leave London.

'I'm not going to settle in the country for ever,' he said, 'just retreat for a time from the telephone.'

Moreland, dependent for most of his social life on restaurants and bars, had never been a great hand at entertaining in his own house. Accordingly, after the move, contact ceased almost entirely. That was, in any case, a decidedly eerie period in which to be living. Unlike the Stonehurst epoch, when, whatever jocular references to a German invasion might be made by persons like Bracey, war had come for most people utterly without warning – like being pushed suddenly on a winter's day into a swirling whirlpool of ice-cold water by an acquaintance, unpredictable perhaps, but not actively homicidal – war was now materialising in slow motion. Like one of the Stonehurst 'ghosts', war towered by the bed when you awoke in the morning; unlike those more transient, more accommodating spectres, its tall form, so far from dissolving immediately, remained, on the contrary, a looming, menacing shape of ever greater height, ever thickening density. The grey, flickering sequences of the screen showed with increased persistence close-ups of stocky demagogues, fuming, gesticulating, stamping; oceans of raised forearms; steel-helmeted men tramping in column; armoured vehicles rumbling over the *pavé* of broad boulevards. Crisis was unremitting, cataclysm not long to be delayed.

Such an atmosphere was not at all favourable to writing novels, the activity which chiefly occupied my own thoughts, one that may require from time to time some more or less powerful outside stimulus in the life of a writer, but needs, in between any such disturbances, long periods of comparative calm. Besides, the ancillaries of a writer's profession, the odd jobs that make such an existence financially surmountable, were at that period in by no means a flourishing condition. I was myself in lowish water and, what was worse, found it difficult, almost impossible, to work on a book while waiting for the starting pistol. Even Chips Lovell, who possessed relatively well-paid employment on a newspaper (contributing to a column of innocuous, almost self-respecting 'gossip'), lived, like others in Fleet Street, in recurrent fear of being told his services were redundant.

Since Chips had married Priscilla, he had shown signs of turning into a model husband. Some people regarded him as an incurably raffish young man, but now the interest he had always taken in the affairs of his many relations became redoubled, growing almost feverish in its intensity. He attended marriages, christenings, funerals as if his life depended on it, as, indeed, to some extent it did, since he would usually introduce later into his column discreet reference to such ceremonies. The trifles Chips offered the public were on the whole inoffensive enough, sometimes even of general interest. All the same, not everyone approved of them: Isobel's eldest sister, Frederica Budd, who, since the recent death of the Tollands' stepmother, Lady Warminster, more than ever felt herself custodian of the family's moral and social standards, found Chips's 'paragraphs' particularly vexatious. In any case, Frederica did not much care for Chips, although she, and everyone else, had to admit that his marriage to Priscilla must be reckoned a success. The Lovells had a baby; Priscilla had become quieter, some complained a little sadder, but at the same time her looks had improved, so that now she could almost be called a 'beauty'. Since Moreland had long since removed himself almost entirely from the kind of society in which Chips Lovell liked to move – was to some extent even professionally committed – the two couples never met. Such a meeting would certainly not have embarrassed Chips, who neither minded nor was in a position to mind about such refinements of sensibility where love affairs were concerned. Moreland on the other hand, once things were broken off with Priscilla, certainly preferred to keep out of her and her husband's way.

Then one day, not long after 'Munich', when everyone's nerves were in a thoroughly disordered state, some relieved, some more apprehensive than ever, Isobel ran across Matilda in the hairdresser's. There was a great reunion. The end of it was that a week-end visit was arranged immediately to the Morelands' cottage. Life was humdrum enough at that moment, even though we were living in so unstable, so harassing a period. I mean the events that took place while we were staying with the Morelands formed not only something of a landmark when looked back upon, but were also rather different from the material of which daily life was in general composed.

'Matilda is dying for company,' Isobel said, when she told me of their meeting.

'How is she?'

'Not bad. Out of a job. She says she has decided she is a terrible actress. She is going to give up the stage and take to petit point.'

'Where exactly are they living?'

'A few miles from Stourwater.'

'I had no idea of that. Was it deliberate?'

'Matilda knows the district. She was brought up there. At first I was too delicate to ask how near they were to the castle. Then Matty said Sir Magnus had actually found the cottage for them. Matty rather likes talking of her days with Sir Magnus if one is *tête-à-tête*. They represent, I think, the most restful moment of her life.'

'Life with Hugh can't be very restful.'

'Hugh doesn't seem to mind about being near Stourwater. Matilda said he was delighted to find a cottage so easily.'

I was not sure that I agreed in believing Moreland so indifferent to the proximity of Sir Magnus Donners. It is true that men vary in attitude towards previous husbands and lovers of their wife or mistress. As it happened, that was a favourite theme of Moreland's. Some, at least outwardly, are to all appearance completely unconcerned with what experiences a woman may have had – and with whom – before they took her on; others never become reconciled to their forerunners. I remembered Moreland saying that Matilda's father had kept a chemist's shop in that part of the world. There was a story about her first having met Sir Magnus when she was organising a school play in the precincts of the castle. One side of Moreland was certainly squeamish about the matter of his wife's former connexion with Sir Magnus, the other, tolerant, sceptical, indolent about his own life – even his emotional life – welcomed any easy solution when it came to finding somewhere to live. The cottage might be in the shadow of Stourwater, or anywhere else. It was the characteristic split personality that the arts seem specially to require, even to augment in those who practise them. Matilda, of course, knew very well the easygoing, inactive side of her husband; her grasp of that side of his character was perhaps her chief power over him. She could judge to a hair's breadth just how much to make a convenience of having been Sir Magnus's mistress, while stopping short of seriously upsetting Moreland's susceptibilities on that score. Such at least, were the terms in which I myself assessed the situation. That was the background I expected to find when we stayed at the cottage. I thought that half-humorous, half-masochistic shame on Moreland's part at thus allowing his wife to make use of a rich man who had formerly 'kept' her would express itself in banter, partly designed to punish himself for allowing such circumstances to arise.

As it happened, conversation had turned on Sir Magnus Donners a night or two before we were invited to the Morelands'. We were dining (at short notice, because a more 'political' couple had dropped out) with Isobel's sister, Susan, married to Roddy Cutts, a Tory back-bencher. Susan greatly enjoyed giving small political dinner-parties. Roddy, hardly drinking anything himself, saw no reason to encourage the habit in others, so that wine did not exactly flow. Current affairs, however, were unrestrainedly discussed. They inhabited a hideous little mansion flat in Westminster, equipped with a 'division bell' for giving warning when Roddy's vote was required in 'the House'. Said to be rather a 'coming man' in the Conservative Party, he was in some disgrace with its leaders at that moment, having thrown in his lot with Churchill, Eden and the group who had abstained from voting in the 'Munich' division. That evening another MP, Fettiplace-Jones, was present with his wife. Fettiplace-Jones, a supporter of the Government's policy, was at the same time too wary to cut himself off entirely from dissident members of the party. Like Roddy, his contemporary in age, he represented a northern constituency. Tall, handsome, moon-faced, with a lock of hair trained across his high forehead for the caricaturist, he seemed to require only side-whiskers and a high collar to complete the picture of a distinguished politician of the nineteenth century. His untiring professional geniality rivalled even Roddy's remorseless charm of manner. His wife, an eager little woman with the features of the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland* – possibly advised by her husband not to be controversial about Czechoslovakia – spoke sagely of public health and housing. Fettiplace-Jones himself seemed to be exploring avenues of thought that suggested no basic disagreement between himself and Roddy; in short, he himself acknowledged that we must continue to prepare for the worst. When the men were left alone, Fettiplace-Jones, rightly deciding no cigars would be available, took one from his pocket and smelled it.

'The sole survivor,' he said apologetically, as he made an incision. 'Were you in the House when Attlee said that "armaments were not a policy"?'

'Bobetty was scathing,' said Roddy. 'By the same token, I was talking to Duff about anti-aircraft shortages the other night.'

'This continued opposition to conscription is going to do Labour harm in the long run,' said Fettiplace-Jones, who no doubt wanted to avoid anything like a head-on clash, 'even if things let up, as I hope they will.'

'I hope you're right,' said Roddy, who was being more brusque than usual. 'All the same, you'll probably agree we ought to tackle problems of civil evacuation and food control.'

'Do you know Magnus Donners?'

'Never met him.'

'I remember being greatly impressed by him as a boy,' said Fettiplace-Jones. 'I was taken to the House to hear a debate.'

He placed his hand on his forehead, grasping the errant lock, leaning back and smiling to himself, perhaps enjoyably contemplating the young Fettiplace-Jones's first sight of the scene of his own future triumphs.

'Not his delivery,' he said quietly. 'That was nothing. It was the mastery of detail. Now Donners is the sort of man to handle some of those administrative problems.'

'Not too old?'

'He knows the unions and gets on well with them.'

'What does he think about the Czechs?'

'Convinced nothing could be done short of war – at the same time not at all keen on the present situation. More of your view than mine.'

'Is he, indeed?' said Roddy. 'It looked at one moment as if Donners would go to the Lords.'

'I doubt if he ever wanted a peerage,' said Fettiplace-Jones. 'He has no children. My impression is that Donners is gearing his various concerns to the probability of war in spite of the settlement.'

'Is he?' said Roddy.

He had evidently no wish for argument with Fettiplace-Jones at that moment. The subject changed to the more general question of international guarantees.

I knew less of the political and industrial activities of Sir Magnus, than of his steady, if at times capricious, patronage of the arts. Like most rich patrons, his interests leant towards painting and music, rather than literature. Moreland described him as knowing the name of the book to be fashionably discussed at any given moment, being familiar with most of the standard authors. There Sir Magnus's literary appreciation stopped, according to Moreland. He took no pleasure in reading. No doubt that was a wise precaution for a man of action, whose imagination must be rigorously disciplined, if the will is to remain unsapped by daydreams, painting and music being, for some reason, less deleterious than writing in that respect. I listened to Roddy and Fettiplace-Jones talking about Sir Magnus, without supposing for a moment that I should meet him again in the near future. He existed in my mind as one of those figures, dominating, no doubt, in their own remote sphere, but slightly ridiculous when seen casually at close quarters.

We had no car, so reached the Morelands' by train.

'It must be generations since anyone but highbrows lived in this cottage,' said Moreland, when we arrived there. 'I imagine most of the agricultural labourers round here commute from London.'

'Baby Wentworth had it at one moment,' said Matilda, a little maliciously. 'She hated it and moved out almost at once.'

'I've installed a piano in the studio,' said Moreland. 'I get some work done when I'm not feeling too much like hell, which hasn't been often, lately.'

The cottage was a small, redbrick, oak-beamed affair, of some antiquity, though much restored, with a studio-room built out at the back. That was where Moreland had put his piano. He was not looking particularly well. When they were first married, Matilda had cleaned him up considerably. Now, his dark-blue suit – Moreland never made any concession to the sartorial conception of 'country clothes' –

looked as if he had spent a restless night wearing it in bed. He had not shaved.

'What's been wrong?'

'That lung of mine has been rather a bore.'

'What are you working on?'

'My ballet.'

'How is it going?'

'Stuck.'

'It's impossible to write with Hitler about.'

'Utterly.'

He was in low spirits. His tangled, uncut hair emphasised the look his face sometimes assumed of belonging to a fractious, disappointed child. Matilda, on the other hand, so far from being depressed, as Isobel had represented her, now seemed lively and restless. She was wearing trousers that revealed each bone of her angular figure. Her greenish eyes, rather too large mouth, for some reason always made one think she would make a more powerful, more talented actress than her stage capabilities in fact justified. These immediately noticeable features, arresting rather than beautiful, also suggested, in some indirect manner, her practical abilities, her gift for organisation. Matilda's present exhilaration might be explained, I thought, by the fact that these abilities were put to more use now than when the Morelands had lived in London. There, except late at night, or when they lay in bed late in the morning, they were rarely to be found in their flat. Here, they must be alone together most of the day, although no doubt much of the time Moreland was shut away in the studio at work. Matilda, when not acting, had sometimes complained in London that time hung on her hands, even though she was – or had formerly been to some extent – a kind of agent for Moreland, arranging much of his professional life, advising as to what jobs he accepted, what interviews he gave, when he must be left in peace. All the same, as I have said, it was chiefly matters outside the musical world that caused him pain and grief. In the business sphere, Matilda no doubt took a burden from him; in his musical life, as such, he may sometimes even have resented too much interference. Since the baby had died, they had had no other child.

'You are eating sausages tonight,' said Matilda, 'and half-a-crown Barbera. As you know, I'm not a great cook. However, you'll have a square meal tomorrow, as we're going over to Stourwater for dinner.'

'Can you bear it?' said Moreland. 'I'm not sure I can.'

'Do cheer up, darling,' said Matilda. 'You know you'll like it when we get there.'

'Not so sure.'

'Anyway, it's got to be faced.'

Things had certainly changed. Formerly, Moreland had been the one who liked going to parties, staying up late, drinking a lot; Matilda, bored by people, especially some of Moreland's musical friends, wanted as a rule to go home. Now the situation seemed reversed: Matilda anxious for company, Moreland immersed in work. Matilda's tone, her immediate manner of bringing up the subject of Stourwater, was no doubt intended to show in the plainest terms that she herself felt completely at ease so far as visiting Sir Magnus was concerned. Although she had never attempted to conceal her former association with him – which would certainly not have been easy – she seemed to feel that present circumstances required her specially to emphasise her complete freedom from embarrassment. This demeanour was obviously intended to cover Moreland in that respect, as well as herself. She was announcing their policy as a married couple. Possibly she did not altogether carry Moreland with her. He was rebellious about something, even if not about the visit to Stourwater.

'Have you seen the place before?' he asked. 'You realise we are going to conduct you to a Wagnerian castle, a palace where Ludwig of Bavaria wouldn't have been ashamed to disport himself.'

'I was there about ten years ago. Some people called Walpole-Wilson took me over. They live twenty or thirty miles away.'

'I've heard Donners speak of them,' said Matilda.

She always referred to Sir Magnus by his surname. Isobel and I used to discuss whether Matilda had so addressed him in their moments of closest intimacy.

'After all,' Isobel had said, 'she can only have liked him for his money. To call him "Donners" suggests capital appreciation much more than a pet-name. Besides, "Magnus" – if one could bring oneself to call him that – is almost more formal than "Donners", without the advantage of conjuring up visions of dividends and allotment letters.'

'Do you think Matilda only liked him for his money? She never attempted to get any out of him.'

'It's not a question of *getting* the money. It's the money itself. Money is a charm like any other charm.'

'As a symbol of power?'

'Partly, perhaps. After all, men and women both like power in the opposite sex. Why not take it in the form of money?'

'Do you really think Matilda liked nothing else about poor Sir Magnus?'

'I didn't think him very attractive myself the only time I saw him.'

'Perhaps Matilda was won by his unconventional ways.'

'Perhaps.'

'You don't think so?'

'I don't express an opinion.'

'Still, I must agree, she left him in the end.'

'I think Matilda is quite ambitious,' said Isobel.

'Then why did she leave Sir Magnus? She might have made him marry her.'

'Because she took a fancy to Hugh.'

That was no doubt the answer. I had been struck, at the time she said this, by Isobel's opinion that Matilda was ambitious.

'Who are the Walpole-Wilsons?' asked Moreland.

'Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson is a retired diplomat. His daughter, Eleanor, has shared a flat for years with Isobel's sister, Norah. But, of course, you know Norah and Eleanor of old.'

Moreland reddened at the mention of Isobel's sisters. Thought of them must still have called Priscilla uneasily to his mind. The subject of sisters-in-law was obviously one to be avoided. However, Matilda showed some inclination to continue to talk of them. She had rescued her husband from Priscilla, whom she could consider to have suffered a defeat. She may have wanted to emphasise that.

'How are Norah and Eleanor?' she asked.

'Eleanor is trying to make up her mind again whether she will become a Catholic convert,' said Isobel. 'Heather Hopkins became an R.C. the other day. Hugo says that puts Eleanor in a dilemma. She wants to annoy Norah, but doesn't want to please Hopkins.'

'I practically never go to Stourwater,' Moreland said, determined to change the subject from one that could possibly lead back to Priscilla. 'Matty pops over there once in a way to see some high life. I recognise that Donners has his points – has in the past even been very obliging to me personally. The fact remains that when I did the incidental music for that film of his, I saw enough of him to last a lifetime.'

If Matilda had wanted to make her sentiments clear about

Stourwater, Moreland had now been equally explicit about his own. The question of the proximity of Sir Magnus perhaps irked him more than he would admit to himself, certainly more than I expected. On inquiry, it appeared that even Matilda's visits to Stourwater were rare. I thought Moreland was just in a bad mood, exaggerating his own dislike for 'going out'. He was not by any means without a taste for occasional forays into rich life. This taste could hardly have been removed entirely by transferring himself to the country. Even in London, he had suffered periods of acute boredom. As the week-end took shape, it became clear that these fits of ennui were by no means a thing of the past. He would sit for hours without speaking, nursing a large tabby cat called Farinelli.

'Do you think this sell-out is going to prevent a war?' he said, when we were reading the papers on Sunday morning.

'No.'

'You think we ought to have fought this time?'

'I don't know. The one thing everybody agrees about is that we aren't ready for it. There's no point in going to war if we are not going to win it. Losing's not going to help anybody.'

'What are you going to do when it comes?'

'My name is on one of those various army reserves.'

'How did you manage that?'

'Offered myself, and was accepted, before all this last business started.'

'I can only do ladylike things such as playing the piano,' said Moreland gloomily. 'I suppose I shall go on doing that if there's a show-down. One wonders what the hell will happen. How are we getting to this place tonight?'

'Donners rang up and said one of his guests is picking us up in a car,' said Matilda.

'When did he ring up?'

'When you were all at the pub this morning.'

'Why not tell us?'

'I forgot,' said Matilda. 'I told Donners when we were asked he must arrange something. Finding transport is the least the rich can do, if they hope to enjoy one's company. You must shave, sweetie, before we start.'

'All right, all right,' said Moreland, 'I won't let you all down by my tramp-like appearance. Do we know the name of our chauffeur?'

'Somebody called Peter Templer,' said Matilda. 'Anybody ever heard of him?'

'Certainly I've heard of Peter Templer,' I said. 'He's one of my oldest friends. I haven't seen him for years.'

'Who is he? What's he like?'

'A stockbroker. Fast sports car, loud checks, blondes, golf, all that sort of thing. We were at school together.'

'Wasn't he the brother of that girl you used to know?' said Isobel.

She spoke as if finally confirming a fact of which she had always been a little uncertain, at the same time smiling as if she hardly thought the pretence worth keeping up.

'He was.'

'Which girl?' asked Moreland, without interest.

'A woman called Jean Duport, whom I haven't seen for years.'

'Never heard of her,' said Moreland.

I thought what a long time it seemed since I had visited Stourwater on that earlier occasion, when the luncheon party had been given for Prince Theodoric. Prince Theodoric's name, as a pro-British element in a country ominously threatened from without by German political pressure, had been in the papers recently. Stringham, just engaged to Peggy Stepney, had still been one of Sir Magnus's secretaries. Jean Duport, Peter Templer's sister, had been there and I had wondered whether I was not perhaps in love with her. Now, I did not know where she was, was ignorant of the very hemisphere she inhabited. When last seen – parting infinitely painful – she had been on her way to South America, reunited with her awful husband. Baby Wentworth was still – though not long to remain – Sir Magnus's 'girl'. Matilda must have taken on the job soon after that visit of mine. If mere arrival in the neighbourhood had imparted, of itself, a strong sense of having slipped back into the past, that sensation was certainly intensified by the prospect of meeting Peter Templer again. He had passed from my life as completely as his sister. There was nothing at all surprising about his staying at Stourwater, when I came to examine the question, except his own dislike for houses of that sort. Business affairs might perfectly well have brought him within the orbit of Sir Magnus. One of the odd things about Templer was that, although pretty well equipped for social life of any kind, he found places like Stourwater in general too pretentious for his taste. He preferred circles where there was less competition, where he could safely be tipped as the man most likely to appeal to all the women present, most popular with the men. It was not that Templer was in any way ill-adapted to a larger sort of life, so much as the fact that he himself was unwilling to tolerate that larger life's social disciplines, of which the chief was the ever-present danger of finding himself regarded as less important than someone else. That makes him sound intolerable. Templer was, on the contrary, one of the most easygoing, good-natured of men, but he liked being first in the field. He liked, especially, to be first in the field with women. After Mona left him, I imagined he had returned to this former pursuit.

'I have rather suburban taste in ladies, like everything else,' Templer used to say. 'Golf, bridge, an occasional spot of crumpet, they are all I require to savour my seasonal financial flutter.'

The fact that he could analyse his tastes in this way made Templer a little unusual, considering what those tastes were. I felt pleasure in the thought that I was going to see him again, tempered by that faint uneasiness about meeting a friend who may have changed too much during the interval of absence to make practicable any renewal of former ties.

'We haven't brought any evening clothes,' I said.

'Good God,' said Moreland, 'we're not changing for Donners.'

It was a warm autumnal evening, so that we were all in the garden when Templer's car drew up at the gate. The vehicle was of just the kind I had predicted. Templer, too, as he jumped out, seemed scarcely to have changed at all. The car was shaped like a torpedo; Templer's clothes gave the familiar impression – as Stringham used to say – that he was 'about to dance backwards and forwards in front of a chorus of naked ladies'. That outward appearance was the old Templer, just as he had looked at Dicky Umfraville's night-club four or five years before. Now, as he strode up the path with the same swagger, I saw there was a change in him. This was more than the fact that he was distinctly fatter. A coarseness of texture had always coloured his elegance. Now, that coarseness had become more than ever marked. He looked hard, even rather savage, as if he had made up his mind to endure life rather than, as formerly, to enjoy it. From the first impression that he had changed hardly at all, I reversed judgment, deciding he had changed a great deal. When he saw me he stepped back melodramatically.

'Is it really you, Nick?'

'What's left.'

I introduced him to the Morelands and to Isobel.

'I believe you invited me to your wedding, Nick,' said

Templer. 'Somehow I never manage to get to weddings – it's an effort even to reach my own.'

'Have you been having many weddings lately, Peter?'

'Oh, well, not for a year or two,' said Templer, suddenly becoming more serious. 'You knew I married again after Mona?'

'I didn't, as a matter of fact.'

'Yes, indeed.'

'How shameful that we should have missed the announcement.'

'I'm not sure that we made one,' Templer said. 'It was all very quiet. Hardly asked a soul. Since then – I don't know – we've been living in the country. Just see a few neighbours. Betty doesn't like going out much. She has come to Stourwater this week-end, as a matter of fact, but that's rather exceptional. She felt jumpy for some reason about staying at home. She gets these jumpy fits from time to time. Thinks war's going to break out all the time.'

He smiled rather uncomfortably. I felt suddenly certain that Templer's new wife must be responsible for the change that had come over him. At the same time, I tried, quite unsuccessfully, to rationalise in my own mind what exactly this change was. Now that we were face to face and I was talking to him, it was more than ever apparent, almost horrifying. He had slowed up, become more 'serious', at the same time lost that understanding, sympathetic manner formerly characteristic of him, so unexpected in a person of his sort. That was my first thought. Then I wondered whether, in fact, he was even less 'serious' – if that were possible – determined to get as much fun out of living as he could, whatever the obstacles, whatever the cost. These dissections on my own part were rather absurd; yet there was something not far away from Templer that generated a sense of horror.

'What a nice colour your car is,' said Moreland.

I could see he had at once placed Templer in the category of persons he found unsympathetic. That was to be expected. Just as most of the world find it on the whole unusual that anyone should be professionally occupied with the arts, Moreland could never get used to the fact that most people – in this particular case, Templer – lead lives in which the arts play no part whatsoever. That is perhaps an exaggeration of Moreland's attitude. All the same, he always found difficulty in accustoming himself to complete aesthetic indifference. This narrowness of vision sometimes led Moreland, with all his subtlety in some matters, to complete misunderstanding of others, especially to underestimate some of the people who came his way. On Templer's side, the meeting had been equally lacking in fellow feeling. He had no doubt been prepared for the Morelands to look – from his point of view – a pretty extraordinary couple. From Templer's point of view, it had to be admitted, the Morelands did look pretty extraordinary. Matilda was still wearing trousers, bright emerald green in colour, her feet in immensely thick cork-soled sandals, her hair done up on the top of her head, in the fashion of the moment, like a bird's nest. Moreland had shaved, otherwise made no effort to tidy himself, a carelessly knotted tie slipping away from the buttonless collar of his blue shirt. Templer began to laugh, partly, I supposed, at the thought of our having met again after so long, partly, too, I felt sure, at the strange picture the Morelands presented to one unaccustomed to people like them. Templer must also have known of Matilda's former relationship with Sir Magnus. Perhaps that was what made him laugh.

'Come on,' he said, 'all aboard for Stourwater and the picturesque ruins.'

We climbed into the car. The Morelands were rather silent, because there is always something a shade embarrassing about an old friend suddenly encountering another old friend, quite unknown to you. They were perhaps meditating on their own differences of opinion regarding the desirability of accepting the hospitality of Sir Magnus. Templer himself kept up a running fire of questions, as if anxious to delay the moment when he had to speak of his own life.

'It is really too extraordinary our meeting again in this way, Nick,' he said. 'Though it's just like a millionaire to make one of the persons staying with him fetch the guests for dinner, instead of using his own chauffeur, but now I'm glad Magnus was running true to form. Do you live in London?'

'Yes – and you?'

'We're at Sunningdale.'

'Isn't that where Stringham's mother, Mrs Foxe, has a house?'

'Charles Stringham – I haven't thought of him for years.'

'Does she still live there?'

'She does, as a matter of fact. We don't know them. Rather too grand for us. Odd you should mention Stringham. It wasn't quite true when I said I hadn't thought of him for years, because, as it happened, I ran across Mrs Foxe's naval-officer husband at a golf tournament handicap not so long ago who said something about him.'

'Stringham was knocking it back pretty hard when I last saw him. What did Buster Foxe say? They don't much care for each other.'

'Don't they? I gathered from Commander Foxe they were great pals. Now, what did he say? Gone right out of my head. No, I know – Stringham is living at Glimber, the house Mrs Foxe inherited from her first husband. It's huge, uninhabitable, entailed, nobody wants to rent it. Stringham looks after it apparently. He has a former secretary of his mother's to help him. It's like being an agent, I suppose.'

'Sounds rather grim.'

'Oh, I don't know. Stately home, and all that. Commander Foxe said Charles liked it. Now you come to mention it, he did say something, too, about giving up the bottle. I hadn't realised Stringham's drinking had reached the headline category.'

'He used to hit it fairly hard. The secretary you mention is called Miss Weedon – Tuffy to her intimates. Rather a frightening lady. She has always taken a great hand in arranging Charles's life. In fact, she had more or less undertaken to stop his drinking at one moment. They even lived in the same flat.'

'Wasn't she the Medusa-like figure who appeared at that party Mrs Foxe gave for my symphony?' said Moreland.

'She was. Charles Stringham is Mrs Foxe's son.'

'It was Miss Weedon who hauled him off home when he was so tight.'

'It wasn't a very enjoyable party, anyway,' said Matilda.

I remembered that it had ended by Moreland's disappearing with Isobel's sister, Priscilla. Templer showed no interest at all in these reminiscences. They were not, perhaps, very absorbing in themselves, but he might have been expected to have given them more attention inasmuch as they referred to so old a friend as Stringham.

'Talking of people we knew at school,' he said, 'Kenneth will be at Stourwater this evening.'

'Kenneth who?'

'Kenneth Widmerpool.'

'Oh, yes.'

'You're a friend of his, aren't you?' said Templer, evidently surprised at my not grasping immediately whom he meant. 'I've heard him speak of you. His mother has a cottage near here.'

I saw that it was no longer a question of Stringham and Widmerpool having drawn level as friends in Templer's mind; the fact was that Widmerpool was now miles ahead. That was clear from Templer's tone. There was not a flicker of laughter or irony in his employment of Widmerpool's Christian name, as there had certainly been when I had last seen them together at Dicky Umfraville's night-club. There was, of course, absolutely no reason why Templer should adopt a satirical tone towards Widmerpool, who had as much right as anyone else to make friends with – if necessary, even to dominate – persons like Templer, who had made fun of him as a schoolboy. It was the juxtaposition of his complete acceptance of Widmerpool with Templer's equally complete indifference to his old crony, Stringham, that gave the two things an emphasis that certainly jarred a little. Templer had probably not set eyes on him since the day when he had arrived in Stringham's college room, later driven us all into the ditch in his newly bought car. If it came to that, I never saw Stringham these days myself, while Templer, doing business with Widmerpool for a long time now, had naturally come to regard him as a personal friend. By that time we were entering the park of Stourwater.

'Look, the castle,' said Isobel. 'Nobody warned me it was made of cardboard.'

Cardboard was certainly the material of which walls and keep seemed to be built, as we rounded the final sweep of the drive, coming within sight of a large castellated pile, standing with absurd unreality against a background of oaks, tortured by their antiquity into elephantine and grotesque shapes. From the higher ground at the back, grass, close-cropped by sheep, rolled down towards the greenish pools of the moat. All was veiled in the faint haze of autumn.

'I told you it was Wagnerian,' said Moreland.

'When we wind the horn at the gate, will a sullen dwarf usher us in,' said Isobel, 'like Beckford's at Fonthill or the Castle of Joyous Gard in the *Morte d'Arthur*?'

'A female dwarf, perhaps,' said Moreland, rather maliciously.

'Don't miss the black swans,' said Matilda, disregarding him.

'An anachronism, I fear,' said Moreland. 'Sir Magnus admitted as much to me in an unguarded moment. They come from Australia. Doesn't it all look as if the safety curtain would descend any moment amid bursts of applause?'

Stourwater was certainly dramatic; yet how unhaunted, how much less ghost-ridden than Stonehurst; though perhaps Sir Magnus himself might leave a spectre behind him. In my memory, the place had been larger, more forbidding, not so elaborately restored. In fact, I was far less impressed than formerly, even experiencing a certain feeling of disappointment. Memory, imagination, time, all building up on that brief visit, had left a magician's castle (brought into being by some loftier Dr Trelawney), weird and prodigious, peopled by beings impossible to relate to everyday life. Now, Stourwater seemed nearer to being an architectural abortion, a piece of monumental vulgarity, a house where something had gone very seriously wrong. We crossed the glittering water by a causeway, drove under the portcullis and through the outer courtyard, entering the inner court, where a fountain stood in the centre of a sunken garden surrounded by a stone balustrade. Here, in the days when he had been first ingratiating himself with Sir Magnus, Widmerpool had backed his car into one of the ornamental urns filled with flowers.

'Is Kenneth Widmerpool staying in the house?' I asked, thinking of that incident.

'Just driving over after dinner,' said Templer. 'Some sort of business to clear up. I'm involved to a small extent, because it's about my ex-brother-in-law, Bob Duport. Between you and me, I think I've been asked partly because Magnus wants me to know what is going on for his own purposes.'

'What are his own purposes?'

'I don't know for certain. Perhaps he wants this particular scheme given a little discreet publicity.'

We had drawn up by the wing of the castle that was used for residence. The girls and Moreland had left the car by then, and were making their way up the steps to the front door. Templer had paused for a moment to fiddle with one of the knobs of the dashboard which for some reason seemed to dissatisfy him. This seemed a good opportunity for learning privately what had happened to Jean; for although by then I no longer thought about her, there is always a morbid interest in following the subsequent career of a woman with whom one has once been in love. That I should have been in this position *vis-à-vis* his sister, Templer himself, I felt pretty sure, had no idea.

'Duport is an *ex*-brother-in-law now?'

'Jean finally got a divorce from him. They lived apart for quite a time when Bob was running round with Bijou Ardglass. Then they joined up again and went to South America together. However, it didn't last. You never really knew Jean, did you?'

'I met her when I stayed with your family years ago – a few times later. What's happened to her now?'

'She married a South American – an army officer.'

'And Bob Duport?'

'There is some question of his going to Turkey for Magnus. Kenneth has been fixing it.'

'On business?'

'Magnus is interested in chromite.'

'What's that?'

'Used for hardening steel.'

By that time we were half-way up the steps, at the top of which the others were waiting.

'Shall I lead the way?' said Templer. 'Magnus was in the Bailiff's Room when last seen.'

If the outside of Stourwater made a less favourable impression than when I had come there with the Walpole-Wilsons, improvements within were undeniable. Ten years before, the exuberance of the armour, tapestries, pictures, china, furniture, had been altogether too much for the austere aesthetic ideals to which I then subscribed. Time had no doubt modified the uninstructed severity of my own early twenties. Less ascetic, intellectually speaking, more corrupt, perhaps, I could now recognise that individuals live in different ways. They must be taken as they come, Sir Magnus Donners, everyone else. If Sir Magnus liked to make his house like a museum, that was his affair; one must treat it as a museum. In any case, there could be no doubt that protégés like Moreland and Barnby, mistresses like Baby Wentworth and Matilda, had played their part in the castle's redecoration. Certainly it was now arranged in a manner more in keeping with contemporary fashion. Sir Magnus had cleared out some of the more cumbersome of his belongings, although much remained that was unviable enough.

'It's all rather wonderful, Nick, isn't it?' said Matilda in a whisper, as we passed through the main hall. 'Whatever Hugh may say about the Donners taste. How would you like to own it all?'

'How would you?'

'I nearly did.'

I laughed, surprised by her directness, always attractive in women. Entering a panelled gallery, Templer opened a door and indicated we were to go in. The room overlooked the garden. Between bookshelves hung drawings: Conder, Steer, John, a couple of Sickerts. Barnby's nude of Norma, the waitress from Casanova's Chinese Restaurant, was beside the fireplace, above which stood a florid china statuette of *Cupid Chastised*. Just as the last of our party crossed the threshold, one of the bookcases on the far side of the room swung forward, revealing itself as an additional door covered with the spines of dummy volumes, through which Sir Magnus Donners himself appeared to greet his guests at exactly the same moment. I wondered whether he had been watching at a peephole. It was like the stage entrance of a famous actor, the conscious modesty of which is designed, by its absolute ease and lack of emphasis, both to prevent the performance from being disturbed at some anti-climax of the play by too deafening a round of applause, at the same time to confirm – what everyone in the theatre knows already – the complete mastery he possesses of his art. The manner in which Sir Magnus held out his hand also suggested brilliant miming of a distinguished man feeling a little uncomfortable about something.

'You did not tell me I was to collect one of my oldest friends, Magnus,' said Templer, addressing his host as if he were on the most familiar terms with him, in spite of any differences between them of age and eminence. 'Nick and I were at school together.'

Sir Magnus did not answer. He only raised his eyebrows and smiled. Introductions began. While he was shaking hands with Isobel, I observed, from out of the corner of my eye, a woman – whom I assumed to be Templer's wife – sitting in an armchair with its back towards us in the corner of the room. She was reading a newspaper, which she did not lower at our entry. Sir Magnus shook hands all round, behaving as if he had never before met the Morelands, giving, when he reached me, that curious pump-handle motion to his handshake, terminated by a sudden upward jerk (as if suddenly shutting off from the main valuable current of good will, of which not a volt too much must be expended), a form of greeting common to many persons with a long habit of public life. Ten years left little mark on him. Possibly the neat grey hair receded a trifle more; the line on one side of the mouth might have been a shade deeper; the eyes – greenish, like Matilda's – were clear and very cold. Sir Magnus's mouth was his least comfortable feature. Tall, holding himself squarely, he still possessed the air, conveyed to me when I first set eyes on him, of an athletic bishop or clerical headmaster. This impression was dispelled when he spoke, because he had none of the urbane manner usual to such persons. Unlike Roddy Cutts or Fettiplace-Jones, he was entirely without the patter of the professional politician, even appearing to find difficulty in making 'small talk' of any kind whatsoever. When he spoke, it was as if he had forced himself by sheer effort of will into manufacturing a few stereotyped sentences to tide over the trackless wilderness of social life. Such colourless phrases as he achieved were produced with a difficulty, a hesitancy, simulated perhaps, but decidedly effective in their unconcealed ineptness. While he uttered these verbal formalities, the side of his mouth twitched slightly. Like most successful men, he had turned this apparent disadvantage into a powerful weapon of offence and defence, in the way that the sledge-hammer impact of his comment left, by its banality, every other speaker at a standstill, giving him as a rule complete mastery of the conversational field. A vast capacity for imposing boredom, a sense of immensely powerful stuffiness, emanated from him, sapping every drop of vitality from weaker spirits.

'So you were at school together,' he said slowly.

He regarded Templer and myself as if the fact we had been at school together was an important piece of evidence in assessing our capabilities, both as individuals and as a team.

He paused. There was an awkward silence.

'Well, I suppose you sometimes think of those days with regret,' Sir Magnus continued at last. 'I know I do. Only in later life does one learn what a jewel is youth.'

He smiled apologetically at having been compelled to use such a high-flown phrase. Matilda, laughing, took his arm. 'Dear Donners,' she said, 'what a thing to tell us. You don't suppose we believe you for a moment. Of course you much prefer living in your lovely castle to being back at school.'

Sir Magnus smiled. However, he was not to be jockeyed so easily from his serious mood.

'Believe me,' he said, 'I would at least give what I have to live again my time at the Sorbonne. One is not a student twice in a lifetime.'

'One is never a student at all in England,' said Moreland, in a tone that showed he was still in no mood to be tractable, 'except possibly a medical student or an art student. I suppose you might say I was myself a student, in one sense, when I was at the Royal College of Music. I never felt in the least like one. Besides, with that sort of student, you enter an area of specialisation, which hardly counts for what I mean. Undergraduates in this country are quite different from students. Not that I was ever even an undergraduate myself, but my observation shows me that undergraduates have nothing in common with what is understood abroad by the word student – young men for ever rioting, undertaking political assassination, overturning governments.'

Sir Magnus smiled a little uncertainly, as if only too familiar with these dissertations of Moreland's on fugitive subjects; as if aware, too, that it was no good hoping to introduce any other matter unless such aimless ramblings had been brought by Moreland himself to a close. Moreland stopped speaking and laughed, seeing what was in Sir Magnus's mind. Sir Magnus began a sentence, but, before he could get the words out, the woman sitting in the corner of the room threw down her newspaper and jumped to her feet. She came hurriedly towards us. She was quite pretty, very untidy, with reddish hair and elaborately blued eyelids. Far from being Templer's wife – unless, by some extraordinary freak, they had married and the news had never come my way – this was Lady Anne Stepney, sister of Peggy Stepney (now divorced and remarried) who had been Stringham's former wife. Anne Stepney was also a *divorcée* – in fact, she was Anne Umfraville, having married that raffish figure, Dicky Umfraville, at least twenty years older than herself, as his third or fourth wife. That marriage, too, had broken up. There had been a time, just before meeting Dicky Umfraville, when Anne had been closely associated with Barnby. Now her manner suggested that she regarded Sir Magnus as her own property.

'I really do agree with you about students,' she said, speaking in a torrent of words addressed to Moreland. 'Why is it we don't have any in England? It would liven things up so. I wish the students would do something to prevent all the awful things that have been happening in Czechoslovakia. I do apologise for my rudeness in not coming to talk to you before now. I was so utterly engrossed in what I was reading, I really had to finish the article. It's by J. G. Quiggin. He says we ought to have fought. I can't think about *anything* but Czechoslovakia. Why can't one of the Germans do in Hitler? Those German students, who are so proud of the duelling scars on their faces, take it like lambs when it comes to being bossed about by a man like that.'

'*The Times* says that the Lord Mayor's Fund for the relief of the Czechs has evoked a wide response,' said Sir Magnus mildly.

Lady Anne made an angry movement.

'But you must all be longing for a drink,' she said, as if in despair. 'I didn't know you were going to sit in here, Magnus. I told them to put the drink tray in the Chinese Room. Shall I ring and have it transferred here?'

It was clear that she regarded herself as holding an established position at Stourwater. Sir Magnus continued to look embarrassed, but whether on account of this outburst, the distressing situation in Central Europe, or the problem of where to consume our drinks, was not apparent. He was probably far from anxious to embark, there and then, on the rights and wrongs of Munich, the practical issues of which were certainly at that time occupying the foremost place in his mind. Roddy Cutts had indicated that when we had talked of Sir Magnus again, after Fettiplace-Jones and his wife had gone home.

'Donners is in close touch with some of the seedy businessmen one or two of the Cabinet think worth cultivating,' said Roddy, who appeared to have kept his own artillery masked while speaking with Fettiplace-Jones, 'but he is alleged to be absolutely out of sympathy with the Chamberlain policy. He is playing a waiting game, perhaps a wise one from his point of view.'

The explosive undertones introduced by Anne Umfraville were deadened at that moment by the entry of another woman, whose arrival immediately altered the atmosphere of the room, without greatly relieving its tensions. She, too, was pretty, with the looks sometimes described as 'porcelain', fragile and delicate, slim and blonde. She gave the impression of being not so much an actress, as the sort of girl an actress often tries to portray on the stage in some play making few demands on the mind: the 'nice' girl in a farce or detective story. A typical Templer girl, I thought, feeling sure she must be Peter's wife, then remembering she was the woman with him at Dicky Umfraville's night-club.

'A Mrs Taylor or Porter,' he had said, 'I can't remember which. Rather a peach, isn't she?'

Presumably Templer had removed her from Mr Taylor or Porter. As she came through the door, Templer's own expression altered slightly. It was as if his features contracted for a brief instant with a sudden spasm of toothache, an agony over almost as soon as felt. The woman moved slowly, shyly, towards us. Sir Magnus stopped looking at Anne Umfraville, following this new arrival with his eyes, as if she were walking a tight-rope and he feared she might at any moment make a false step, fall into the net below, ruin the act, possibly break her neck. Templer watched her too. She came to a standstill.

'This is Betty,' Templer said.

He spoke as if long past despair. Sir Magnus nodded in resigned, though ever hopeful, agreement that this was indeed Betty. Betty stood for a moment gazing round the room in a dazed, almost terrified, manner, suggesting sudden emergence into the light of day after long hours spent behind drawn curtains. I suddenly thought of the tour of Stourwater's 'dungeons' (strenuously asserted by Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson, on my previous visit, to be mere granaries), when Sir Magnus had remarked with sensuous ogreishness, '*I sometimes think that is where we should put the girls who don't behave.*' Could it be that Betty Templer, with her husband's connivance – an explanation of Templer's uneasy air – had been imprisoned in the course of some partly high-spirited, partly sadistic, rompings to gratify their host's strange whims? Of course, I did not seriously suppose such a thing, but for a split second the grotesque notion presented itself. However, setting fantasy aside, I saw at once that something was 'wrong' with Betty Templer, not realising, until I came to shake hands with her, how badly 'wrong' things were. It was like trying to shake hands with Ophelia while she was strewing flowers. Betty Templer was 'dotty'.

She was as 'dotty' as my sister-in-law, Blanche Tolland – far 'dottier', because people met Blanche, talked with her at parties, had dealings with her about her charities, without ever guessing about her 'dottiness'. Indeed, in the world of 'good works' she was a rather well known, certainly a respected, figure. Blanche's strangeness, when examined, mainly took the shape of lacking any desire to engage herself in life, to have friends, to marry, to bear children, to go out into the world. Within, so to speak, her chosen alcove, she appeared perfectly happy, at least not actively unhappy. The same could certainly not be said for Betty Templer. Betty Templer, on the contrary, was painfully disorientated, at her wits' end, not happy at all. It was dreadful. I saw that the situation required reassessment. After my failure at shaking hands with her, I made some remark about the weather. She looked at me without speaking, as if horrified at my words.

'Perhaps it would be better to go to the Chinese Room,' said Sir Magnus, 'if the drinks are really there.'

He spoke in that curiously despondent, even threatening, manner sometimes adopted by very rich people towards their guests, especially where food and drink are concerned, a tone suggesting considerable danger that drinks would not be found in the Chinese Room or, indeed, anywhere else at Stourwater Castle; that we should be lucky if we were given anything to drink at all – or to eat, too, if it came to that – during the evening that lay ahead of us.

'Will you lead the way, Anne?' he said, with determined cheerfulness. 'I shall have to speak to you later about trying to keep us from our drinks. Deliberate naughtiness on your part, I fear. Have you heard the New Hungarian String Quartet, Hugh? I haven't been myself. I was at *Faust* the other night, and a little disappointed at some of the singing.'

We followed through the door, crossing the hall again, while I wondered what on earth had happened to Templer's wife to give her this air of having been struck by lightning. Contact between us was broken for the moment, because, while drinks were being dispensed in the Chinese Room, I found myself talking to Anne Umfraville. By the fireplace there, as if left by some visiting photographer, was a camera on a tripod, beside which stood two adjustable lamps.

'What's all this, Donners?' asked Matilda. 'Have you taken up photography?'

'It is my new hobby,' said Sir Magnus, speaking apologetically, as if this time, at least, he agreed with other people in thinking his own habits a shade undesirable. 'I find it impossible to persuade professionals to take pictures of my collections in the way I want them taken. That was why I decided to do it myself. The results, although I say it, are as good, if not better. I have been photographing some of the Nymphenburg. That is why the apparatus is in here.'

'Do you ever photograph people?' asked Moreland.

'I had not thought of that,' said Sir Magnus, smiling rather wolfishly. 'I suppose I might rise to people.'

'Happy snaps,' said Matilda.

'Or unhappy ones,' said Moreland, 'just for a change.'

Dinner was announced. We found ourselves among those scenes in blue, yellow and crimson, the tapestries illustrating the Seven Deadly Sins, which surrounded the dining-room, remembered so well from my earlier visit. Then, I had sat next to Jean Duport. We had talked about the imagery of the incidents depicted in the tapestries. Suitably enough our place had been just below the sequences of *Luxuria*.

'Of course they are newly married . . .' she had said.

That all seemed a long time ago. I glanced round the room. If the rest of Stourwater had proved disappointing – certainly less overpowering in ornate magnificence – these fantastic tapestries, on the other hand, had gained in magnitude. More gorgeous, more extravagant than ever, they engulfed my imagination again in their enchanting colours, grotesque episodes, symbolic moods, making me forget once more the persons on either side of me, just as I had been unaware of Jean when she had spoken on that day, telling me we had met before. Thinking of that, I indulged in a brief moment of sentimentality permissible before social duties intervened. Then, I collected myself. I was between Matilda and Betty Templer – we were sitting at a table greatly reduced in size from that in use on the day when Prince Theodoric had been entertained at Stourwater – and, abandoning the tapestries, I became aware that Templer was chatting in his easy way to Matilda, while I myself had made no effort to engage his wife in conversation. Beyond Betty Templer, Moreland was already administering a tremendous scolding to Anne Umfraville, who, as soon as they sat down, had ventured to express some musical opinion which outraged him, an easy enough thing to do. Sir Magnus, on the other side, had begun to recount to Isobel the history of the castle.

'Have you been to Stourwater before?' I asked Betty Templer.

She stared at me with big, frightened eyes.

'No.'

'It's rather a wonderful house, isn't it?'

'How – how do you mean?'

That question brought me up short. To like Stourwater, to disapprove, were both tenable opinions, but, as residence, the castle could hardly be regarded as anything except unusual. If Betty Templer had noticed none of its uncommon characteristics, pictures and furniture were not a subject to embark upon.

'Do you know this part of the world at all?'

'No,' she said, after some hesitation.

'Peter told me you lived at Sunningdale.'

'Yes.'

'Have you been there long?'

'Since we married.'

'Good for getting up and down to London.'

'I don't go to London much.'

'I suppose Peter gets back for dinner.'

'Sometimes.'

She looked as if she might begin to cry. It was an imbecile remark on my part, the worst possible subject to bring up, talking to the wife of a man like Templer.

'I expect it is all rather nice there, anyway,' I said.

I knew that I was losing my head, that she would soon reduce me to as desperate a state, conversationally speaking, as herself.

'Yes,' she admitted.

'It was extraordinary Peter's bringing us over in the car this evening. I hadn't seen him for ages. We used to know each other so well at school.'

'He knows such a lot of people,' she said.

Her eyes filled with tears. There could be no doubt of it. I wondered what was going to happen next, fearing the worst. However, she made a tremendous effort.

'Do you live in London?' she asked.

'Yes, we——'

'I used to live in London when I was married to my first husband.'

'Oh, yes.'

'He was in – in jute.'

'Was he?'

For the moment I saw no way of utilising this opening.

'Are you a stockbroker?' she asked.

'No . . . I . . .'

I suddenly felt unable to explain what I did, what I was.

The difficulties seemed, for some reason, insuperable. Fortunately no explanation was necessary. She required of me no alternative profession.

'Most of Peter's friends are stockbrokers,' she said, speaking rather more calmly, as if that thought brought some small balm to her soul, adding, a moment later, 'Some of them live at Sunningdale.'

The situation was relieved at that moment by Matilda's causing conversation to become general by returning to the subject of Sir Magnus and his photography.

'You were talking about photographing people, Donners,' she said. 'Why don't you begin on us after dinner? What could be nicer to photograph than the present company?'

'What a good idea,' said Anne Umfraville. 'Do let's do that, Magnus. It would be fun.'

She was greatly improved, far less truculent, than in the days when I had first met her. If Dicky Umfraville could not be said exactly to have knocked the nonsense out of her, marriage to him had certainly effected a change. At least the nonsense was, so to speak, rearranged in a manner less irksome to those with whom she came in contact. She no longer contradicted, as a matter of principle, every word spoken to her; her demeanour was friendly, rather than the reverse. Soon after our arrival at Stourwater, she had reminded Isobel that they were distant cousins; her musical blunder with Moreland was due to ignorance, not desire to exacerbate him; she was well disposed even to Matilda, who, as a former 'girl' of Sir Magnus's, might well have incurred her antagonism. I thought she had obviously taken a fancy to Templer, and he to her. That might explain her excellent humour. It might also explain, at least in part, his wife's 'state'.

'Oh, are we going to be photographed?' Betty Templer whispered at that moment in an agonised voice.

I concluded she had been reduced to her unhappy condition largely by Templer's goings-on. Her own prettiness, silliness, adoration of himself must have brought Templer to the point of deciding to remove her from the husband who 'bored her by talking of money all the time'. At a period when Templer was no doubt still smarting from his own abandonment by Mona, Betty had re-established his confidence by accepting him so absolutely. In marrying her, Templer had shown himself determined to make no such mistake a second time, to choose a wife unquestionably devoted to him, one possessing, besides, not too much life of her own. Mona, by the time she came Templer's way, had had too many adventures. In Betty, he had certainly found adoration (throughout dinner, she continually cast tortured glances in his direction), but the price had been a high one. In short, Templer had picked a girl probably not quite 'all there' even at the beginning of their married life; then, by his racketty conduct, he had sent her never very stable faculties off their balance. Betty Templer was simply not equipped to cope with her husband, to stand up to Templer's armour-plated egotism as a 'ladies' man'. The qualities that had bowled her over before marriage – that bowled her over, so far as that went, still – had also driven her to the borders of sanity. Never very bright in the head, she had been shattered by the unequal battle. The exercise of powerful 'charm' is, in any case, more appreciated in public than in private life, exacting, as it does, almost as heavy demands on the receiver as the transmitter, demands often too onerous to be weighed satisfactorily against the many other, all too delicate, requirements of married life. No doubt affairs with other women played their part as well. In the circumstances, it was inconceivable that Templer did not have affairs with other women. That, at least, was my own reading of the situation. Anyway, whatever the cause, there could be no doubt Betty Templer's spirit was broken, that she was near the end of her tether. Templer must have been aware of that himself. In fact, his perpetual awareness of it explained my own consciousness of some horror in the background when he had stepped from his car that evening. He was always kind, I noticed, when he spoke to Betty, would probably have done anything in his power – short of altering his own way of life, which perhaps no one can truly do – to alleviate this painful situation. It was a gruesome predicament. I thought how ironic that Templer, my first friend to speak with assurance of 'women' and their ways, should have been caught up in this dire matrimonial trap. These impressions shot across the mind, disquieting, evanescent, like forked lightning. Sir Magnus, who had been silent for a minute or two, now leaned forward over the dinner-table, as if to carry us all with him at some all important board meeting – at a Cabinet itself – in the pursuance of an onerous project he had in mind.

'By all means let us take some photographs after dinner,' he said. 'What a good idea.'

Highlights showed on his greenish eyes. No doubt he saw escape from dishing up 'Munich' for the thousandth time, not only with Anne Umfraville, but also with a handful of guests whose views he could not reasonably be expected to take seriously. Like so many men who have made a successful career through the will, it was hard to guess how much, or how little, Sir Magnus took in of what was going on immediately round him. Did he know that his own sexual habits were a source of constant speculation and jocularity; that Moreland was tortured by the thought of Matilda's former status in the house; that Betty Templer made the party a very uncomfortable one; or was he indifferent to these things, and many others as well? It was impossible to say. Perhaps Sir Magnus, through his antennae, was even more keenly apprised of surrounding circumstances than the rest of us; perhaps, on the other hand, he was able to dismiss them completely from his consciousness as absolutely unessential elements in his own tranquil progress through life.

'Let's pose some tableaux,' said Matilda. 'Donners can photograph us in groups.'

'Historical events or something of that sort,' said Anne Umfraville. 'The history of the castle? We could use some of the armour. Ladies watching a tournament?'

Moreland had shown signs of being dreadfully bored until that moment, expressing his own lack of enjoyment by yawns and occasional tart remarks. Now he began to cheer up. The latest proposal not only pointed to the kind of evening he liked, it also opened up new possibilities of teasing Sir Magnus, a project certainly uppermost at that moment in his mind. Anne Umfraville seemed to some extent to share this wish to torment her host.

'Let's do scenes from the career of Sir Magnus,' said Moreland. 'His eventual rise to being dictator of the world.'

'No, no,' said Sir Magnus, laughing. 'That I cannot allow. It would have a bad effect on my photography. You must remember I am only a beginner. Myself as a subject would make me nervous.'

'Hitler and Chamberlain at Godesberg?' suggested Templer.

That proposal, certainly banal enough, was at once dismissed, not only as introducing too sinister, too depressing a note, but also as a scene devoid of attractive and colourful characters of both sexes.

'What about some mythological incident?' said Moreland. 'Andromeda chained to her rock, or the flaying of Marsyas?'

'Or famous pictures?' said Anne Umfraville. 'A man once told me I looked like Mona Lisa. I admit he'd drunk a lot of

Martinis. We want something that will bring everyone in.'

'Rubens's *Rape of the Sabine Women*,' said Moreland, 'or *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch. We might even be highbrows, while we're about it, and do *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. What's against a little practical cubism?'

Sir Magnus nodded approvingly.

'We girls don't want to die of cold,' said Anne Umfraville. 'Nothing too rough, either. I'm not feeling particularly cubistic tonight.'

'Or too highbrow,' said Templer. 'Nick will get out of hand. I know him of old. Let's stick to good straightforward stuff, don't you agree, Magnus – Anne doing a strip-tease, for instance.'

'Nothing sordid,' said Anne Umfraville, her attention distinctly engaged by this last suggestion. 'It must all be at a high intellectual level, or I shan't play.'

'Well-known verses, then,' said Moreland,

I was a king in Babylon,
And you were a Christian slave. . . .

– not that I can ever see how the couple in question managed to be those utterly disparate things at the same moment in history – or, to change the mood entirely:

Now all strange hours and all strange loves are over,
Dreams and desires and sombre songs and sweet . . .

There is good material in both of those. The last would be better for including everyone.'

My own mind was still on the tapestries. What could be better than variations on the spectacle these already offered?

'Why not the Seven Deadly Sins?'

'Oh, yes,' said Anne Umfraville.

'Modern version,' said Moreland.

'A good idea,' agreed Sir Magnus. 'A very good idea indeed.'

He nodded his head in support of the Board's – the Cabinet's – proposal. That was the tone of his words. He glanced round to talk. There was no dissentient voice.

'I shall look forward to seeing some first-rate acting after dinner,' he said.

He nodded his head again. Everything he did had about it heavy, sonorous overtones. He was entirely free from gaiety. Nothing of that kind could ever have troubled him. There was suddenly a tremendous gasp from Betty Templer, who had been quite silent while all this discussion was taking place.

'Oh, we haven't got to act, have we?' she now cried out in a voice of despair. 'I can't act. I never was able to. Need we really?'

'Oh, don't be so silly, darling,' said Templer, addressing her for the first time that evening rather sharply. 'It's only a game. Nothing much will be expected of you. Don't try and wreck everything from the start.'

'But I *can't* act.'

'It will be all right.'

'Oh, I wish I hadn't come.'

'Pull yourself together, Betty.'

This call to order made her lips tremble. Again, I thought there were going to be tears. However, once more she recovered herself. She was more determined than one might suppose.

'Yes, you must certainly play your part, Betty,' said Sir Magnus, with just a hint, just the smallest suggestion, of conscious cruelty. 'We are exactly seven, so everyone must do his or her bit.'

'We're eight,' said Moreland. 'Surely you yourself are not going to be sinless?'

'I shall only be the photographer,' said Sir Magnus, smiling firmly.

'What are the Seven Deadly Sins, anyway?' said Anne Umfraville. 'I can never remember. Lust, of course – we all know that one – but the others, Pride——'

'Anger – Avarice – Envy – Sloth – Gluttony,' said Isobel.

'They are represented all round us,' said Sir Magnus, making a gesture towards the walls, at the same time wiping his lips very carefully with a napkin, as if in fear of contamination, 'sometimes pictured rather whimsically.'

He seemed cheered as Moreland by what lay ahead. He must also have decided either that a little more drink would improve the tableaux, or that the measure of wine up to then provided was insufficient to clear him unequivocally of the sin of Avarice, because he said in an aside to the butler: 'I think we shall need some more of that claret.'

'How are we to decide what everyone is going to do?' said Anne Umfraville. 'Obviously Lust is the star part.'

'Do you think so, Anne?' said Sir Magnus, feigning ponderous reproof. 'Then to prevent argument, I must decide for you all. It will be my privilege as host. I shall allot everyone a Sin. Then they will be allowed their own team to act it. Peter, I think we can rely on you to take charge of Lust – which for some reason Anne seems to suppose so acceptable to everyone – for I don't think we can offer such a sin to a lady. Perhaps, Anne, you would yourself undertake Anger – no, no, not a word. I must insist. Matilda – Envy. Not suit you? Certainly I think it would suit you. Lady Isobel, no one could object to Pride. Betty, I am going to ask you to portray Avarice. It is a very easy one, making no demand on your powers as an actress. Nonsense, Betty, you will do it very well. We will all help you. Hugh, don't be offended if I ask you to present Gluttony. I have often heard you praise the pleasures of the table above all others. Mr Jenkins, I fear there is nothing left for you but Sloth. There are, of course, no personal implications. I am sure it is quite inappropriate, but like Avarice, it makes no great demands on the actor.'

If the administrative capacity of Sir Magnus Donners had ever been at all in question before that moment, his ability to make decisions – and have them obeyed – was now amply demonstrated. Naturally, a certain amount of grumbling took place about the allotment of Sins, but only superficial. No vital objection was raised. In the end everyone bowed to the Donners ruling. Even Betty Templer made only a feeble repetition of the statement that she could not act at all. It was brushed aside for the last time. Moreland was especially delighted with the idea of portraying Gluttony.

'Can we do them in here?' he asked, 'everyone in front of his or her appropriate Sin?'

'Certainly,' said Sir Magnus, 'certainly. We will return after coffee.'

He had become more than ever like an energetic, dominating headmaster, organising extempore indoor exercise for his pupils on an afternoon too wet for outdoor games. A faint suggestion of repressed, slightly feverish excitement under his calm, added to this air, like some pedagogue confronted with aspects of his duties that gratify him almost to the point of aberration. The rest of dinner passed with much argument as to how best the Sins were to be depicted. All of us drank a lot, especially Moreland, Templer and Anne Umfraville, only Sir Magnus showing his usual moderation. The extravagance of the project offered temporary relief from personal problems, from the European scene. I had not expected the evening to turn out this way. There could be no doubt that Sir Magnus, genuinely exhilarated, was, as much as anyone, casting aside his worries. While the table was cleared, we had coffee in the Chinese Room, drawing lots as to the order in which the Sins should be presented. Camera and arc lamps were moved into the dining-room.

'Do you want any companions, Hugh?' asked Sir Magnus.

'Gluttony at its most enjoyable dispenses with companionship,' said Moreland, who was to lead off.

He had surrounded himself with dishes of fruit and liqueur bottles, from both of which he was helping himself liberally.

'Be prepared for the flash,' said Sir Magnus.

Moreland, not prepared, upset a glass of Kümmel. He must have been photographed half-sprawled across the table. It was agreed to have been a good performance.

'I shall continue to act the Sin for the rest of the evening,' he said, pouring out more Kümmel, this time into a tumbler.

Isobel was next as Pride. She chose Anne Umfraville as her 'feed'. With these two a different note was struck. Moreland's 'turn' was something individual to himself, an artist – in this case a musician – displaying considerable attainment in a medium not his own. With Isobel and Anne Umfraville, on the other hand, the performance was of quite another order. The two of them had gone off together to find suitable 'properties', returning with a metal receptacle for fire irons, more or less golden in material, the legs of which, when inverted, formed the spikes of a crown. They had also amassed a collection of necklaces and beads, rugs and capes of fur. With the crown on her head, loaded with jewels, fur hanging in a triangular pattern from her sleeves, Isobel looked the personification of Pride. Anne Umfraville, having removed her dress, wore over her underclothes a tattered motor rug, pinned across with a huge brooch that might have come from a sporran. She had partially blacked her face; her hair hung in rats' tails over her forehead; her feet were bare, enamelled toenails the only visible remnant of a more ornamented form of existence. Here, before us, in these two, was displayed the nursery and playroom life of generations of 'great houses': the abounding physical vitality of big aristocratic families, their absolute disregard for personal dignity in uninhibited delight in 'dressing up', that passionate return to childhood, never released so fully in any other country, or, even in this country, so completely by any other class. Sir Magnus was enchanted.

'You are a naughty girl, Anne,' he said, with warm approval. 'You've made yourself look an absolute little scamp, a bundle of mischief. I congratulate you, too, Lady Isobel. You should always wear fur. Fur really becomes you.'

'My turn next,' said Anne Umfraville now breathless with excitement. 'Isobel and I can do Anger just as we are. It fits perfectly. Wait a second.'

She went off to the hall, returning a moment later with a long two-handed sword, snatched from the wall, or from one of the figures in armour. With this, as Anger provoked by Pride, she cut Isobel down in her finery.

'That should make a splendid picture,' said Sir Magnus, from behind the camera.

My own enactment of Sloth required no histrionic ability beyond lying on the table supported by piles of cushions. It was quickly over.

'Leave the cushions there, Nick,' said Templer, 'I shall need them all for Lust.'

Matilda's turn, good as it was in some ways, noticeably lowered the temperature of the entertainment. Once again the whole tone of the miming changed. I had the impression that, if Anne Umfraville was unexpectedly tolerant of Matilda, Matilda was less prepared to accept Anne Umfraville. Certainly Matilda was determined to show that she, as a professional actress, had a reputation to sustain. She had draped herself in a long green robe – possibly one of Sir Magnus's dressing gowns, since Matilda's familiarity with the castle rooms had been of help in collecting costumes and 'props' – a dress that entirely concealed her trousers. In this she stood, with no supporting cast, against the panel of the tapestry representing Envy. Everything was to be done by expression of the features. She stood absolutely upright, her face contorted. The glance, inasmuch as it was canalised, seemed aimed in the direction of Anne Umfraville. So far as it went, the performance was good; it might even be said to show considerable talent. On the other hand, the professional note, the contrast with what had gone before, somewhat chilled the party. There was some clapping. There appeared to be no other way of bringing Matilda back to earth.

'Jolly good, Matty,' said Moreland. 'I shall know now what's happened when I next see you looking like that.'

There was still Betty Templer to be hustled through Avarice, before her husband sustained the role of Lust, the final Sin, which, it was agreed, would make a cheerful termination to the spectacle. I was interested to see what would happen when Betty Templer's turn came: whether Sir Magnus would take charge, or Templer. It was Templer.

'Come on, Betty,' he said in a soothing voice. 'I can be a beggar by the side of the road and you can be walking past with your nose in the air.'

That was obviously a simple, kindly solution to Betty Templer's diffidence about acting, to which no objection could possibly be taken. There was assistance from Anne Umfraville and Isobel in providing a suitably rich-looking bag, and various garments, to increase the contrast between riches and poverty. Templer himself had by then removed some of his clothes, so that only a few touches were required to turn him into an all but naked beggar seeking alms. His wife stood smiling unhappily for a second or two, taut and miserable, but carried through, in spite of everything, by her looks. She was undeniably very pretty indeed. In the unpropitious circumstances, she might be said to have acquitted herself well. Now that the ordeal was over, she would no doubt feel better. I thought that the danger of a total breakdown on her part – by no means to be disregarded until that moment – could now be dismissed from the mind. Indeed, having been forced against her will to 'act', Betty Templer would probably discover that she was quite pleased with herself after carrying things off with such comparative success.

'Good, Betty,' said Sir Magnus, perhaps himself a little relieved. 'Now Lust, Peter. Do you want any help?'

'Yes, of course, I do, old boy,' said Templer, now rather tight. 'Really, that is a most insulting remark, Magnus. I shouldn't have thought it of you. I want all the girls I'm not married to. Married Lust isn't decent. I'd like to do some different forms of Lust. You can photograph the one you think best.'

'No reason not to photograph them all,' said Sir Magnus. 'There is plenty of film.'

'Why not do the three ages of Lust?' said Moreland, 'Young, Middle-aged, Elderly?'

'A splendid idea,' said Templer. 'Perhaps Lady Isobel and Mrs Moreland would assist me in the first two, and Anne in the last.'

He began to prepare a corner of the table, upon which the cushions of Sloth still remained. Templer had now entirely thrown off the distant, almost formal air he had shown earlier in the day. He was more like himself when I had known him years before. His first scene, Youthful Lust, as he saw it – an old-fashioned conception, very typical of Templer himself – was to take place in the private room of a restaurant, where a debutante had been lured by a lustful undergraduate: Isobel, in long white gloves (which Sir

Magnus produced, as if by magic), with three ostrich feathers in her hair; Templer, in vaguely sporting attire, shorts and a scarf playing some part. Then, Middle-aged Lust; Matilda for some reason wearing sun-spectacles, was a married woman repelling the advances of a lustful clergyman, Templer in this role wearing an evening collar back-to-front. Neither of these two tableaux was specially memorable. For the third scene, Elderly Lust, a lustful octogenarian entertained to dinner a ballet girl – another typically nineteenth-century Templer concept – an opera-hat being produced from somewhere, white blotting-paper from the writing-table in the morning-room providing a stiff shirt. Anne Umfraville had constructed some sort of a ballet skirt, but was wearing by then little else. In his presentation of senile lust, Templer excelled himself, a theatrical performance he could never have achieved in the past. His acting might almost be regarded as one of those cases where unhappiness and frustration seem to force something like art from persons normally concerned only with the material side of life. Anne Umfraville, as the ballet girl, fell not far short of him in excellence.

'Give me that fly-whisk,' said Templer.

At the height of the act, amid much laughter from the audience, I suddenly heard next to me a muffled howl. It was the noise a dog makes when accidentally trodden on. I turned to see what had happened. The sound came from Betty Templer. Tears were coursing down her cheeks. Up to that moment she had been sitting silent on one of the dining-room chairs, watching the show, apparently fairly happy now that her own turn was passed. I thought she was even finding these antics a little amusing. Now, as I looked at her, she jumped up and rushed from the room. The door slammed. Templer and Anne Umfraville, both by then more or less recumbent on the cushions littering the table, in a dramatic and convincing representation of impotent desire, now separated one from the other. Templer slid to his feet. Sir Magnus looked up from the camera.

'Oh, dear,' he said mildly, 'I'm afraid Betty is not feeling well again. Perhaps she should not have sat up so late.'

For some reason my mind was carried back at that moment to Stonehurst and the Billson incident. This was all the same kind of thing. Betty wanted Templer's love, just as Billson wanted Albert's; Albert's marriage had precipitated a breakdown in just the same way as Templer's extravagances with Anne Umfraville. Here, unfortunately, was no General Conyers to take charge of the situation, to quieten Betty Templer. Certainly her husband showed no immediate sign of wanting to accept that job. However, before an extreme moral discomfort could further immerse all of us, a diversion took pace. The door of the dining-room, so recently slammed, opened again. A man stood on the threshold. He was in uniform. He appeared to be standing at attention, a sinister, threatening figure, calling the world to arms. It was Widmerpool.

'Good evening,' he said.

Sir Magnus, who had been fiddling with the camera, smiling quietly to himself, as if he had not entirely failed to extract a passing thrill of pleasure from Betty Templer's *crise*, looked up. Then he advanced across the room, his hand outstretched.

'Kenneth,' he said, 'I did not expect to see you at this late hour. I thought you must have decided to drive straight to London. We have been taking some photographs.'

By that date, when the country had lived for some time under the threat of war, the traditional, the almost complete professional anonymity of the army in England had been already abrogated. Orders enacting that officers were never to be seen in London wearing uniform – certainly on no social occasion, nor, as a rule, even when there on duty – being to some extent relaxed, it was now not unknown for a Territorial, for example, to appear in khaki in unmilitary surroundings because he was on his way to or from a brief period of training. Something of the sort must have caused Widmerpool's form of dress. His arrival at this hour was, in any case, surprising enough. The sight of him in uniform struck a chill through my bones. Nothing, up to that date, had so much brought home to me the imminence, the certitude, of war. That was not because Widmerpool himself looked innately military. On the contrary, he had almost the air of being about to perform a music-hall turn, sing a patriotic song or burlesque, with 'patter', an army officer. Perhaps that was only because the rest of the party were more or less in fancy dress. Even so, uniform, for some reason, brings out character, physique, class, even sex, in a curious manner. I had never before thought of Widmerpool as possessing physical characteristics at all feminine in disposition, but now his bulky, awkward shape, buttoned up and held together by a Sam Browne belt, recalled Heather Hopkins got up as an admiral in some act at the Merry Thought. Widmerpool was evidently at a loss, hopelessly at a loss, to know what was happening. He put his cap, leather gloves and a swagger stick bound in leather on the sideboard, having for some reason brought all these with him, instead of leaving them in the hall; possibly to make a more dramatic appearance. Sir Magnus introduced the Morelands. Widmerpool began to assert himself.

'I have heard my medical man, Brandreth, speak of you, Mr Moreland,' he said. 'Don't you play the piano? I think so. Now I recall, I believe, that we met in a nursing home where I was confined for a time with those vexatious boils.

I found you in the passage one day, talking to Nicholas here. I believe you are one of Brandreth's patients, too. He is an able fellow, Brandreth, if something of a gossip.'

'I say, Kenneth, old boy,' said Templer, who, in surprise at seeing Widmerpool at this moment in such an outfit, seemed to have forgotten, at least dismissed from his mind, his wife's hysterical outburst, 'are you going to make us all form fours?'

'You are not very up to date, Peter,' said Widmerpool, smiling at such a pitiful error. 'The army no longer forms fours. You should surely know that. We have not done so for several years now. I cannot name the precise date of the Army Council Regulation. It is certainly by no means recent.'

'Sorry,' said Templer. 'You must give us some squad drill later.'

'You are very fortunate not to be faced with squad drill in any case,' said Widmerpool severely, 'it was touch and go. You may count yourself lucky that the recent formula was reached.'

Templer brought his heels together with a click. Widmerpool ignored this facetiousness. He turned to me.

'Well, Nicholas,' he said, 'I did not know you were a Stourwater visitor. Can you explain to me why everyone is clad – or unclad – in this extraordinary manner?'

Sir Magnus took charge of him.

'I am glad you were able to look in, Kenneth,' he said. 'We were taking a few photographs after dinner. Just the Seven Deadly Sins, you know. Like yourself, I am a believer in relaxation in these troublous times. It is absolutely necessary. You look very military, my dear fellow.'

'I have been staying at my mother's cottage,' said Widmerpool, evidently gratified by Sir Magnus's conciliatory tone. 'I spent most of the afternoon with one of the other units in my Territorial division. I was doing a rather special job for our CO. There seemed no point in changing back into mufti. I find, too, that uniform makes a good impression these days. A sign of the times. However, I merely looked in to tell you, Magnus, that arrangements about the Swiss company are all but completed. There were no complications.'

'This is old Bob's affair, is it?' said Templer. 'I saw him last week. He was complaining about the markets. God knows, they're awful.'

Templer, at that moment, was sitting on the edge of the dining-room table, with the opera-hat tipped to the back of his head. Having removed most of his clothes, he had wrapped a heavy rug around him, so that he might have been wearing some garment like an Inverness cape. He looked like a contemporary picture of a Victorian businessman on a journey.

'Steel made a modest recovery,' said Widmerpool, apparently mesmerised by this semi-professional garb of Templer's into talking general business. 'Then Copper has been receiving a fair amount of support. Also the Zinc-Lead group, with certain specific Tin shares. Still, it's a sorry state of affairs. I'm keeping an eye on this calling-in of funds by non-clearing lenders.'

Even Sir Magnus himself was unable to resist this sudden switch to money-matters at Widmerpool's entrance.

'The discount houses are getting sixty-nine per cent of their applications for bills dated any day next week except Saturday at a price equal to a discount rate of practically twenty-five thirty-seconds per cent,' he said.

'What do you think about the rumours of Roosevelt devaluing the dollar, Magnus?' asked Templer. 'You don't mind if I put a few more clothes on, here and now? It's getting a shade chilly.'

'I see the flight of funds to Wall Street as continuing,' said Sir Magnus, speaking very quietly, 'even though we have avoided war for the time being.'

That was an opinion I should have been prepared to hazard myself without laying claim to financial wizardry. Sir Magnus must have been unwilling to commit himself in front of Widmerpool. His words also carried the unmistakable note of implication that we should all go home.

'Well, we have avoided war,' said Widmerpool. 'That is the important point. I myself think we are safe for five years at least. But – to get back to Duport – everything is going through the subsidiary company, as agreed. Duport will collect the material from the Turkish sellers on his own responsibility, and wire the Swiss company when he has enough ores for shipment.'

'This ought to keep old Bob quiet for a bit,' said Templer. 'He does a job well when he's at it, but goes to pieces if unemployed. He brought off some smart deals in manganese when he was in South America, so he is always telling me. Chromite is the main source of manganese, isn't it? I'm no expert.'

'Chromite——' began Widmerpool.

'And payments?' asked Sir Magnus, not without emphasis.

'I've opened an account for him through a local bank,' said Widmerpool, 'since you asked me to handle the credit formalities. That is agreeable to you, I hope. Duport can thereby undertake down-payments. We shall have to keep an eye on the European situation. In my opinion, as I said just now, it is going to steady up.'

'Very good, Kenneth,' said Sir Magnus, in a voice that closed the matter.

He began to fold up the stand of the flash lamp. The evening, for Sir Magnus's visitors, was at an end. The girls, who had already gone off to clean themselves up, were now returning. There was some muttering between Templer and Anne Umfraville. Then she said good night all round, and retired from the dining-room.

'I think I'd better go up too,' said Templer. 'See how Betty is getting on.'

He too said good night. There was a sound of laughter from the stairs, suggesting that Anne Umfraville had not yet reached her room.

'Kenneth,' said Sir Magnus, 'I am going to ask you to take these friends of mine back in your car. It is not out of your way.'

'Where do they live?' asked Widmerpool, without bothering to assume even the most superficial veneer of pleasure, even resignation, at this prospect. 'I was intending to take the short cut through the park.'

'Peter kindly fetched them,' said Sir Magnus, 'but Betty is not feeling well this evening. Naturally he wants to attend to her.'

He was absolutely firm.

'Come on, then,' said Widmerpool, without geniality.

We thanked Sir Magnus profusely. He bowed us out. There was not much room in Widmerpool's car. We charged insecurely through murky lanes.

'What happened to Peter's wife?' asked Widmerpool. 'She is rather delicate, isn't she? I have hardly met her.'

We gave him some account of the Stourwater evening.

'You seem all to have behaved in an extraordinary manner,' said Widmerpool. 'There is a side of Magnus of which I cannot altogether approve, his taste for buffoonery of that kind. I don't like it myself, and you would be surprised at the stories such goings-on give rise to. Disgusting stories. Totally untrue, of course, but mud sticks. You know Magnus will sit up working now until two or three in the morning. I know his habits.'

'What is wrong with Betty Templer?' I asked.

'I have been told that Peter neglects her,' said Widmerpool. 'I understand she has always been rather a silly girl. Someone should have thought of that before she became involved in your ragging. It was her husband's place to look after her.'

We arrived at the Morelands' cottage.

'Come in and have a drink,' said Moreland.

'I never touch alcohol when I'm driving,' said Widmerpool, 'more especially when in uniform.'

'A soft drink?'

'Thanks, no.'

'I'll make you a cup of tea,' said Matilda.

'No, Mrs Moreland, I will push on.'

The car's headlights illuminated a stretch of road; then the glare disappeared from sight. We moved into the house.

'Who was that awful man?' said Moreland.

'You met him with me once in a nursing home.'

'No recollection.'

'What a party,' said Isobel. 'Some of it was rather enjoyable, all the same.'

'What do you think of Stourwater?' asked Matilda. 'I find it really rather wonderful, in spite of everything.'

'*Eldorado banal de tous les vieux garçons*,' said Moreland.

'But that was Cythera,' said Isobel, 'the island of love. Do you think love flourishes at Stourwater?'

'I don't know,' said Moreland. 'Love means such different things to different people.'

3

EVERY CHRISTMAS, AS I HAVE SAID, ALBERT used to send my mother a letter drafted in a bold, sloping, dowager's hand, the mauve ink of the broad nib-strokes sinking deep, spreading, into the porous surface of the thick, creamy writing paper with scalloped edge. He had kept that up for years. This missive, composed in the tone of a dispatch from a distant outpost of empire, would contain a detailed account of his recent life, state of health, plans for the future. Albert expressed himself well on paper, with careful formality. In addition to these annual letters, he would, every three or four years, pay my mother a visit on his 'day off'. These visits became rarer as he grew older. During the twenty-five years or so after we left Stonehurst, I saw him on such occasions twice, perhaps three times; one of these meetings was soon after the war, when I was still a schoolboy; another, just before 'coming down' from the university. Perhaps there was a third. I cannot be sure. Certainly, at our last encounter, I remember thinking Albert remarkably unchanged from Stonehurst days: fatter, undeniably, though on the whole additional flesh suited him. He had now settled down to be a fat man, with the professional fat man's privileges and far from negligible status in life. He still supported a chronic weariness of spirit with an irony quite brutal in its unvarnished view of things. His dark-blue suit, assumed ceremonially for the call, gave him a rather distinguished appearance, brown canvas, rubber-soled shoes temporarily substituted for the traditional felt slippers (which one pictured as never renovated or renewed), adding a seedy, nearly sinister touch. He could have passed for a depressed, incurably indolent member of some royal house (there was a look of Prince Theodoric) in hopeless exile. The 'girl from Bristol' had taken him in hand, no doubt bullied him a bit, at the same time arranged a life in general tolerable for both of them. She had caused him to find employment in hotels where good wages were paid, good cooking relatively appreciated. There were two children, a boy and a girl. Albert himself was never greatly interested in either of them, while admitting they 'meant a lot' to his wife. It had been largely with a view to the children's health and education that she had at last decided on moving to a seaside town (the resort, as it happened, where Moreland had once conducted the municipal orchestra), when opportunity was offered there to undertake the management of a small 'private hotel'. Albert was, in principle, to do the cooking, his wife look after the housekeeping. It was a species of retirement, reflecting the 'girl from Bristol's' energetic spirit.

To this establishment – which was called the Bellevue – Uncle Giles inevitably gravitated. Even if he had never heard of Albert, Uncle Giles would probably have turned up there sooner or later. His life was spent in such places – the Ufford, his *pied-à-terre* in Bayswater, the prototype – a phenomenal number of which must have housed him at one time or another throughout different parts of the United Kingdom.

'Battered caravanserais,' Uncle Giles used to say. 'That's what a fellow I met on board ship used to call the pubs he stayed in. From Omar Khayyám, you know. Not a bad name for 'em. Well-read man in his way. Wrote for the papers. Bit of a bounder. Stingy, too. Won the ship's sweep and nobody saw a halfpenny back in hospitality.'

The position of Albert at the Bellevue offered a family connexion not to be disregarded, one to support a reasonable demand for that special treatment always felt by Uncle Giles to be unjustly denied him by fate and the malign efforts of 'people who want to push themselves to the front'. Besides, the Bellevue offered a precinct where he could grumble to his heart's content about his own family to someone who knew them personally. That was a rare treat. In addition, when Uncle Giles next saw any members of his family, he could equally grumble about Albert, complaining that his cooking had deteriorated, his manners become 'offhand'. Uncle Giles did not visit the Bellevue often. Probably Albert, who had his own vicissitudes of temperament to contend with, did not care – family connexion or no family connexion – to accommodate so cantankerous a client there too frequently. He may have made intermittent excuses that the hotel was full to capacity. Whatever the reason, these occasional sojourns at the Bellevue were spaced out, for the most part, between Uncle Giles's recurrent changes of employment, which grew no less frequent with the years. He continued to enjoy irritating his relations.

'I like the little man they've got in Germany now,' he would remark, quite casually.

This view, apparently so perverse in the light of Uncle Giles's often declared radical principles, was in a measure the logical consequence of them. Dating to some extent from the post-war period, when to support Germany against France was the mark of liberal opinion, it had somehow merged with his approval of all action inimical to established institutions. National Socialism represented revolution; to that extent the movement gained the support, at any rate temporary support, of Uncle Giles. Besides, he shared Hitler's sense of personal persecution, conviction that the world was against him. This was in marked contrast to the feeling of my brother-in-law, Erridge, also a declared enemy of established institutions, who devoted much of his energies to assisting propaganda against current German policies. Erridge, however, in his drift away from orthodox Communism after his own experiences in Spain, had become an increasingly keen 'pacifist', so that he was, in practice, as unwilling to oppose Germany by force of arms as Uncle Giles himself.

'We don't want guns,' Erridge used to say. 'We want to make the League of Nations effective.'

The death of the Tollands' stepmother, Lady Warminster, a year or two before, with the consequent closing down of Hyde Park Gardens as an establishment, caused a re-grouping of the members of the Tolland family who had lived there. This had indirectly affected Erridge, not as a rule greatly concerned with the lives of his brothers and sisters. When Lady Warminster's household came to an end, Blanche, Robert and Hugo Tolland had to find somewhere else to live, a major physical upheaval for them. Even for the rest of the family, Lady Warminster's death snapped a link with the past that set the state of childhood at a further perspective, forced her stepchildren to look at life in rather a different manner. Ties with their stepmother, on the whole affectionate, had never been close in her lifetime. Death emphasised their comparative strength: Norah Tolland, especially, who had never 'got on' very well with Lady Warminster, now losing no opportunity of asserting – with truth – that she had possessed splendid qualities. Although widow of two relatively rich men, Lady Warminster left little or no money of her own. There were some small bequests to relations, friends and servants. Blanche Tolland received the residue. She had always been the favourite of her stepmother, who may have felt that Blanche's 'dottiness' required all financial support available. However, when the point of departure came, Blanche's future posed no problem. Erridge suggested she should keep house for him at Thrubworth. His butler, Smith, had also died at about that moment – 'in rather horrible circumstances', Erridge wrote – and he had decided that he needed a woman's help in running the place.

'Smith is the second butler Erry has killed under him,' said Norah. 'You'd better take care, Blanchie.'

Since his brief adventure with Mona, Erridge had shown no further sign of wanting to marry, even to associate himself with another woman at all intimately. That may have been partly because his health had never wholly recovered from the dysentery incurred in Spain: another reason why his sister's care was required. This poor state of health Erridge – always tending to hypochondria – now seemed to welcome, perhaps feeling that to become as speedily as possible a chronic invalid would be some insurance against the need to take a decision in the insoluble problem of how to behave if hostilities with Germany were to break out.

'I have become a sick man,' he used to say, on the rare occasions when any of his family visited Thrubworth. 'I don't know at all how long I am going to last.'

Robert Tolland had lived in his stepmother's house, partly through laziness, partly from an ingrained taste for economy; at least those were the reasons attributed by his brothers and sisters. At her death, Robert took a series of small flats on his own, accommodation he constantly changed, so that often no one knew in the least where he was to be found. In short, Robert's life became more mysterious than ever. Hitherto, he had been seen from time to time at Hyde Park Gardens Sunday luncheon-parties; now, except for a chance glimpse at a theatre or a picture gallery, he disappeared from sight entirely, personal relationship with him in general reduced to an occasional telephone call. Hugo Tolland, the youngest brother, also passed irretrievably into a world of his own. He continued to be rather successful as assistant to Mrs Baldwyn Hodges in her second-hand furniture and decorating business, where, one afternoon, he sold a set of ormolu candlesticks to Max Pilgrim, the pianist and cabaret entertainer, who was moving into a new flat. When Hyde Park Gardens closed down, Hugo announced that he was going to share this flat. There was even a suggestion – since engagements of the kind in which he had made his name were less available than formerly – that Pilgrim might put some money into Mrs Baldwyn Hodges's firm and himself join the business.

Among her small bequests, Lady Warminster left her sister, Molly Jeavons, the marquetry cabinet in which she kept the material for her books, those rambling, unreviewed, though not entirely unreadable, historical studies of dominating women. The Maria Theresa manuscript, last of these biographies upon which she had worked, remained uncompleted, because Lady Warminster admitted – expressing the matter, of course, in her own impenetrably oblique manner – she had taken a sudden dislike to the Empress on reading for the first time of her heartless treatment of prostitutes. Although they used to see relatively little of each other, Molly Jeavons was greatly distressed at her sister's death. No greater contrast could be imagined than the staid, even rather despondent atmosphere of Hyde Park Gardens, and the devastating muddle and hustle of the Jeavons house in South Kensington, but it was mistaken to suppose these antitheses precisely reproduced the opposing characters of the two sisters. Lady Warminster had a side that took pleasure in the tumbledown aspects of life: journeys to obscure fortune-tellers in the suburbs, visits out of season to dowdy seaside hotels. It was, indeed, remarkable that she had never found her way to the Bellevue. Molly Jeavons, on the other hand, might pass her days happily enough with a husband as broken down, as unemployable, as untailored, as Ted Jeavons, while she ran a kind of free hotel for her relations, a rest-home for cats, dogs and other animals that could impose themselves on her good nature; Molly, too, was capable of enjoying other sides of life. She had had occasional bursts of magnificence as Marchioness of Sleaford, whatever her first marriage may have lacked in other respects.

'The first year they were married,' Chips Lovell said, 'the local Hunt Ball was held at Dogdene. Molly, aged eighteen or nineteen, livened up the proceedings by wearing the Sleaford tiara – which I doubt if Aunt Alice has ever so much as tried on – and the necklace belonging to Tippoo Sahib that Uncle Geoffrey's grandfather bought for his Spanish mistress when he outbid Lord Hertford on that famous occasion.'

For some reason there was a great deal of fuss about moving the marquetry cabinet from Hyde Park Gardens to South Kensington. The reason for these difficulties was obscure, although it was true that not an inch remained in the Jeavons house for the accommodation of an additional piece of furniture.

'Looks as if I shall have to push the thing round myself on a barrow,' said Jeavons, speaking gloomily of this problem.

Then, one day in the summer after 'Munich', when German pressure on Poland was at its height, Uncle Giles died too – quite suddenly of a stroke – while staying at the Bellevue.

'Awkward to the end,' my father said, 'though I suppose one should not speak in that way.'

It was certainly an inconvenient moment to choose. During the year that had almost passed since Isobel and I had stayed with the Morelands, everyday life had become increasingly concerned with preparations for war: expansion of the services, air-raid precautions, the problems of evacuation; no one talked of anything else. My father, in poor health after being invalided out of the army a dozen years before (indirect result of the wound incurred in Mesopotamia), already racked with worry by the well-justified fear that he would be unfit for re-employment if war came, was at that moment in no state to oversee his brother's cremation. I found myself charged with that duty. There was, indeed, no one else to do the job. By universal consent, Uncle Giles was to be cremated, rather than buried. In the first place, no specially apposite spot awaited his coffin; in the second, a crematorium was at hand in the town where he died. Possibly another feeling, too, though unspoken, influenced that decision: a feeling that fire was the element appropriate to his obsequies, the funeral pyre traditional to the nomad.

I travelled down to the seaside town in the afternoon. Isobel was not feeling well. She was starting a baby. Circumstances were not ideal for a pregnancy. Apart from unsettled international conditions, the weather was hot, too hot. I felt jumpy, irritable. In short, to be forced to undertake this journey in order to dispose of the remains of Uncle Giles seemed the last straw in making life tedious, disagreeable, threatening, through no apparent fault of one's own. I had never seen much of Uncle Giles, felt no more than formal regret that he was no longer among us. There seemed no justice in the fact that fate had willed this duty to fall on myself. At the same time, I had to admit things might have been worse. Albert – more probably his wife – had made preliminary arrangements for the funeral, after informing my father of Uncle Giles's death. I should stay at the Bellevue, where I was known; where, far more important, Uncle Giles was known. He probably owed money, but there would be no uneasiness. Albert would have no fears about eventual payment. It was true that some embarrassing fact might be revealed: with Uncle Giles, to be prepared for the unexpected in some more or less disagreeable form was always advisable. Albert, burdened with few illusions on any subject, certainly possessed none about Uncle Giles; he would grasp the situation even if there were complexities. I could do what clearing up was required, attend the funeral, return the following morning. There was no real excuse for grumbling. All the same, I felt a certain faint-heartedness at the prospect of meeting Albert again after all these years, a fear – rather a base one – that he might produce embarrassing reminiscences of my own childhood. That was very contemptible. A moment's serious thought would have shown me that nothing was less likely. Albert was interested in himself, not in other people. That did not then occur to me. My trepidation was increased by the fact that I had never yet set eyes on the 'girl from Bristol', of whom her husband had always painted so alarming a picture. She was called 'Mrs Creech', because Albert, strange as it might seem, was named 'Albert Creech'. The suffix 'Creech' sounded to my ears unreal, incongruous, rather impertinent, like suddenly attaching a surname to one of the mythical figures of Miss Orchard's stories of the gods and goddesses, or Mr Deacon's paintings of the Hellenic scene. Albert, I thought, was like Sisyphus or Charon, one of those beings committed eternally to undesired and burdensome labours. Charon was more appropriate, since Albert had, as it were, recently ferried Uncle Giles over the Styx. I do not attempt to excuse these frivolous, perhaps rather heartless, reflections on my own part as I was carried along in the train.

On arrival, I went straight to the undertaker's to find out what arrangements had already been made. Later, when the Bellevue hove into sight – the nautical phrase is deliberately chosen – I saw at once that, during his visits there, Uncle Giles had irrevocably imposed his own personality upon the hotel. Standing at the corner of a short, bleak, anonymous street, some little way from the sea-front, this corner house, although much smaller in size, was otherwise scarcely to be distinguished from the Ufford, his London *pied-à-terre*. Like the Ufford, its exterior was painted battleship-grey, the angle of the building conveying just the same sense of a hopelessly unseaworthy, though less heavily-built vessel, resolutely attempting to set out to sea. This foolhardy attempt of the Bellevue to court shipwreck, emphasised by the distant splash of surf, seemed somehow Uncle Giles's fault. It was just the way he behaved himself. Perhaps I attributed too much to his powers of will. The physical surroundings of most individuals, left to their own choice, vary little wherever they happen to live. No doubt that was the explanation. I was in the presence of one of those triumphs of mind over matter, like the photographer's power of imposing his own personal visual demands on the subject photographed. Nevertheless, even though I ought to have been prepared for a house of more or less the same sort, this miniature, shrunken version of the Ufford surprised me by its absolute consistency of type, almost as much as if the Ufford itself had at last shipped anchor and floated on the sluggish Bayswater tide to this quiet roadstead. Had the Ufford done that? Did the altered name, the new cut of jib, hint at mutiny, barratry, piracy, final revolt on the high seas – for clearly the Bellevue was only awaiting a favourable breeze to set sail – of that ship's company of well brought up souls driven to violence at last by their unjustly straitened circumstances?

Here, at any rate, Uncle Giles had died. By the summer sea, death had claimed him, in one of his own palaces, amongst his own people, the proud, anonymous, secretive race that dwell in residential hotels. I went up the steps of the Bellevue. Inside, again on a much smaller scale, resemblance to the Ufford was repeated: the deserted hall; yellowing letters on the criss-cross ribbons of a board; a faint smell of clean sheets. Striking into the inner fastnesses of its precinct, I came suddenly upon Albert himself. He was pulling down the blinds of some windows that looked on to a sort of yard, just as if he were back putting up the shutters at Stonehurst, for it was still daylight.

'Why, Mr Nick . . .'

Albert, dreadfully ashamed at being caught in this act, in case I might suppose him habitually to lend a hand about the house, began to explain at once that he was occupied in that fashion only because, on this particular evening, his wife was in bed with influenza. He did not hide that he considered her succumbing in this way to be an act of disloyalty.

'I don't think she'll be up and about for another day or two,' he said, 'what with the news on the wireless night after night, it isn't a very cheerful prospect.'

It was absurd to have worried about awkward adjustments where Albert was concerned. Talking to him was just as easy, just as natural, as ever. All his old fears and prejudices remained untouched by time, the Germans – scarcely more ominous – taking the place of the suffragettes. He was older, of course, what was left of his hair, grey and grizzled; fat, though not outrageously fatter than when I had last seen him; breathing a shade more heavily, if that were possible. All the same, he had never become an old man. In essential aspects, he was hardly altered at all: the same timorous, self-centred, sceptical artist-cook he had always been, with the same spirit of endurance, battling his way through life in carpet-slippers. Once the humiliation of being caught doing 'housework' was forgotten, he seemed pleased to see me. He launched at once into an elaborate account of Uncle Giles's last hours, making no attempt to minimise the fearful lineaments of death. In the end, with a view to terminating this catalogue of macabre detail, which I did not at all enjoy and seemed to have continued long enough, however much pleasure the narrative might afford Albert himself in the telling, I found myself invoking the past. This seemed the only avenue of escape. I spoke of Uncle Giles's visit to Stonehurst just before the outbreak of war. Albert was hazy about it.

'Do you remember Bracey?'

'Bracey?'

'Bracey – the soldier servant.'

Albert's face was blank for a moment; then he made a great effort of memory.

'Little fellow with a moustache?'

'Yes.'

'Used to come on a bicycle?'

'That was him.'

'Ignorant sort of man?'

'He had his Funny Days.'

Albert looked blank again. The phrase, once so heavy with ominous import at Stonehurst, had been completely erased from his mind.

'Can't recollect.'

'Surely you must remember – when Bracey used to sulk.'

'Did he go out with the Captain – with the Colonel, that is – when the army went abroad?'

'He was killed at Mons.'

'And which of us is going to keep alive, I wonder, when the next one starts?' said Albert, dismissing, without sentiment, the passing of Bracey. 'It won't be long now, the way I see it. If the government takes over the Bellevue, as they looks like doing, we'll be in a fix. Be just as bad, if we stay. They say the big guns they have nowadays will reach this place easy. They've come on a lot from what they was in 1914.'

'And Billson?' I said.

I was now determined to re-create Stonehurst, the very subject I had dreaded in the train on the way to meet Albert again. I suppose by then I had some idea of working up, by easy stages, to the famous Billson episode with General Conyers. I should certainly have liked to hear Albert's considered judgment after all these years. Once again, he showed no sign of recognition.

'Billson?'

'The parlourmaid at Stonehurst.'

'Small girl, was she – always having trouble with her teeth?'

'No, that was another one.'

I recognised that it was no good attempting to rebuild the red tiles, the elongated façade of the bungalow. If Albert supposed Billson to be short and dark, she must have passed from his mind without leaving a trace of her own passion. That was cruel. All the same, I made a final shot.

'You don't remember when she gave the slice of seed-cake to the little boy from Dr Trelawney's?'

The question struck a spark. This concluding bid to unclog the floods of memory had an immediate, a wholly unexpected effect.

'I knew there was something else I wanted to tell you, sir,' said Albert. 'It just went out of my head till you reminded me. That's the very gentleman – Dr Trelawney – been staying here quite a long time. Came through a friend of your uncle's, a lady. I puzzled and puzzled where I'd seen him before. Captain Jenkins said something one day how Dr Trelawney had lived near Stonehurst one time. Then the name came back to me.'

'Does he still wear a beard and take his people out running?'

'Still got a beard,' said Albert, 'but he lives very quiet now. Not so young as he was, like the rest of us. Has a lot of meals in his room. Quite a bit of trouble, he is. I get worried about him now and then. So does the wife. Not too quick at settling the account. Then he does say some queer things.

Not everyone in the hotel likes it. Of course, we have to have all sorts here. Can't pick and choose. Dr Trelawney's health ain't all that good neither. Suffers terrible from asthma. Something awful. I get frightened when he's got the fit on him.'

It was clear that Albert, too well-behaved to say so explicitly, would have been glad to eject Dr Trelawney from the Bellevue. That was not surprising. I longed to set eyes on the Doctor again. It would be a splendid story to tell Moreland, with whom I had been out of any close contact since we had stayed at the cottage.

'Used my uncle to see much of Dr Trelawney?'

'They'd pass the time of day,' said Albert. 'The lady knew both of them, of course. They'd sometimes all three go out together on the pier and such like. Captain Jenkins used to get riled with some of the Doctor's talk about spirits and that. I've heard him say as much.'

'Was the lady called Mrs Erdleigh?' I asked.

Uncle Giles had once been suspected of being about to marry this fortune-telling friend of his. It was likely that she was the link between himself and Dr Trelawney.

'That's the name,' said Albert. 'Lives in the town here. Tells fortunes, so they say. Used to come here quite a lot. In fact, she rang up and offered to help after Captain Jenkins died, but I thought I'd better wait instructions. As it was, we just put all the clothing from the drawers tidy on the bed, so the things would be easy to pack. We haven't touched the Gladstone bag. Captain Jenkins didn't have much with him at the end. Kept most of his stuff in London, so I believe.'

Albert sniffed. He evidently held a low opinion of the Ufford.

'I'll just give you your uncle's keys, sir,' he said. 'If you'll excuse me, I must see the wife now. She takes on if I don't keep her informed about veg. Those silly girls never bring her what she wants neither. One of them's having time off, extra like, old Mrs Telford persuading her to go to an ambulance class or some such. I don't know what the young women of today are about. Making sheep's eyes most of the time, that's what it comes to.'

He moved off laboriously to Mrs Creech's sick-bed. I thought the best system would be to deal with Uncle Giles's residue straight away, then dine. The news of Dr Trelawney's installation at the Bellevue aroused a cloud of memories. That he had not passed into oblivion like so many others Albert had met was a tribute to the Doctor's personality. Even he would have been forgotten, if Uncle Giles had not recalled him to mind. That was strange because, as a rule, where others were concerned, Uncle Giles's memory was scarcely more retentive than Albert's. I wondered what life would be like lived in this largely memoryless condition. Better? Worse? Not greatly different? It was an interesting question. The reappearance of Mrs Erdleigh was also a matter of note. This fairly well known clairvoyante (whom Lady Warminster had consulted in her day) had once 'put out the cards' for me at the Ufford, prophesying my love affair with Jean Duport, for a time occupying so much of my life, now like an episode in another existence. Later, characteristically, Uncle Giles had pretended never to have heard of Mrs Erdleigh. However, rumours persisted at a later date to the effect that they still saw each other. There must have been a reconciliation. I wondered whether she would turn up at the funeral, what had been her relations with Uncle Giles, what with Dr Trelawney.

I had told Albert I would find my own way to the bedroom, which was some floors up. It was small, dingy, facing inland. The sea was in any case visible from the Bellevue – in spite of its name – only from the attic windows, glimpsed through a gap between two larger hotels, though the waves could be heard clattering against the shingle. Laid out on the bed were a couple of well-worn suits; three or four shirts, frayed at the cuff; half a dozen discreet, often-knotted ties; darned socks (who had darned them?); handkerchiefs embroidered with the initials GDJ (who had embroidered them?); thick woollen underclothes; two pairs of pyjamas of unattractive pattern; two pairs of shoes, black and brown; bedroom slippers worthy of Albert; a raglan overcoat; a hat; an unrolled umbrella; several small boxes containing equipment such as studs and razor blades. This was what Uncle Giles had left behind him. No doubt there was more of the same sort of thing at the Ufford. The display was a shade depressing. Dust was returning to dust with dreadful speed. I looked under the bed. There lay the suitcase into which these things were to be packed, beside it, the Gladstone bag to which Albert had referred, a large example of its kind, infinitely ancient, perhaps the very one with which Uncle Giles had arrived at Stonehurst on the day of the Archduke's assassination. I dragged these two pieces out. One of the keys on the ring committed to me by Albert fitted this primitive, shapeless survival of antique luggage, suitable for a conjuror or comedian.

At first examination, the Gladstone bag appeared to be filled with nothing but company reports. I began to go through the papers. Endless financial projects were adumbrated; gratifying prospects; inevitable losses; hopeful figures, in spite of past disappointments. The whole panorama of the money-market lay before one – as it must once have burgeoned under the eyes of Uncle Giles – like the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. Hardly a venture quoted on the Stock Exchange seemed omitted; several that were not. There were two or three share certificates marked 'valueless' that might have been stock from the South

Sea Bubble. Uncle Giles's financial investigations had been extensive. Then a smaller envelope turned out to be something different. One of the sheets of paper contained there showed a circle with figures and symbols noted within its circumference. It was a horoscope, presumably that of Uncle Giles himself.

He had been born under Aries – the Ram – making him ambitious, impulsive, often irritable. He had secret enemies, because Saturn was in the Twelfth House. I remembered Mrs Erdleigh remarking that handicap when I met her with Uncle Giles at the Ufford. Mars and Venus were in bad aspect so far as dealings with money were concerned. However, Uncle Giles was drawn to hazards such as the company reports revealed by the conjunction of Jupiter. Moreover Jupiter, afflicting Mercury, caused people to find 'the native' – Uncle Giles – unreliable. That could not be denied. Certainly none of his own family would contradict the judgment. Unusual experiences with the opposite sex (I thought of Sir Magnus Donners) were given by Uranus in the Seventh House, a position at the same time unfavourable to marriage. It had to be admitted that all this gave a pretty good, if rough-and-ready, account of my uncle and his habits.

Underneath the envelope containing the horoscope was correspondence, held together by a paper-clip, with a firm of stockbrokers. Then came Uncle Giles's pass-book. The bank statements of the previous year showed him to have been overdrawn, though somewhat better off than was commonly supposed. The whole question of Uncle Giles's money affairs was a mysterious one, far more mysterious than anything revealed about him astrologically. Speculation as to the extent of his capital took place from time to time, speculation even as to whether he possessed any capital at all. The stockbroker's letters and bank statements came to an end. The next item in the Gladstone bag appeared to be a surgical appliance of some sort. I pulled it out. The piece of tubing was for the administration of an enema. I threw the object into the wastepaper-basket, with the company reports. Below again – the whole business was like research into an excavated tomb – lay a roll of parchment tied in a bow with red tape.

'VICTORIA by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Queen, Defender of the Faith, Empress of India &c. To Our Trusty and well-beloved *Giles Delahay Jenkins, Gentleman,* Greeting. We, reposing especial Trust and Confidence in your Loyalty, Courage and good Conduct, do by these Presents Constitute and Appoint you to be an Officer in Our *Land* Forces . . .'

Trusty and wellbeloved were not the terms in which his own kith and kin had thought of Uncle Giles for a long time now. Indeed, the Queen's good-heartedness in herself greeting him so warmly was as touching as her error of judgment was startling. There was something positively ingenuous in singling out Uncle Giles for the repose of confidence, accepting him so wholly at his own valuation. No doubt the Queen had been badly advised in the first instance. She must have been vexed and disappointed.

'. . . You are therefore carefully and diligently to discharge your Duty as such in the Rank of *2nd Lieutenant* or in such higher Rank as we may from time to time hereafter be pleased to promote or appoint you to . . .'

The Queen's faith in human nature seemed boundless for, extraordinary as the royal whim might seem, she had indeed been pleased to appoint Uncle Giles to a higher rank, instead of quietly – and far more wisely – dispensing with his services at the very first available opportunity. Perhaps such an opportunity had not arisen so immediately as might have been expected; perhaps Uncle Giles had assumed the higher rank without reference to the Queen. Certainly he was always styled 'Captain' Jenkins, so that there must have been at least a presumption of a once held captaincy of some sort, however 'temporary', 'acting' or 'local' that rank might in practice have been. No doubt her reliance would have been lessened by the knowledge that Mercury was afflicting Jupiter at the hour of Uncle Giles's birth.

'. . . and you are at all times to exercise and well discipline in Arms both the inferior Officers and Men serving under you and use your best endeavours to keep them in good Order and Discipline. And we do hereby command them to Obey you as their superior Officer . . . according to the Rules and Discipline of War, in pursuance of the Trust hereby reposed in you . . .'

The great rolling phrases, so compelling in their beauty and simplicity, might be thought inadmissible for the most heedless, the most cynical, to disregard, so moderate, so obviously right in the circumstances, were their requirements, so friendly – even to the point of intimacy – the manner in which the Sovereign outlined the principles of her honourable service. Uncle Giles, it must be agreed, had not risen to the occasion. So far as loyalty to herself was concerned, he had been heard on more than one occasion to refer to her as 'that old Tartar at Osborne', to express without restraint his own leanings towards a republican form of government. His Conduct, in the army or out of it, could not possibly be described as Good. In devotion to duty, for example, he could not be compared with Bracey, a man no less pursued, so far as that went, by Furies. There remained Uncle Giles's Courage. That, so far as was known, remained untarnished, although – again so far as was known – never put to any particularly severe test. Certainly it could be urged that he had the Courage of his own opinions; the Queen had to be satisfied with that. In short, the only one of her admonitions Uncle Giles had ever shown the least sign of taking to heart was the charge to command his subordinates to obey him.

Even after his own return to civilian life, Uncle Giles tried his best to carry out this injunction in relation to all who could possibly be regarded as subordinate to him. Being 'a bit of a radical' never prevented that; the Sign of Aries investing him with the will to command, adding that touch of irritability of disposition as an additional spur to obedience.

While I thus considered, rather frivolously, Uncle Giles's actual career in contrast with the ideal one envisaged by the terms of his Commission, I could not help thinking at the same time that facile irony at my uncle's expense could go too far. No doubt irony, facile or otherwise, can often go too far. In this particular instance, for example, it was fitting to wonder what sort of a figure I should myself cut as a soldier. The question was no longer purely hypothetical, a grotesque fantasy, a romantic daydream, the career one had supposed to lie ahead as a child at Stonehurst. There was every reason to think that before long now the tenor of many persons' lives, my own among them, would indeed be regulated by those draconic, ineluctable laws, so mildly, so all embracingly, defined in the Commission as 'the Rules and Discipline of War'. How was it going to feel to be subject to them? My name was on the Emergency Reserve, although no one at that time knew how much, or how little, that might mean when it came to joining the army. At the back of one's mind sounded a haunting resonance, a faint disturbing buzz, that was not far from fear.

By the time these disturbing thoughts had descended on me, I had begun to near the bottom of the Gladstone bag. There was another layer of correspondence, this time in a green cardboard file, on the subject of a taxi-cab's collision with a lorry, an accident with regard to which Uncle Giles had been subpoenaed as witness. It went into the waste-paper-basket, a case – as Moreland would have said – in which there was 'nothing of the spirit'. That brought an end to the contents, except for a book. This was bound in grubby vellum, the letterpress of mauve ink, like that used by Albert in his correspondence. I glanced at the highly decorated capitals of the title page:

The Perfumed Garden
of the Sheik Nefzaoui
or
The Arab Art of Love

I had often heard of this work, never, as it happened, come across a copy. Uncle Giles was an unexpected vehicle to bring it to hand. The present edition – 'Cosmopoli: 1886' – was stated to be published 'For Private Circulation Only', the English translation from a French version of the sixteenth-century Arabic manuscript made by a 'Staff Officer in the French Army in Algeria'.

I pictured this French Staff Officer sitting at his desk. The sun was streaming into the room through green latticed windows of Moorish design, an oil sketch by Fromentin or J. F. Lewis. Dressed in a light-blue frogged coatee and scarlet peg-topped trousers buttoning under the boot, he wore a pointed moustache and imperial. Beside him on the table stood his shako, high and narrowing to the plume, the white puggaree falling across the scabbard of his discarded sabre. He was absolutely detached, a man who had tasted the sensual pleasures of the Second Empire and Third Republic to their dregs, indeed, come to North Africa to escape such insistent banalities. Now, he was examining their qualities and defects in absolute calm. Here, with the parched wind blowing in from the desert, he had found a kindred spirit in the Sheik Nefzaoui, to whose sixteenth-century Arabic he was determined to do justice in the language of Racine and Voltaire. Perhaps that picture was totally wide of the mark:

the reality quite another one. The Staff Officer was a family man, snatching a few minutes at his beloved translation between the endearments of his wife, the rompings of a dozen children. . . . Rimbaud's father, perhaps, who had served in North Africa, made translations from the Arabic. . . . The 'Rules and Discipline of War' must in some degree have been relaxed to allow spare time for these literary labours. Possibly he worked only on leave. I turned the pages idly. The Sheik's tone was authoritative, absolutely self-assured – for that reason, a trifle forbidding – the chapter headings enigmatic:

'. . . Concerning Praiseworthy Men . . . Concerning Women who deserve to be Praised . . . Of Matters Injurious to the Act of Generation . . . On the Deceits and Treacheries of Women . . . Concerning Sundry Observations useful to Know for Men and Women . . .'

On the Deceits and Treacheries of Women? The whole subject was obviously very fully covered. Sincere and scholarly, there was also something more than a little oppressive about the investigation, moments when the author seemed to labour the point, to induce a feeling of surfeit in the reader. All the same, I felt rather ashamed of my own lack of appreciation, because I could see that much of the advice was good. Disinclination to continue reading I recognised as a basic unwillingness to face facts, rather than any innate fastidiousness to be regarded as a matter for self-congratulation. I felt greatly inferior to the French Staff Officer, whatever his personal condition, who saw this severely technical sociological study, by its nature aseptic, even chilling in deliberate avoidance of false sentiment and specious charm, as a refreshing antidote to Parisian canons of sensuality.

Uncle Giles's acquisition of this book must have been one of the minor consequences of having Uranus in the Seventh

House; that was the best that could be said for him. It reminded him perhaps of ladies like the garage proprietor's widow, manicurist at Reading, once thought to be under consideration as his future wife; possibly it was used as a handbook in those far off, careless days. In any case, there was no reason to suppose Uncle Giles to have become more stait-laced as he grew older. I put the volume aside to reconsider. There was work to be done. The clothes were packed away at last in the suitcase, the papers spared from the waste-paper-basket, returned to the Gladstone bag, the two pieces of luggage placed side by side to await removal. As Albert had remarked, Uncle Giles had not left much behind, even though further items would be found at the Ufford. By that time the gong had sounded for dinner.

I took the Sheik Nefzaoui's treatise with me to the dining-room, which was fairly full, single white-haired ladies predominating, here and there an elderly couple. No doubt the seasons made little difference to the Bellevue, the bulk of its population living there all the year round, winter and summer, solstice to solstice. I was given a table in the corner, near the hatch through which food was thrust by Albert. The table next to mine was laid for one person. Upon it stood a half-consumed bottle of whisky, a room-number pencilled on the label. I wondered whether my neighbour would turn out to be Dr Trelawney. That would provide an excitement. I hoped, in any case, that I should catch a glimpse of the Doctor before leaving the hotel, contrive some anecdote over which Moreland and I could afterwards laugh. I had nearly finished my soup – which recalled only in a muted form Albert's ancient skill – when a tall man, about my own age or a year or two older, entered the dining-room. He strode jauntily through the doorway, looking neither to the right nor left, making straight for the table with the whisky bottle. Hope vanished of enjoying near me Dr Trelawney's mysterious presence. This man was thin, with fair to reddish hair, pink-faced, pale eyebrows raised in an aggressive expression, as if he would welcome a row at the least provocation. He wore a country suit, somehow rather too elegant for the Bellevue's dining-room. I experienced that immediate awareness, which can descend all of a sudden like the sky becoming overcast, of the close proximity of a person I knew and did not like, someone who made me, at the same time, in some way morally uncomfortable. For a second, I thought this impression one of those sensations of dislike as difficult to rationalise as the contrasting feeling of sudden sympathy; a moment later realising that Bob Duport was sitting next to me, that there was excuse for this onset of tingling antipathy.

I had not set eyes on Duport since I was an undergraduate, since the night, in fact, when Templer had driven us all into the ditch in his new car. A whole sequence of memories and sensations, luxuriant, tender, painful, ludicrous, wearisome, rolled up, enveloping like a fog. Moreland, as I have said, liked talking of the variations of sexual jealousy, the different effect produced by men with whom a woman has been 'shared'.

'Some of them hardly matter at all,' he had said. 'Others you can't even bear to think about. Very mention of their name poisons the whole relationship – the whole atmosphere. Again you get to like – almost to love – certain ones, husbands or cast-off lovers, I mean. You feel dreadfully sorry for them, at least, try to make their wives or ex-mistresses behave better to them. It becomes a matter of one's own self-respect.'

Duport, so far as I was concerned, had been a case in point. I had once loved his wife, Jean, and, although I loved her no longer, our relationship had secreted this distasteful residue, an unalterable, if hidden, tie with her ex-husband. It was a kind of retribution. I might not like the way Duport behaved, either to Jean or towards the world in general, but what I had done had made him, at least in some small degree, part of my own life. I was bound to him throughout eternity. Moreover, I was, for the same reason, in no position to be censorious. I had undermined my own critical standing. Duport's emergence in this manner cut a savage incision across Time. Templer's Vauxhall seemed to have crashed into the ditch only yesterday; I could almost feel my nose aching from the blow received by the sudden impact of Ena's knee, hear Templer's fat friend, Brent, swearing, the grinding, ghastly snorts of the expiring engine, Stringham's sardonic comments as we clambered out of the capsized car. It had all seemed rather an adventure at the time. I reflected how dreadfully boring such an experience would be now, the very thought fatiguing. However, an immediate decision had to be taken about Duport. I made up my mind to pretend not to recognise him, although the years I had loved Jean made him horribly, unnaturally familiar to me, as if I had been seeing Duport, too, all the time I had been seeing her. Indeed, he seemed now almost more familiar than repellent.

The thought that Duport had been Jean's husband, that she had had a child by him, that no doubt she had once loved him, had not, for some reason, greatly worried me while she and I had been close to each other. Duport had never – I cannot think why – seemed to be in competition with myself where she was concerned. For Jean to have married him, still, so to speak, to own him, although living apart, was like a bad habit (Uncle Giles poring in secret over *The Perfumed Garden*), no more than that; something one might prefer her to be without, to give up, nothing that could remotely affect our feeling for each other. Anyway, I thought, those days are long past; they can be considered with complete equanimity. Duport and I had met only once, fourteen or fifteen years before. He could safely be regarded as the kind of person to whom the past, certainly such a chance encounter, would mean little or nothing, in fact be completely forgotten. No doubt, since then, new friends of his had driven him scores of times into the ditch with new cars full of new girls. He was that sort of man. Such were my ill-judged, unfriendly, rather priggish speculations. They turned out to be hopelessly wide of the mark.

Duport's first act on sitting down at the table was to pour out a stiffish whisky, add a splash of soda from the syphon also standing on the table, and gulp the drink down. Then he looked contemptuously round the room. Obviously my own presence had materially altered the background he expected of the dining-room at the Bellevue. He stared hard. Soup was set in front of him. I supposed he would turn to it. Instead, he continued to stare. I pretended to be engrossed with my fish. There was something of the old Albert in the sauce. Then Duport spoke. He had a hard, perfectly assured, absolutely uningratiating voice.

'We've met before,' he said.

'Have we?'

'Somewhere.'

'Where could that have been?'

'Certain of it. I can't remember your name. Mine's Duport – Bob.'

'Nicholas Jenkins.'

'Aren't you a friend of my former brother-in-law, Peter Templer?'

'A very old friend.'

'And he drove us both into the ditch in some bloody fast second-hand car he had just bought. Years ago. A whole row of chaps and a couple of girls. The party included a fat swab called Brent.'

'He did, indeed. That was where we met. Of course I remember you.'

'I thought so. Do you ever see Peter these days?'

'Hadn't for ages. Then we met about a year ago – just after "Munich", as a matter of fact.'

'I've heard him talk about you. I used to be married to his sister, Jean, you know. I believe I've heard her speak of you, too.'

'I met her staying with the Templers.'

'When was that?'

'Years ago – when I had just left school.'

'Ever see her later?'

'Yes, several times.'

'Probably when she and I were living apart. That is when Jean seems to have made most of her friends.'

'When I last saw Peter, he was talking about some new job of yours.'

I judged it best to change the subject of Jean – also remembering the talk about Duport between Sir Magnus Donners and Widmerpool. Up to then, I had thought of Duport only in an earlier incarnation, never considered the possibility of running into him again.

'Was he, indeed? Where did you meet him?'

'Stourwater.'

'Did you, by God? What do you do?'

I tried to give some account, at once brief and intelligible, of the literary profession: writing; editing; reviewing; the miscellaneous odd jobs to which I was subject, never, for some reason, very easy to define to persons not themselves in that world. To my relief, Duport showed no interest whatever in such activities, apparently finding them neither eccentric nor important.

'Shouldn't think it brings in much dough,' he said. 'But how do you come to know Donners?'

'We were taken over by some friends who live in the neighbourhood.'

'You're married?'

'Yes.'

'How do you like being married?'

'Support it all right.'

'You're lucky. I find it a great relief not to be married – though I was quite stuck on Jean when we were first wed. But what on earth are you doing in this dump?'

I explained about Uncle Giles, about Albert.

'So that's the answer,' said Duport. 'Of course I used to see your uncle cruising about here. Bad-tempered old fellow. Didn't know he'd dropped off the hooks. They like to keep death quiet in places like this. Look here, when you were staying with Donners, was an absolute bugger called Widmerpool there too?'

'Widmerpool wasn't staying there. He just looked in. Wanted to say something about your business affairs, I think. I know Widmerpool of old.'

'A hundred per cent bastard – word's too good for him.'

'I know some people think so.'

'Don't you?'

'He and I rub along all right. But why are *you* living at the Bellevue?'

'Keeping out of the immediate view of the more enterprising of my creditors. I only wish my stay here were going to be as brief as yours.'

'How did you find the place?'

'Odd chance, as a matter of fact. I once brought a girl down to the Royal for the week-end – one of those bitches you want to have and get out of your system and never set eyes on again. While we were there I made friends with the barman. He's called Fred and a very decent sort of chap. When I found, not so long ago, that I'd better go into comparative hiding, I decided this town would be as good a place as any other to put myself out of commission for a week or two. I left my bags at the station and dropped in to the Royal bar to ask Fred the best place to make an economical stay. He sent me straight to the Bellevue.'

'How do you like Albert?'

'Get along with Albert, as you call him, like a house on fire – but it's a pretty dead-and-alive hole to live in, I can tell you. It's the sort of town where you feel hellishly randy all the time. I've got quite a bit of work to do in the way of sorting out my own affairs. That keeps me going during the day. But there's nothing whatever to do in the evenings. I go to a flick sometimes. The girls are a nightmare. We'd better go out and get drunk together tonight. Make you forget about your uncle. Has he left you anything?'

'Doubt if he'd anything to leave.'

'Never mind. You'll get over it. I'd like to have a talk with you about Widmerpool.'

This intermittent conversation had taken us through most of dinner. I felt scarcely more drawn to Duport than on the day we first met. He was like Peter Templer, with all sympathetic characteristics removed. There was even a slight physical resemblance between the two of them. I wondered if one of those curious, semi-incestuous instincts of attraction had brought Jean to Duport in the first place, or whether Templer and Duport had become alike by seeing a good deal of each other as brothers-in-law and in the City. Duport, I knew, suffered financial crises from time to time. For a period he would live luxuriously, then all his money would disappear. This capacity for making money, combined with inability to keep it, was mysterious to me. I had once said something of the sort to Templer, when he complained of his brother-in-law's instability.

'Oh, Bob knows he will be able to recoup in quite a short time,' Templer had said. 'Doesn't worry him, any more than it worries you that you will be able to write the review of some book when it appears next year. You'll have something to say, Bob'll find a way of making money. It's only momentary inconvenience, due to his own idiocy. It's not making the money presents the difficulty, it's keeping his schemes in bounds – not landing in jail.'

I could see the force of these words. They probably explained Duport's present situation. From what Templer used to say of him – from what Jean used to say of him – I knew quite a lot of Duport. At the same time, there were other things I should not at all have minded hearing about, which only Duport could tell me. I was aware that to probe in this manner was to play with fire, that it would probably be wiser to remain in ignorance of the kind of thing which I was curious to know. However, I saw, too, there was really no escape. I was fated to spend an evening in Duport's company. While I was about it, I might as well hear what I wanted to hear, no matter what the risk. Like Uncle Giles's failings, all was no doubt written in the stars.

'Where shall we go?'

'The bar of the Royal.'

For a time we walked in silence towards the sea-front, the warm night hinting at more seductive pursuits than drinking with Duport.

'News doesn't look very good,' I said. 'Do you think the Germans are going into Poland?'

There seemed no particular object in avoiding banality from the start, as the evening showed every sign of developing into a banal one.

'There's bloody well going to be a war,' said Duport, 'you can ease your mind about that. If I'd been in South America, I'd have sweated it out there. Might in any case. Still, I suppose currency restrictions would make things difficult. I've always been interested in British Guiana aluminium. That might offer something. I'll recount some of my recent adventures in regard to the international situation when we've had some drinks. Did you meet Peter Templer's wife at Stourwater?'

'Yes.'

'What did you think of her?'

'Something's gone a bit adrift, hasn't it?'

'Peter has driven her off her rocker. Nothing else. Used to be a very pretty little thing married to an oaf of a man who bored her to death.'

'What went wrong?'

'She was mad about Peter – still is – and he got too much of her. He always had various items on the side, of course. Then he started up with Lady Anne Something-or-Other, who is always about with Donners.'

'Anne Umfraville.'

'That's the one.'

'There was rather a scene when we were there.'

I gave a brief account of the Masque of the Seven Deadly Sins. Duport listened without interest.

'Donners never seems to mind about other people getting off with his girls,' he said. 'I've heard it said he is a *voyeur*. No accounting for tastes. I don't think Peter cares what he does now. Something of the sort may have upset Betty – though whether she herself, or Anne, was involved, you can't say.'

'I found Peter quietened down on the whole.'

'Quite right. He is in a way. Used to be more cheerful in the days of the slump, when he was down the drain like the rest of us. Then he turned to, and made it all up. Very successful, I'd say. But he never recovered from it. Slowed him up for good, so far as being a pal for a night on the tiles. Prefers now to read the *Financial Times* over a glass of port. However, that need not apply to his private life – may have developed special tastes, just as Donners has. Very intensive womanising sometimes leads to that kind of thing, and you can't say Peter hasn't been intensive.'

By this time we had reached the Royal. Duport led the way to the bar. It was empty, except for the barman, a beefy, talkative fellow, who evidently knew Duport pretty well.

'Fred will fix you up with a girl, if you want one,' said Duport, while drinks were being poured out. 'I don't recommend it.'

'Come off it, Mr Duport.'

'You know you can, Fred. Don't be so coy about it. Where are we going to sit? How do you feel about availing yourself of Fred's good offices?'

'Not tonight.'

'Why not?'

'Not in the mood.'

'Sure?'

'Certain.'

'Don't make a decision you'll regret later.'

'I won't.'

'Do you play poker?'

'Not a great hand at it.'

'Bores you?'

'Never seem to hold a card.'

'Golf?'

'No.'

I felt I was not cutting a very dashing figure, even if I did not accept all this big talk about women as necessarily giving an exact picture of Duport's own life. No doubt women played a considerable part in his existence, but at the same time he seemed over keen on making an impression on that score. He probably talked about them, I thought, more than concerning himself with incessant action in that direction. He was not at all put out that I should fall so far short of the dissipations suggested by him. All he wanted was a companion with whom to drink. Life at the Bellevue must certainly be boring enough.

'I was going to tell you about that swine Widmerpool,' he said.

This seemed no occasion for an outward display of loyalty to Widmerpool by taking offence at such a description. I had stated earlier that Widmerpool and I were on reasonably good terms. That would have to be sufficient. In any case, I had no illusions about Widmerpool's behaviour. All the same, this abuse sounded ungrateful, for what I knew of their connection indicated that more than once Widmerpool had been instrumental in finding a job for Duport when hard up. It was a Widmerpool job for Duport that had finally severed me from Jean.

'Why do you dislike Widmerpool so much?'

'Listen to this,' said Duport. 'Some years ago, when I was on my uppers, Widmerpool arranged for me to buy metal ores for a firm in South America. When that was fixed, I suggested to my wife, Jean, that we might as well link up again. Rather to my surprise, she agreed. Question of the child and so on. Made things easier.'

Duport paused.

'I'll tell you about Jean later,' he said. 'The Widmerpool story first. I don't expect you've ever heard of chromite?'

'The word was being bandied about at Stourwater.'

'Of course. I'd forgotten you'd been there at the critical moment.'

'What was the critical moment?'

'Donners got into his head that he would be well advised to get a foothold in the Turkish chromite market. He'd already talked to Widmerpool about it, when I arrived in London from South America. I'd left South America for reasons I'll explain later. I found a message from Widmerpool, with whom I was of course in touch, telling me to come and see him. I went along to his office. He suggested I should push off to Turkey and buy chromite. It was for Donners-Brebner, but negotiated through a Swiss subsidiary company. What about a refill?'

We ordered some more drinks.

'Widmerpool opened a credit for me through a Turkish bank,' said Duport. 'I was to buy the ores myself and send a shipment as soon as I had enough. I sent one shipment, was getting to work good and proper on the second shipment, when, a week or two ago, do you know what happened?'

'I'm floored.'

'Widmerpool,' said Duport slowly, 'without informing me, cancelled the credit. He did that on his own responsibility, because he didn't like the look of the European situation.'

'Can't you apply to Donners?'

'He is in France, doing a tour of the Maginot Line or something of the sort – making French contacts and having a bit of a holiday at the same time. I was bloody well left holding the baby. The sellers were looking to me for payments impossible for me to make. Of course I shall see Donners the moment he returns. Even if he re-opens the credit, there's been an irreparable balls-up.'

'And you'd go back?'

'If the international situation allows. It may not. I've no quarrel with Widmerpool about the likelihood of war. I quite agree. That is why Donners wants chromite. Widmerpool seems to have missed that small point.'

'Why does Donners specially want chromite if there's war?'

'Corner the Turkish market. The more there is talk of war, the more Donners-Brebner will need chromite. Donners gives out that it is for some special process he is interested in. That was why Peter Templer was asked to Stourwater – so that he would gossip afterwards about that. Not a word of truth. Donners had quite other reasons. He is not going to give away his plans to a fool like Widmerpool, even when it suits his book to use Widmerpool. Widmerpool talks a lot of balls about "reducing the firm's commitments". He's missed the whole bloody point.'

I was not sure that I saw the point myself. It presumably turned on whether or not there was a war – Sir Magnus thinking there would be, Widmerpool undecided how to act if there were. All that was clear was that Duport had been put into an unenviable position.

'So you see,' he said, 'Widmerpool isn't a great favourite with me at the moment.'

'You were going to tell me why you left South America.'

'I was,' said Duport, speaking as if it were a relief to abandon the subject of Widmerpool and chromite. 'Since you know Peter Templer, did you ever meet another ex-brother-in-law of mine, Jimmy Stripling, who was married to Peter's other sister, Babs? He used to have quite a name as a racing driver.'

'Stripling was at the Templers' when I stayed there years ago. I met him once since.'

'Jimmy and Babs got a divorce. Jimmy – who has always been pretty cracked in some ways – took up with a strange lady called Mrs Erdleigh, who tells fortunes. Incidentally, she sometimes came to the Bellevue to see your uncle. I remembered her. Looks as if she kept a high-class knocking-shop. There is another queer fish living at the Bellevue – old boy with a beard. He and Mrs Erdleigh and your late lamented uncle used sometimes to have tea together.'

'I know about Mrs Erdleigh – and Dr Trelawney too.'

'You do? Trelawney tried to bring off a touch last time we talked. I explained I was as broke as himself. No ill feeling. That's beside the point. Also the fact that Myra Erdleigh milked Jimmy Stripling to quite a tune. All I want to know is: what did you think of Jimmy when you met him?'

'Pretty awful – but I never knew him well. He may be all right.'

'Not a bit of it,' said Duport. 'He is awful. Couldn't be worse. Kept out of the war himself and ran away with Babs when her husband was at the front. Double-dealing, stingy, conceited, bad-tempered, half-cracked. I went to him to try and get a bit of help during my last pre-South American *débâcle*. Not on your life. Nothing doing with Jimmy. I might have starved in the gutter for all Jimmy cared. Now, you say you knew Jean, my ex-wife?'

'She was at Peter's Maidenhead house once when I went there.'

'Nice girl, didn't you think?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Reasonably attractive?'

'I'd certainly have said so.'

'Wouldn't have any difficulty in getting hold of the right sort of chap?'

'It wouldn't be polite to express doubt on that point, since she married you.'

I did not manage to impart all the jocularity fittingly required to give lively savour to this comment. Duport, in any case, brushed it aside as irrelevant.

'Leave me out of it by all means,' he said. 'Just speaking in general, would you think Jean would have any difficulty in getting hold of a decent sort of chap? Yes or no.'

'No.'

'Neither should I,' said Duport. 'But the fact remains that she slept with Jimmy Stripling.'

I made some suitable acknowledgment, tempered, I hoped, by polite surprise. I well remembered the frightful moment when Jean herself had first informed me, quite gratuitously, of having undergone the experience to which Duport referred. I could recall even now how painful that information had been at the time, as one might remember a physical accident long passed. The matter no longer worried me, primarily because I no longer loved Jean, also because the whole Stripling question had, so to speak, been resolved between Jean and myself at the time. All the same, the incident had been a disagreeable one. That had to be admitted. One does not want to dwell on some racking visit to the dentist, however many years have rolled on since that day. Perhaps I would have preferred to have remained even then unreminded of Jean and Stripling. However, present recital could in no way affect the past. That was history.

'Can you beat it?'

I acknowledged inability to offer a parallel instance.

'Well, I can,' said Duport. 'I don't set up as behaving particularly well myself, but, when it comes to behaving badly, women can give you a point or two every time. I just tell you about Jimmy Stripling by the way. He is not the cream of the jest. As I mentioned before, I thought things would be easier if Jean and I joined up again. I found I was wrong.'

'Why was that?'

'Not surprisingly, Jean had been having a bit of a run around while we were living apart,' said Duport. 'I suppose that was to be expected.'

I began to feel decidedly uncomfortable. So far as I knew, neither Duport, nor anyone else, had the smallest reason to guess anything of what had passed between Jean and myself. All the same, his words suggested he was aware of more than I might suppose.

'The point turned out to be this,' said Duport. 'Jean only wanted to link up with me again to make things easier for herself in carrying on one of her little affairs.'

'But how could joining up with you possibly help? Surely things were much easier when she was on her own?'

Duport did not answer that question.

'Guess who the chap was?' he said.

'How could I possibly?'

'Somebody known to you.'

'Are you sure?'

'Seen you and him at the same time.'

Duport grinned horribly. At least I guiltily thought his grin horrible, because I supposed him to be teasing me. It was unlikely, most unlikely, that Jean had told him about ourselves, although, since she had told both of us about Stripling, such a confession could not be regarded as out of the question. Perhaps someone else, unknown to us, had passed the story on to Duport. In either case, the situation was odious. I greatly regretted having agreed to come out drinking with him, even more of having encouraged him to speak of his own troubles. My curiosity had put me in this position. I had no one but myself to blame. It was just in Duport's character, I felt, to discompose me in this manner. If he chose to make himself unpleasant about what had happened, I was in no position to object. Things would have to be brazened out. All the same, I could not understand what he meant by saying that Jean had come back to him in order to 'make things more convenient'. Her return to her husband, their journey together to South America, had been the moment when we had been forced finally to say good-bye to each other. Since then, I had neither seen nor heard of her.

'Just have a shot at who it was,' said Duport, 'bearing in mind Jimmy Stripling as the standard of what a lover should be.'

'Did he look like Stripling?'

I felt safe, at least, in the respect that, apart from any difference in age, no two people could look less alike than Stripling and myself.

'Even more of a lout,' said Duport, 'if you can believe that.'

'In what way?'

There was a ghastly fascination in seeing how far he would go.

'Wetter, for one thing.'

'I give it up.'

'Come on.'

'No good.'

I knew I must be red in the face. By this time we had had some more drinks, to which heightened colouring might reasonably be attributed.

'I'll tell you.'

I nerved myself.

'It was another Jimmy,' said Duport. 'Perhaps Jimmy is just a name she likes. Call a man Jimmy and she gets hot pants at once, I shouldn't wonder. Anyway, it was Jimmy Brent.'

'Brent?'

At first the name conveyed nothing to me.

'The fat slob who was in the Vauxhall when Peter drove us all into the hedge. You must remember him.'

'I do remember him now.'

Even in retrospect, this was a frightful piece of information.

'Jimmy Brent – always being ditched by tarts in night-clubs.'

I felt as if someone had suddenly kicked my legs from under me, so that I had landed on the other side of the room, not exactly hurt, but thoroughly ruffled, with all the breath knocked out of me.

'Nice discovery, wasn't it?' said Duport.

'Had this business with Brent been going on long?'

'Quite a month or two. Took the place of something else, I gather. In fact there was a period when she was running both at the same time. That's what I have good reason to believe. The point was that Brent was going to South America too. It suited Jean's book for me to buy her ticket. We all three crossed on the same boat. Then she continued to carry on with him over there.'

'But are you sure this is true? She can't really have been in love with Brent.'

This naïve comment might have caught the attention of someone more interested than Duport in the emotions of other people. It was, in short, a complete give-away. No one was likely to use that phrase about a woman he scarcely knew, as I had allowed Duport to suppose about Jean and myself. As it was, he merely showed justifiable contempt for my lack of grasp, no awareness that the impact of his story had struck a shower of sparks.

'Who's to say when a woman's in love?' he said.

I thought how often I had made that kind of remark myself, when other people were concerned.

'I've no reason to suppose she wasn't speaking the truth when she told me she'd slept with him,' Duport said. 'She informed me in bed, appropriately enough. You're not going to tell me any woman would boast of having slept with Jimmy Brent, if she hadn't. The same applies to Jimmy Stripling. It's one of the characteristics the two Jimmies have in common. Both actions strike me as even odder to admit to than to do, if that was possible.'

'I see.'

'Nothing like facing facts when you've been had for a mug in a big way,' said Duport. 'I was thinking that this morning when I was working out some freight charges. The best one can say is that Jimmy and the third party – if there was a third party – were probably had for mugs too.'

I agreed. There was nothing like facing facts. They blew into the face hard, like a stiff, exhilarating, decidedly gritty breeze, which brought sanity with it, even though sanity might be unwelcome.

'What made you think there was another chap too?' I asked, from sheer lack of self-control.

'Something Jean herself let fall.'

It is always a temptation to tell one's own story. However, I saw that would be only to show oneself, without the least necessity, in a doubly unflattering light to someone I did not like, someone who could not, in the circumstances, reasonably be expected to be in the least sympathetic. I tried to sort out what had happened. Only a short while earlier, I had thought of myself as standing in an uneasy position *vis-à-vis* Duport, although at the same time a somewhat more advantageous one. Now, I saw that I, even more than he, had been made a fool of. At least Duport seemed to have begun the discord in his own married life – although, again, who can state with certainty the cause of such beginnings? – while I had supposed myself finally parting with Jean only in order that her own matrimonial situation might be patched up. That charming love affair, which had formerly seemed to drift to a close through my own ineffectiveness, had, in reality, been terminated by the deliberate manœuvre of Jean herself for her own purposes, certainly to the detriment of my self-esteem. I thought of that grave, gothic beauty that once I had loved so much, which found fulfilment in such men. The remembered moaning in pleasure of someone once loved always haunts the memory, even when love itself is over. Perhaps, I thought, her men are gothic too, beings carved on the niches and corbels of a mediaeval cathedral to arouse at once laughter and horror. In any case, I had been one of them. If her lovers were horrifying, I too had been of their order. That had to be admitted.

'It is no good pontificating,' Mr Deacon used to say, 'about other people's sexual tastes.'

For the moment, angry, yet at the same time half-inclined to laugh, I could not make up my mind what I thought. This was yet another example of the tricks that Time can play within its own folds, tricks that emphasise the insecurity of those who trust themselves over much to that treacherous concept. I suddenly found what I had regarded as immutable – the not entirely unsublime past – roughly reshaped by the rude hands of Duport. That was justice, I thought, if you like.

'What happened after?'

'After what?'

'Did she marry Brent?'

Duport's story had made me forget entirely that Templer had already told me his sister had made a second marriage.

'Not she,' said Duport. 'Ditched Brent too. Can't blame her for that. Nobody could stick Jimmy for long – either of them. She married a local Don Juan some years younger than herself – in the army. Nephew of the President. I've just met him. He looks like Rudolph Valentino on an off day. Change from Brent, anyway. It takes all sorts to make a lover. Probably keep her in order, I should think. More than I ever managed.'

He stretched.

'I could do with a woman now,' he said.

'Why not have one of Fred's?'

'Fred hasn't got what I want. Besides, it's too late in the evening. Fred likes about an hour's notice. You know, I'll tell you something else, as I seem to be telling you all about my marital affairs. My wife wasn't really much of a grind. That was why I went elsewhere. All the same, she had something. I wasn't sorry when we started up again.'

I loathed him. I still carried with me *The Perfumed Garden*. Now seemed a suitable moment to find a home for the Sheik Nefzaoui's study. Room could no doubt be found for it in the Duport library. To present him with the book would be small, secret amends for having had a love affair with his wife, a token of gratitude for his having brought home to me in so uncompromising a fashion the transitory nature of love. It would be better not to draw his attention to the chapter on the Deceits and Treacheries of Women. He could find that for himself.

'Ever read this?'

Duport glanced at the title, then turned the pages.

'*The Arab Art of Love*,' he said. 'Are you always armed with this sort of literature? I did not realise you meant that kind of thing when you said you reviewed books.'

'I found it among my uncle's things.'

'The old devil.'

'What do you think of it?'

'They say you're never too old to learn.'

'Would you like it?'

'How much?'

'I'll make a present of it.'

'Might give me a few new ideas,' said Duport. 'I'll accept it as a gift. Not otherwise.'

'It's yours then.'

'Got to draw your attention to the clock, Mr Duport,' said the barman, who was beginning to tidy up in preparation for closing the bar.

'We're being kicked out,' said Duport. 'Just time for a final one.'

The bar closed. We said good night to Fred.

'Nothing for it but go back to the Bellevue,' said Duport. 'I've got a bottle of whisky in my room.'

'What about the pier?'

'Shut by now.'

'Let's walk round by the Front.'

'All right.'

The wind had got up by that time. The sea thudded over the breakwaters in a series of regular, dull explosions, like a cannonade of old-fashioned artillery. I felt thoroughly annoyed. We turned inland and made for the Bellevue. The front door was shut, but not locked. We were crossing the hall, when Albert came hurrying down the stairs. He was evidently dreadfully disturbed about some matter. His movements, comparatively rapid for him, indicated consternation. He was pale and breathless. When he saw us, he showed no surprise that Duport and I should have spent an evening together. Our arrival in each other's company seemed almost expected by him, the very thing he was hoping for at that moment.

'There's been a proper kettle of fish,' he said. 'I'm glad to see you back, Mr Nick – and you too, Mr Duport.'

'What's happened?'

'Dr Trelawney.'

'What's he done?'

'Gone and locked himself in the bathroom. Can't get out. Now he's having one of his asthma attacks. With the wife queer herself, I don't want to get her out of bed at this time of night. I'd be glad of you gentlemen's help. There's no one else in the house that's less than in their seventies and it ain't no good asking those silly girls. I'm all that sorry to trouble you.'

'What,' said Duport, 'the good Dr Trelawney, the bearded one? We'll have him out in a trice. Lead us to him.'

This sudden crisis cheered Duport enormously. Action was what he needed. I thought of Moreland's remarks about men of action, wondering whether Duport would qualify. This was not how I had expected to meet Dr Trelawney again. We hurried along the passages behind Albert, slip-slopping in his ancient felt slippers. There were many stairs to climb. At last we reached the bathroom door. There it became clear that the rescue of Dr Trelawney presented difficulties. In fact it was hard to know how best to set about his release. From within the bathroom, rising and falling like the vibrations of a small but powerful engine, could be heard the alarming pant of the asthma victim. Dr Trelawney sounded in extremity. Something must be done quickly. There was no doubt of that. Albert bent forward and put his mouth to the keyhole.

'Try again, Dr Trelawney,' he shouted.

The awful panting continued for a minute or two; then, very weak and shaky, came Dr Trelawney's thin, insistent voice.

'I am not strong enough,' he said.

Albert turned towards us and shook his head.

'He's done this before,' he said in a lower tone. 'It's my belief he just wants to get attention. He was angry when your uncle died, Mr Nick, and the wife and I had to see about that, and not about him for a change. It can't go on. I won't put up with it. He'll have to go. I've said so before. It's too much. Flesh and blood won't stand it.'

'Shall we bust the door down?' said Duport. 'I could if I took a run at it, but there isn't quite enough space to do that here.'

That was true. The bathroom door stood at an angle by the end of the passage, built in such a way that violent attack of that kind upon it was scarcely possible. Dr Trelawney's hoarse, trembling voice came again.

'Telephone to Mrs Erdleigh,' he said. 'Tell her to bring my pills. I must have my pills.'

This request seemed to bring some relief to Albert.

'I'll do that right away, sir,' he shouted through the keyhole.

'What on earth can Mrs Erdleigh do?' said Duport.

Albert, with an old-fashioned gesture, touched the side of his nose with his forefinger.

'I know what he wants now,' he said. 'One of his special pills. I might have thought of Mrs Erdleigh before. We'll have him out when she comes. She'll do it.'

'What pills are they?'

'Better not ask, sir,' said Albert.

'Drugs, do you mean?'

'I've never pressed the matter, sir, nor where they come from.'

Duport and I were left alone in the passage.

'I suppose we could smash the panel,' he said. 'Shall I try to find an instrument?'

'Better not break the house up. Anyway, not until Albert returns. Besides, it would wake everybody up. We don't want a bevy of old ladies to appear.'

'Try taking the key out, Dr Trelawney,' said Duport in an authoritative voice, 'then put it back again and have another turn. That sometimes works. I know that particular key. I thought I was stuck in the bloody hole myself yesterday, but managed to get out that way.'

At first there was no answer. When at last he replied, Dr Trelawney sounded suspicious.

'Who is that?' he asked. 'Where has Mr Creech gone?'

'It's Duport. You know, we sometimes talk in the lounge. You borrowed my *Financial Times* the other morning. Creech has gone to ring Mrs Erdleigh.'

There was another long silence, during which Dr Trelawney's breathing grew a little less heavy. Evidently he was making a great effort to bring himself under control, now that he found that people, in addition to Albert, were at work on his rescue. Then the ritual sentence sounded through the door:

'The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True.'

Duport turned to me and shook his head.

'We often get that,' he said.

This seemed the moment, now or never, when the spell must prove its worth. I leant towards his keyhole and spoke the concordant rejoinder:

'The Vision of Visions heals the Blindness of Sight.'

Duport laughed.

'What on earth are you talking about?' he said.

'That's the right answer.'

'How on earth did you know?'

We heard the sound of Dr Trelawney heaving himself up with difficulty from wherever he was sitting. He must have staggered across the bathroom, for he made a great deal of noise as he came violently into contact with objects obstructive to his passage. Then he reached the door and began to fumble with the key. He removed it from the lock; after a moment or two he tried once more to insert it in the keyhole. Several of these attempts failed. Then, suddenly, quite unexpectedly, came a hard scraping sound; the key could be heard turning slowly; there was a click; the door stood ajar. Dr Trelawney was before us on the threshold.

'I told you that would work,' said Duport.

Except for the beard, hardly a trace remained of the Dr Trelawney I dimly remembered. All was changed. Even the beard, straggling, dirty grey, stained yellow in places like the patches of broom on the common beyond Stonehurst, had lost all resemblance to that worn by the athletic, vigorous prophet of those distant days. Once broad and luxuriant, it was now shrivelled almost to a goatee. He no longer seemed to have stepped down from a stained-glass window or ikon. His skin was dry and blotched. Dark spectacles covered his eyes, his dressing-gown a long blue oriental robe that swept the ground. He really looked rather frightening. Although so altered from the Stonehurst era, he still gave me the same chilly feeling of inner uneasiness that I had known as a child when I watched him and his flock trailing across the heather. I remembered Moreland, when we had once talked of Dr

Trelawney, quoting the lines from *Marmion*, where the king consults the wizard lord:

> 'Dire dealings with the fiendish race
> Had mark'd strange lines upon his face;
> Vigil and fast had worn him grim,
> His eyesight dazzled seem'd and dim . . .'

That just about described Dr Trelawney as he supported himself against the doorpost, seized with another fearful fit of coughing. I do not know what Duport and I would have done with him, if Albert had not reappeared at that moment. Albert was relieved, certainly, but did not seem greatly surprised that we had somehow brought about this liberation.

'Mrs Erdleigh promised she'd be along as quick as possible,' he said, 'but there were a few things she had to do first. I'm glad you was able to get the door open at last, sir. Mrs Creech must have that door seen to. I've spoken to her about it before. Might be better if you used the other bathroom in future, Dr Trelawney, we don't want such a business another night.'

Dr Trelawney did not reply to this suggestion, perhaps because Albert spoke in what was, for him, almost a disrespectful tone, certainly a severe one. Instead, he held out his arms on either side of him, the hands open, as if in preparation for crucifixion.

'I must ask you two gentlemen to assist me to my room,' he said. 'I am too weak to walk unaided. That sounds like the beginning of an evangelical hymn:

> I am too weak to . . . walk unaided . . .

The fact is I must be careful of this shell I call my body, though why I should be, I hardly know. Perhaps from mere courtesy to my medical advisers. There have been warnings – cerebral congestion.'

He laughed rather disagreeably. We supported him along the passage, led by Albert. In his room, not without effort, we established him in the bed. The exertions of Duport and myself brought this about, not much aided by Albert, who, breathing hard, showed little taste for the job. Duport, on the other hand, had been enjoying himself thoroughly since the beginning of this to-do. Action, excitement were what he needed. They showed another side to him. Dr Trelawney, too, was enjoying himself by now. So far from being exhausted by this heaving about of the shell he called his body, he was plainly stimulated by all that had happened. He had mastered his fit of asthma, brought on, no doubt, as Albert had suggested, by boredom and depression. The Bellevue must in any case have represented a low ebb in Dr Trelawney's fortunes. Plenty of attention made him almost well again. He lay back on his pillows, indicating by a movement of the hands that he wished us to stay and talk with him until the arrival of Mrs Erdleigh.

'Bring some glasses, my friend,' he said to Albert. 'We shall need four – a number portending obstacles and opposition in the symbolism of cards – yet necessary for our present purpose, if Myra Erdleigh is soon to be of our party.'

Albert, thankful to have Dr Trelawney out of the bathroom and safely in bed at so small a cost, went off to fetch the glasses without any of the peevishness to be expected of him when odd jobs were in question. Dr Trelawney's request seemed to have reference to a half-bottle of brandy, already opened, that stood on the wash-stand. I had been prepared to find myself in an alchemist's cell, where occult processes matured in retorts and cauldrons, reptiles hung from the ceiling while their venom distilled, homunculi in bottles lined the walls. However, there were no dog-eared volumes of the Cabbala to be seen, no pentagrams or tarot cards. Instead, Dr Trelawney's room was very like that formerly occupied by Uncle Giles, no bigger, just as dingy. A pile of luggage lay in one corner, some suits – certainly ancient enough – hung on coat-hangers suspended from the side of the wardrobe. The only suggestion of the Black Arts was wafted by a faint, sickly smell, not immediately identifiable: incense? hair-tonic? opium? It was hard to say whether the implications were chemical, medicinal, ritualistic; a scent vaguely disturbing, like Dr Trelawney's own personality. Albert returned with the glasses, then said good night, adding a word about latching the front door when Mrs Erdleigh left. He must have been used to her visits at a late hour. Duport and I were left alone with the Doctor. He told us to distribute the brandy – the flask was about a quarter full – allowing a share for Mrs Erdleigh herself when she arrived. Duport took charge, pouring out drink for the three of us.

'Which of you answered me through the door?' asked Dr Trelawney, when he had drunk some brandy.

'I did.'

'You know my teachings then?'

I told him I remembered the formula from Stonehurst. That was not strictly speaking true, because I should never have carried the words in my head all those years, if I had not heard Moreland and others talk of the Doctor in later life. My explanation did not altogether please Dr Trelawney, either because he wished to forget that period of his career, or because it too painfully recalled happier, younger days, when his cult was more flourishing. Possibly he felt disappointment that I should turn out to be no new, hitherto unknown, disciple, full of untapped enthusiasm, admiring from afar, who now at last found dramatic opportunity to disclose himself. He made no comment at all. There was something decidedly unpleasant about him, sinister, at the same time absurd, that combination of the ludicrous and alarming soon to be widely experienced by contact with those set in authority in wartime.

'I may be said to have come from Humiliation into Triumph,' he said, 'the traditional theme of Greek Tragedy. The climate of this salubrious resort does not really suit me. In fact, I cannot think why I stay. Perhaps because I cannot afford to pay my bill and leave. Nor is there much company in the Bellevue calculated to revive failing health and spirits. And you, sir? Why are you enjoying the ozone here, if one may ask? Perhaps for the same reason as Mr Duport, who has confided to me some of the secrets of his own private prison-house.'

Dr Trelawney smiled, showing teeth as yellow and irregular as the stains on his beard. He was, I thought, a tremendously Edwardian figure: an Edwardian figure of fun, one might say. All the same, I remembered that a girl had thrown herself from a Welsh mountain-top on his account. Such things were to be considered in estimating his capacity. His smile was one of the worst things about him. I saw that Duport must be on closer terms with the Doctor than he had pretended. I had certainly not grasped the fact that they already knew each other well enough to have exchanged reasons for residing at the Bellevue. Indeed, Duport, while he had been drinking at the Royal, seemed almost deliberately to have obscured their comparative intimacy. There was nothing very surprising about their confiding in one another. Total strangers in bars and railway carriages will unfold the story of their lives at the least opportunity. It was probably true to say that the hotel contained no more suitable couple to make friends. The details about his married life which Duport had imparted to me showed that he was a more complicated, more introspective character than I had ever guessed. His connexion with Jean was now less mysterious to me. No doubt Jimmy Stripling's esoteric goings-on had familiarised Duport, more or less, with people of Dr Trelawney's sort. In any case, Dr Trelawney was probably pretty good at worming information out of other residents. Even during the time we had been sitting in the room I had become increasingly aware of his pervasive, quasi-hypnotic powers, possessed to a greater or lesser degree by all persons – not necessarily connected with occultism – who form little cults devoted primarily to veneration of themselves. This awareness was not because I felt myself in danger of falling under Dr Trelawney's dominion, though it conveyed an instinctive warning to be on one's guard. Perhaps the feeling was no more than a grown-up version of childish fantasies about him, perhaps a tribute to his will. I was not certain. Duport, on the other hand, appeared perfectly at ease. He sat in a broken-down armchair facing the bed, his hands in his pockets. I explained about my early associations with Albert, about Uncle Giles's funeral.

'I used to talk with your uncle,' said Dr Trelawney.

'What did you think of him?'

'A thwarted spirit, a restless soul wandering the vast surfaces of the earth.'

'He never found a job he liked.'

'Men do not gather grapes from off a thorn.'

'He told you about himself?'

'It was not necessary. Every man bears on his forehead the story of his days, an open volume to the initiate.'

'From that volume, you knew him well?'

'Who can we be said to know well? All men are mysteries.

'There was no mystery about your uncle's grousing,' said Duport. 'The only thing he was cheerful about was saying there would not be a war. What do you think, Dr Trelawney?'

'What will be, must be.'

'Which means war, in my opinion,' said Duport.

'The sword of Mithras, who each year immolates the sacred bull, will ere long now flash from its scabbard.'

'You've said it.'

'The slayer of Osiris once again demands his grievous tribute of blood. The Angel of Death will ride the storm.'

'Could this situation have been avoided?' I asked.

'The god, Mars, approaches the earth to lay waste. Moreover, the future is ever the consequence of the past.'

'And we ought to have knocked Hitler out when he first started making trouble?'

I remembered Ted Jeavons had held that view.

'The Four Horsemen are at the gate. The Kaiser went to war for shame of his withered arm. Hitler will go to war because at official receptions the tails of his evening coat sweep the floor like a clown's.'

'Seems an inadequate reason,' said Duport.

'Such things are a paradox to the uninstructed – to the adept they are clear as morning light.'

'I must be one of the uninstructed,' said Duport.

'You are not alone in that.'

'Just one of the crowd?'

'Reason is given to all men, but all men do not know how to use it. Liberty is offered to each one of us, but few learn to be free. Such gifts are, in any case, a right to be earned, not a privilege for the shiftless.'

'How do you recommend earning it?' asked Duport, stretching out his long legs in front of him, slumping down into the depths of the armchair. 'I've got to rebuild my business connexions. I could do with a few hints.'

'The education of the will is the end of human life.'

'You think so?'

'I know.'

'But can you always apply the will?' said Duport. 'Could I have renewed my severed credits by the will?'

'I am concerned with the absolute.'

'So am I. An absolute balance at the bank.'

'You speak of material trifles. The great Eliphas Lévi, whose precepts I quote to you, said that one who is afraid of fire will never command salamanders.'

'I don't need to command salamanders. I want to shake the metal market.'

'To know, to dare, to will, to keep silence, those are the things required.'

'And what's the bonus for these surplus profits?'

'You have spoken your modest needs.'

'But what else can the magicians offer?'

'To be for ever rich, for ever young, never to die.'

'Do they, indeed?'

'Such was in every age the dream of the alchemist.'

'Not a bad programme – let's have the blue-prints.'

'To attain these things, as I have said, you must emancipate the will from servitude, instruct it in the art of domination.'

'You should meet a mutual friend of ours called Widmerpool,' said Duport. 'He would agree with you. He's very keen on domination. Don't you think so, Jenkins? Anyway, Dr Trelawney, what action do you recommend to make a start?'

'Power does not surrender itself. Like a woman, it must be seized.'

Duport jerked his head in my direction.

'I offered him a woman in the bar of the Royal this evening,' he said, 'but he declined. He wouldn't seize one. I must admit Fred never has much on hand.'

'Cohabitation with antipathetic beings is torment,' said

Dr Trelawney. 'Has that never struck you, my dear friend?'

'Time and again,' said Duport, laughing loudly. 'Perfect hell. I've done quite a bit of it in my day. Would you like to hear some of my experiences?'

'Why should we wish to ruminate on your most secret orgies?' said Dr Trelawney. 'What profit for us to muse on your nights in the lupanar, your diabolical couplings with the brides of debauch, more culpable than those phantasms of the incubi that rack the dreams of young girls, or the libidinous gymnastics of the goat-god whose ice-cold sperm fathers monsters on writhing witches in coven?'

Duport shook with laughter. I saw that one of Dr Trelawney's weapons was flattery, though flattery of no trite kind, in fact the best of all flattery, the sort disguised as disagreement or rebuke.

'So you don't want a sketch of my love life in its less successful moments?' said Duport.

Dr Trelawney shook his head.

'There have been some good moments too,' said Duport. 'Don't get me wrong.'

'He alone can truly possess the pleasures of love,' said Dr Trelawney, 'who has gloriously vanquished the love of pleasure.'

'Is that your technique?'

'If you would possess, do not give.'

'I've known plenty of girls who thought that, my wife among them.'

'Continual caressing begets satiety.'

'She thought that too. You should meet. However, if what you said about a war coming is true – and it's what I think myself – why bother? We shall soon be as dead as Jenkins's uncle.'

Duport had a way of switching from banter to savage melancholy.

'There is no death in Nature,' said Dr Trelawney, 'only transition, blending, synthesis, mutation.'

'All the same,' said Duport, 'to take this uncle of Jenkins's again, you must admit, from his point of view, it was different sitting in the Bellevue lounge, from lying in a coffin at the crematorium, his present whereabouts, as I understand from his nephew.'

'Those who no longer walk beside us on the void expanses of this fleeting empire of created light have no more reached the absolute end of their journey than birth was for them the absolute beginning. They have merely performed their fugitive pilgrimage from embryo to ashes. They are in the world no longer. That is all we can say.'

'But what more can anyone say?' said Duport. 'You're put in a box and stowed away underground, or cremated in the Jenkins manner. In other words, you're dead.'

'Death is a mere phantom of ignorance,' said Dr Trelawney. 'It does not exist. The flesh is the raiment of the soul. When that raiment has grown threadbare or is torn asunder by violent hands, it must be abandoned. There is witness without end. When men know how to live, they will no longer die, no more cry with Faustus:

O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!'

Dr Trelawney and Duport were an odd couple arguing together about the nature of existence, the immortality of the soul, survival after death. The antithetical point of view each represented was emphasised by their personal appearance. This rather bizarre discussion was brought to an end by a knock on the door.

'Enter,' said Dr Trelawney.

He spoke in a voice of command. Mrs Erdleigh came into the room. Dr Trelawney raised himself into a sitting position, leaning back on his elbows.

'The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True.'

'The Vision of Visions heals the Blindness of Sight.'

While she pronounced the incantation, Mrs Erdleigh smiled in a faintly deprecatory manner, like a grown-up who, out of pure good nature, humours the whim of a child. I remembered the same expression coming into her face when speaking to Uncle Giles. Dr Trelawney made a dramatic gesture of introduction, showing his fangs again in one of those awful grins as he lay back on the pillow.

'Mr Duport, you've met, Myra,' he said. 'This gentleman here is the late Captain Jenkins's nephew, bearing the same name.'

He rolled his eyes in my direction, indicating Mrs Erdleigh.

'*Connaissez-vous la vieille souveraine du monde*,' he said, '*qui marche toujours, et ne se fatigue jamais?* In this incarnation, she passes under the name of Mrs Erdleigh.'

'Mr Jenkins and I know each other already,' she said, with a smile.

'I might have guessed,' said Dr Trelawney. 'She knows all.'

'And your introduction was not very polite,' said Mrs Erdleigh. 'I am not as old as she to whom the Abbé referred.'

'Be not offended, priestess of Isis. You have escaped far beyond the puny fingers of Time.'

She turned from him, holding out her hand to me.

'I knew you were here,' she said.

'Did Albert say I was coming?'

'It was not necessary. I know such things. Your poor uncle passed over peacefully. More peacefully than might have been expected.'

She wore a black coat with a high fur collar, a tricorne hat, also black, riding on the summit of grey curls. These had taken the place of the steep bank of dark-reddish tresses of the time when I had met her at the Ufford with Uncle Giles seven or eight years before. Then, I had imagined her nearing fifty. Lunching with the Templers eighteen months later (when she had arrived with Jimmy Stripling), I decided she was younger. Now, she was not so much aged as an entirely different woman – what my brother-in-law, Hugo Tolland, used to call (apropos of his employer, Mrs Baldwyn Hodges) a 'blue-rinse marquise'. This new method of doing her hair, the tone and texture of which suggested a wig, together with the three-cornered hat, recalled Longhi, the Venetian ridotto. You felt Mrs Erdleigh had just removed her mask before paying this visit to Cagliostro – or, as it turned out with no great difference, to Dr Trelawney.

'Sad that your mother-in-law, Lady Warminster, passed over too,' said Mrs Erdleigh. 'She had not consulted me for some years, but I foretold both her marriages. I warned her that her second husband should beware of the Eagle – symbol of the East, you know – and of the Equinox of Spring. Lord Warminster died in Kashmir at just that season.'

'She is greatly missed in the family.'

'Lady Warminster was a woman among women,' said Mrs Erdleigh. 'I shall never forget her gratitude when I revealed to her that Tuesday was the best day for the operation of revenge.'

Dr Trelawney was becoming restive, either because Mrs Erdleigh had made herself the centre of attention, or because his own 'treatment' had been delayed too long.

'We think we should have our . . . er . . . pill, ha-ha,' he said, trying to laugh, but beginning to twitch dreadfully. 'We do not wish to cut short so pleasurable an evening. I am eternally grateful to you, gentlemen – though to name eternity is redundant, since we all perforce have our being within it – and I hope we shall meet again, if only in the place where the last are said to be first, though, for my own part, I shall not be surprised if the first are first there too.'

'We shall have to turn in too,' said Duport, rising, 'or I shall have no head for figures tomorrow.'

I thought Duport did not much care for Mrs Erdleigh, certainly disliked the fact that she and I had met before.

'The gods brook no more procrastination,' said Dr Trelawney, his hoarse voice rising sharply in key. 'I am like one of those about to adore the demon under the figure of a serpent, or such as make sorceries with vervain and periwinkle, sage, mint, ash and basil . . .'

Mrs Erdleigh had taken off her coat and hat. She was fumbling in a large black bag she had brought with her. Dr Trelawney's voice now reached an agonised screech.

'. . . votaries of the Furies who use branches of cedar, alder, hawthorn, saffron and juniper in their sacrifices of turtle-doves and sheep, who pour upon the ground libations of wine and honey . . .'

Mrs Erdleigh almost hustled us through the door. There was something in her hand, a small instrument that caught the light.

'I shall be with my old friend at the last tomorrow,' she said, opening wide her huge, misty eyes.

The door closed. There was the sound of the key turning in the lock, then, as we moved off down the passage, of water poured into a basin.

'You see what living at the Bellevue is like,' said Duport.

'I'm surprised you find it boring. Have you still got *The Perfumed Garden*?'

'What's that?'

'The book I gave you – *The Arab Art of Love*.'

'Hell,' said Duport, 'I left it in Trelawney's room. Well, I can get it again tomorrow, if he hasn't peddled it by then.'

'Good night.'

'Good night,' said Duport. 'I don't envy you having to turn out for your uncle's funeral in the morning.'

The Bellevue mattress was a hard one. Night was disturbed by dreams. Dr Trelawney – who had shaved his head and wore RAF uniform – preached from the baroquely carved pulpit of a vast cathedral on the text that none should heed Billson's claim to be pregnant by him of a black messiah. These and other aberrant shapes made the coming of day welcome. I rose, beyond question impaired by the drinks consumed with Duport, all the same anxious to get through my duties. Outside, the weather was sunny, all that the seaside required. Nevertheless, I wanted only to return to London. While I dressed, I wondered whether the goings-on of the night before had disturbed other residents of the hotel. When I reached the dining-room, the air of disquiet there made me think we had made more noise than I had supposed. Certainly the murmur of conversation was disturbed at the tables of the old ladies. An atmosphere of tension made itself felt at once. Duport, unexpectedly in his place, was eating a kipper, a pile of disordered newspapers lying on the floor beside him. I made some reference to the unwisdom of terminating an evening of that sort with Dr Trelawney's brandy. Duport made a face. He ignored my comment.

'Nice news,' he said, 'isn't it?'

'What?'

'Germany and Russia.'

'What have they done? I haven't seen a paper.'

'Signed a Non-Aggression Pact with each other.'

He handed me one of the newspapers. I glanced at the headlines.

'Cheerful situation, you will agree,' said Duport.

'Makes a good start to the day.'

I felt a sinking inside me as I read.

'Molotov and Ribbentrop,' said Duport. 'Sound like the names of a pair of performing monkeys. Just the final touch to balls up my affairs.'

'It will be war all right now.'

'And Hitler will be able to buy all the chromite he wants from the Soviet.'

'So what?'

'It's good-bye to my return to Turkey, whatever happens.'

'But if there's war, shan't we want the stuff more than ever?'

'Of course we shall. Even a bloody book-reviewer, or whatever you are, can see that. It doesn't prevent Widmerpool from failing to grasp the point. The probability of war made the pre-empting of the Turkish market essential to this country.'

'Then why not still?'

'Buying chromite to prevent Germany from getting it and buying it just for our own use are not the same thing. All the chromite Germany wants will now be available from Russian sources – and a bloody long list of other important items too.'

'I see.'

'Donners will handle matters differently now. I shall drop out automatically. I might get another job out of him, not that one. But can you imagine Widmerpool being such a fool as to suppose the prospect of war would diminish Donners-Brebner requirements. "Cut down our commitments", indeed.'

Duport spat out some kipper-bones on to his plate. He took several deep gulps of coffee.

'Of course in a way Widmerpool turned out to be right,' he said. 'As usual, his crassness brought him luck. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't wonder if he didn't cut off my credits as much from spite as obtuseness.'

'Why should Widmerpool want to spite you?'

'Just to show who's master. I sent him one or two pretty curt telegrams. He didn't like that. Probably decided to get his own back. Anyway, I'm up a gum tree now.'

I saw he had cause to grumble. At that moment, I could not spare much sympathy. In any case, I did not care for Duport, although I had to admit he had his points. He was, in his way, a man of action. Ahead, I thought, lay plenty of opportunity for action of one kind or another. Even now, a thousand things had to be done. Then and there, the only course to follow was to oversee Uncle Giles's cremation, return home, try to make plans in the light of the new international situation.

' 'Spect they'll requisition the place now all right,' said Albert, when I saw him. 'That's if there's anything to requisition in a day or two. Hitler's not one to tell us when he's coming. Just loose a lot of bombs, I reckon. The wife's still poorly and taking on a treat about the blackout in the bedrooms.'

For a man who thoroughly disliked danger, Albert faced the prospect of total war pretty well. At best its circumstances would shatter the props of his daily life at a time when he was no longer young. All the same, the Germans, the Russians, the suffragettes were all one when it came to putting up the shutters. He might be afraid when a policeman walked up the Stonehurst drive; that trepidation was scarcely at all increased by the prospect of bombardment from the air. Indeed, his fear was really a sort of courage, fear and courage being close to each other, like love and hate.

'Mr Duport and I sat up with Dr Trelawney for a while after he went to bed last night,' I said.

Albert shook his head.

'Don't know how we're going to get rid of him now,' he said. 'Flesh and blood won't stand it much longer. If there's requisitioning, he'll be requisitioned like the rest of us, I suppose. It won't do no good talking. Well, it's been nice seeing you again, Mr Nick.'

I felt no more wish to adjudicate between Albert and Dr Trelawney than between Duport and Widmerpool. They must settle their own problems. I went on my way. The crematorium was a blaze of sunshine. I had a word with the clergyman. It looked as if I was going to be the only mourner. Then, just as the service was about to begin, Mrs Erdleigh turned up. She was shrouded in black veils that seemed almost widow's weeds. She leant towards me and whispered some greeting, then retired to a seat at the back of the little chapel. The clergyman's voice sounded as if he, too, had sat up drinking the night before, though his appearance put such a surmise out of court.

'. . . For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain; he heapeth up riches and cannot tell who shall gather them . . .'

Uncle Giles's spirit hovered in the air. I could well imagine one of his dissertations on such a theme. The coffin slid through the trap-door with perfect precision: Uncle Giles's remains committed to a nomad's pyre. I turned to meet Mrs Erdleigh. She had already slipped away. Her evasiveness was perhaps due to delicacy, because, when Uncle Giles's will (proved at the unexpectedly large figure of seven thousand, three hundred pounds) came to light, Mrs Erdleigh turned out to be the sole legatee. Uncle Giles could not be said to have heaped up riches, but he had seen to it that his relations did not gather them. It was one of those testamentary surprises, like St John Clarke's leaving his money to Erridge. The bequest gave some offence within the family.

'Giles was always an unreliable fellow,' said my father, 'but we mustn't speak ill of him now.'

4

When the sword of Mithras – to borrow Dr Trelawney's phrase – flashed at last from its scabbard, people supposed London would immediately become the target of bombs. However, the slayer of Osiris did not at first demand his grievous tribute of blood, and a tense, infinitely uneasy over-all stagnation imposed itself upon an equally uncomfortable, equally febrile, over-all activity. Everyone was on the move. The last place to find a friend or relation was the spot where he or she had lived or worked in peacetime. Only a few, here and there, discovered themselves already suitably situated for war conditions. Frederica Budd, for example, Isobel's eldest sister, as a widow with children to bring up, had not long before gone to live in the country within range of their schools. Her small house stood in a village within twenty or thirty miles of Thrubworth, upon which Frederica always liked to keep an eye. Here it was arranged that Isobel should stay, if possible, until she gave birth. Without much in common except their relationship as sisters, the temperaments of Isobel and Frederica – unlike those of Frederica and Norah – were at the same time not in active conflict. Isobel's help in running the house was as convenient to Frederica as this arrangement was acceptable to ourselves.

Thrubworth had been requisitioned as a military headquarters. In principle detesting war in all its manifestations, Erridge was reported, in practice, to enjoy the taking over of his house by the government. This unexpected attitude on his part was not, as might be thought, because of any theoretical approval of state intervention where private property was concerned, so much as on account of the legitimate grievance – indeed, series of legitimate grievances – with which the army's investment of his mansion provided him. Erridge, a rebel whose life had been exasperatingly lacking in persecution, had enjoyed independence of parental control, plenty of money, assured social position, early in life. Since leaving school he had been deprived of all the typical grudges within the grasp of most young men. Some of these grudges, it was true, he had later developed with fair success by artificial means, grudges being, in a measure, part and parcel of his political approach. At first the outbreak of war had threatened more than one of his closest interests by making them commonplace, compulsory, even vulgarly 'patriotic'. The army at Thrubworth, with the boundless inconvenience troops bring in their train, restored Erridge's inner well-being. There was no major upheaval in his own daily existence. He and Blanche, in any case, inhabited only a small corner of the house, so that domestically speaking things remained largely unchanged for him on his own ground. At the same time he was no longer tempted to abandon all his high-minded activities. Provided with a sitting target, he was able to devote himself to an unremitting campaign against militarism as represented in person by the commanding officer and staff of the formation quartered on his property. A succession of skirmishes raged round the use of the billiard-table, the grand piano, the hard tennis-court, against a background of protest, often justifiable enough, about unsightly tracks made by short cuts across lawns, objects in the house broken or defaced by carelessness and vandalism. However, these hostilities could at the same time be unremitting only so far as Erridge's own health allowed, the outbreak of war having quite genuinely transformed him from a congenital sufferer from many vague ailments into a man whose physical state bordered on that of a chronic invalid.

'Erry helped to lose the Spanish war for his own side,' said Norah. 'Thank goodness he is not going to be fit enough to lose this one for the rest of us.'

Norah herself, together with her friend, Eleanor Walpole-Wilson, had already enrolled themselves as drivers in some women's service. They could talk of nothing but the charm of their superior officer, a certain Gwen McReith. Eleanor's father, Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson, after many years of retirement, had made a public reappearance by writing a 'turnover' article for *The Times* on German influence in the smaller South American countries. This piece had ended with the words: 'The dogs bark: the caravan moves on.' In fact everyone, one way and another, was becoming absorbed into the leviathan of war. Its inexorable pressures were in some ways more irksome for those outside the machine than those within. I myself, for example, felt lonely and depressed. Isobel was miles away in the country; most of the people I knew had disappeared from London, or were soon to do so. They were in uniform, or some new, unusual civil occupation. In this atmosphere writing was more than ever out of the question; even reading could be attempted only at short stretches. I refused one or two jobs offered, saying I was 'on the Reserve', should soon be 'called up'. However, no calling-up took place; nor, so far as I could discover, was any likely to be enunciated in the near future. There was just the surrounding pressure of uneasy stagnation, uneasy activity.

I was not alone, of course, in this predicament. Indeed, my father, who might have been expected to be of some assistance, was, as it turned out, in worse case even than myself. He was by this time totally immersed in the problem of how to bring about his own re-employment, a preoccupation which, in spite of her very mixed feelings on the subject, equally engrossed my mother, who partly feared he might succeed, partly dreaded his despair if left on the shelf. It was hard, even impossible, for my father to concentrate for even a short time on any other subject. He would talk for hours at a time about possible jobs that he might be offered. His prospects were meagre in the extreme, for his health had certainly not improved since retirement. Now, his days were spent writing letters to contemporaries who had achieved senior rank, hanging about his club trying to buttonhole them in person.

'I managed to have a word with Fat Boy Gort at the Rag yesterday,' he would say, speaking as if in a dream. 'Of course I knew he could do nothing for me himself in his exalted position, but he wasn't at all discouraging. Gave me the name of a fellow in the Adjutant-General's own secretariat who is entering my name on a special file with a few others of much the same category as myself. Something may come of it. Brownrigg's doing his best too. As a member of the Army Council, he ought to bring something off.'

Then it struck me that General Conyers might be worth approaching in my own interests. By that time my parents had almost lost touch with the General, having themselves drifted into a form of life in which they hardly ever 'saw' anybody, certainly a way of life far removed from the General's own restless curiosity about things, an energy that age was said to have done little to abate. At least that was the picture of him to be inferred from their occasional mention of his name. To tell the truth, they rather disapproved of rumours that percolated through to them that General Conyers would sometimes attend meetings of the Society for Psychical Research, or had given a lecture at one of the universities on the subject of Oriental secret societies. My parents preferred to think of General Conyers as living a life of complete retirement and inactivity since the death of his wife four or five years before. At that date he had sold their house in the country, at the same time disposing of such sporting poodles as remained in the kennels there. Now he lived all the year round in the small flat near Sloane Square, where he was still said to play Gounod on his 'cello in the afternoons.

'Poor old Aylmer,' my father would say, since he liked to think of other people existing in an unspectacular, even colourless manner. 'You know he was rather a gay spark in his youth. Never looked at another woman after he married Bertha. It must be a lonely life.'

At first I hesitated to call on General Conyers, not only on account of this forlorn picture of him, but also because great age is, in itself, a little intimidating. I had not set eyes on him since my own wedding. Finally, I decided to telephone. The General sounded immensely vigorous on the line. Like so many of his generation, he always shouted into the mouthpiece with the full force of his lungs, as if no other method would make the instrument work.

'Delighted to hear your voice, Nick. Come along. Of course, of course, of course.'

He was specific about the time I was to call on the following day. I found myself once more under his photograph in the uniform of the Body Guard I had so much admired as a child, when my mother had taken me to see Mrs Conyers not long after we had left Stonehurst. I think the General admired this picture too, because, while we were talking of people we knew in common, he suddenly pointed to this apotheosis of himself in plumed helmet bearing a halberd.

'They made me give all that up,' he said. 'Reached the age limit. Persuaded them to keep me on for quite a while longer than allowed by regulations, as a matter of fact, but they kicked me out in the end. Lot of nonsense. It's not the fellows of my age who feel the strain. We know how to hold ourselves easily on parade. It's the fellow in his fifties who has to go to bed for a week after duty at a court or levée. Tries to stand to attention all the time and be too damned regimental. Won't do at that age. Anyway, I've got plenty to occupy me. Too much, I don't mind telling you. In any case, gallivanting round in scarlet and gold doesn't arise these days.'

He shook his head emphatically, as if I might try to deny that. His face had become more than ever aquiline and ivory, the underlying structure of bone and muscle, accentuated by age, giving him an other-worldliness of expression, a look withdrawn and remote (not unlike that of Lady Warminster's features in the months before she died), as if he now lived in a dream of half-forgotten campaigns, love affairs, heterodox experiences and opinions. At the same time there was a restless strength, a rhythm, about his movements that made one think of the Michelangelo figures in the Sistine Chapel. The Cumæan Sybil with a neat moustache added? All at once he leant forward, turning with one arm over the back of his chair, his head slightly bent, pointing to another picture hanging on the wall. I saw he was an unbearded Jehovah inspiring life into Adam through an extended finger.

'Sold most of the stuff when Bertha died,' he said. 'No good to Charlotte, married to a sailor, never has a home. Thought I'd keep the Troost, though. Troost? Van Troost? Can't remember which he is. Not sure that I was wise to have had it cleaned on the advice of that fellow Smethyck.'

The scene was a guard-room in the Low Countries.

'Undisciplined looking lot,' General Conyers went on. 'No joke soldiering in those days. Must have been most difficult to get your orders out to large bodies of men. Still, that's true today. Immense intricacies even about calling them up in the categories you want them.'

I told him that was the very subject about which I came to speak; in short, how best to convert registration with the Reserve into a commission in the armed forces. Before the war, this metamorphosis had been everywhere regarded as a process to be put automatically in motion by the march of events; now, for those in their thirties, the key seemed inoperative for entry into that charmed circle. The General shook his head at once.

'If Richard Cœur de Lion came back to earth tomorrow,' he said, 'he would be able to tell you more, my dear Nick, than I can about the British Army of today. I am not much further advanced in military knowledge than those fellows Troost painted in the guard-room. Can't your father help?'

'He's trying to solve his own problem of getting back.'

'They'll never have him.'

'You think not?'

'Certainly not. Never heard such a thing.'

'Why not?'

'Health isn't good enough. Too old.'

'He doesn't believe that.'

'Of course he's too old. Much too old. Aren't you getting a shade old yourself to embark on a military career? Wars have to be fought by young men nowadays, you know, my dear Nick, not old buffers like us.'

'Still, I thought I might try.'

'Does you credit. Can't one of your own contemporaries give you a tip? Some of them must be soldiers.'

He stood for a moment to straighten out his rheumatic leg, carefully smoothing the thick dark check of the trouser as far down as the cloth top of his buttoned boot. I felt a little dashed to find suddenly that I was so old, by now good for little, my life virtually over. The General returned to his chair.

'Didn't you once tell me years ago that you knew Hugh Moreland, the composer?' he asked. 'Splendid thing of his I heard on the wireless not long ago. Now, what was it called? *Tone Poem Vieux Port* . . . something of the sort . . . wondered if I could get a record . . .'

He had evidently dismissed the army – the war itself – from his mind for a moment. Quite other thoughts were in his head.

'How are all Isobel's brothers and sisters?' he asked.

I gave some account of them.

'Erridge is a psychosomatic case, of course,' said the General. 'Not a doubt of it. Contradictory exterior demands of contending interior emotions. Great pity he doesn't get married.'

He looked at his watch. I made a movement to leave. As a man of action, General Conyers had failed me. He put out his hand at once.

'No, don't go yet,' he said. 'Stay just a moment more, if you can. There is someone coming I would like you to meet. That was why I asked you at this time. Got a bit of news to tell you, as a matter of fact. You can pass it on to your parents during the next day or two.'

He paused, nodding his head knowingly. He was evidently very pleased about something. I wondered what could have happened. Perhaps he had been given at long last some decoration he specially coveted. It would be late in the day to award him decorations, but such official afterthoughts are not unknown. All the same, it would be unlike General Conyers to care greatly about such things, certainly to speak of them with this enthusiasm, though one can never tell what specialised goals people will set their hearts on attaining.

'I am getting married again,' he said crisply.

I had just enough control not to laugh aloud.

'Some people might think it a mistake,' said the General, speaking now very sternly, as if he well knew how to deal in the most crushing fashion with such persons. 'I perfectly realise that. I have not the smallest doubt that a good many of my friends will say that I am making a mistake. My answer is that I do not care a damn. Not a damn. Don't you agree, Nicholas?'

'Absolutely.'

'After all, it is I who am getting married, not they.'

'Of course.'

'They can mind their own business, what?'

'Certainly.'

'That's a thing no one likes to do.'

General Conyers laughed very heartily at this thought of the horrible destiny pursuing his critics, that they would have to mind their own business, most dreaded of predicaments.

'So I should like you to stay and meet my future wife,' he said.

I wondered what my parents were going to say to this. From their point of view it would be the final nail in the coffin of Aylmer Conyers. There was nothing of which they would more disapprove. At that moment the front-door bell rang.

'Forgive me,' said the General, 'as I explained before, I have no longer any domestic staff.'

He went off to open the door. I heard a woman's voice in the hall; soft laughter, as if at a too violent embrace. I thought how furious Uncle Giles would have been had he lived to hear that General Conyers was contemplating remarriage. Certainly the news was unexpected enough. I wondered who on earth was going to appear. A succession of possibilities, both ludicrous and conventional, presented themselves to the mind: ash-blondes of seventeen; red-wigged, middle-aged procuresses, on the lines of Mrs Erdleigh; silver-haired, still palely-beautiful widows of defunct soldiers, courtiers, noblemen. I even toyed for a moment with the fantasy that the slight asperity that had always existed between the General and my sister-in-law, Frederica, might really have concealed love, dismissing such a possibility almost as soon as it took shape. Even that last expectation scarcely came up to the reality. I could not have guessed it in a million years. A tall, dark, beaky-nosed lady of about fifty came into the room. I rose. She was distinctly well-dressed, with a business-like, rather than frivolous, air.

'We have often met before,' she said, holding out her hand.

It was Miss Weedon.

'At Lady Molly's,' she said, 'and long before that too.'

The General took my arm between his forefinger and thumb, as if about to break it neatly just above the elbow with one sharp movement of his wrist.

'So you know each other already?' he said, not absolutely sure he was pleased by that fact. 'I might have guessed you would have met with Molly Jeavons. I'd forgotten she was an aunt of Isobel's.'

'But we knew each other in much more distant days as well,' said Miss Weedon, speaking in a gayer tone than I had ever heard her use before.

She looked enormously delighted at what was happening to her.

'I ran into Jeavons the other day in Sloane Street,' said General Conyers. 'Have you seen him lately, Nick?'

'Not for a month or two. There has been such a lot to do about Isobel going to the country and so on. We haven't been to Molly's house for ages. How are they?'

'Jeavons is an air-raid warden,' said the General. 'We had quite a talk. I like Jeavons. Don't know him well. Hear some people complain he is a bore. I don't think so. He put me on to a first-rate place to buy cheap shirts many years ago. Shopped there ever since.'

'I believe Lady Molly is going back to Dogdene,' said Miss Weedon. 'They have evacuated a girls' school to the house. She may help to run it – not teach, of course. How strange to return after being châtelaine of the place.'

'Of course, she was once married to that pompous fellow, John Sleaford, wasn't she?' said the General. 'One forgets things. Sleaford must be dead these twenty years. How King Edward abominated him.'

'I don't think the present marchioness will be too pleased to find her former sister-in-law in residence at Dogdene again,' said Miss Weedon, with one of those icy, malicious smiles I well remembered. 'Lady Molly has always been so funny about what she calls "the latest Dogdene economy".'

'Poor Alice Sleaford,' said the General. 'You must not be unkind to her, Geraldine.'

I had never before heard Miss Weedon addressed as 'Geraldine'. When secretary to Stringham's mother, Mrs Foxe, she had always been 'Tuffy'. That was what Molly Jeavons called her, too. I wanted to ask about Stringham, but, in the existing circumstances, hesitated to do so. As bride of General Conyers, Miss Weedon had suddenly become such a very different sort of person, almost girlish in her manner, far from the Medusa she had once been designated by Moreland. At the same time, she still retained some of her secretary's formality in speaking of people. However, she herself must have decided that her present position would be weakened, rather than strengthened, by all avoidance of the subject of Stringham, which, certain to turn up sooner or later, was best put at once on a solid basis. She now raised it herself.

'I expect you want to hear about Charles,' she said, very cheerfully.

'Of course. How is he?'

'Quite all right now.'

'Really?'

'Absolutely.'

'Charles is the fellow you were helping to look after his mother's house, is he?' asked General Conyers, speaking with that small touch of impatience, permissible, even to be applauded, in the light of his own engagement. 'You knew Charles Stringham, did you, Nicholas? At school with him, were you? I hear he drank too much, but has given it up. Good thing.'

'Is he still at Glimber?'

'Glimber has been taken over as an evacuated government office. Charles is in London now, looking for a job. He wants to get into the army. Of course his health isn't very good, even though he has stopped drinking. It isn't going to be easy. There have been money troubles too. His father died in Kenya and left such money as he had to his French wife. Mrs Foxe is not nearly so rich as she was. Commander Foxe is so terribly extravagant. He has gone back to the navy, of course.'

'Good old Buster.'

Miss Weedon laughed. She deeply detested Buster Foxe.

'Nicholas wants to get into the army too,' said General Conyers, anxious to dismiss the subject of Stringham and his relations. 'He is also having difficulties. Didn't you say so, Nicholas? Now, tell me, don't I remember a former servant of your parents manages a hotel somewhere? Some seaside place. Very good cook, wasn't he? I remember his soufflés. Thought we might perhaps honeymoon at his hotel. Not going to make it a long affair. Just a week or ten days. Quite enough.'

'They have probably requisitioned the place. I was down there a month or two ago for Uncle Giles's funeral.'

'Saw his death in the paper. Made rather a mess of his life, didn't he? Don't think I set eyes on him since a week or two before the earlier war broke out.'

'Do you remember Dr Trelawney? He was staying in the hotel.'

'That old scoundrel. Was he, indeed? How is he?'

'He got locked in the bathroom.'

'Did he, did he?' said the General thoughtfully. 'The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True . . . may be something in it. Always meant to go and have a look at Trelawney on his own ground . . . all that stuff about the Astral Plane . . .'

He pondered; then, with an effort, brought himself back to earth, when I said that I must be going.

'Sorry not to have been more use about your own problem, Nick. Have another talk with your father. Better still, get some young fellow to help you. No good trying too high up. Somebody quite junior, like a lieutenant-colonel. That's the kind of fellow. Very nice to have seen you. You must come and visit us after we get back. Don't know where we shall go yet.'

I left them together, discussing that question, Miss Weedon still looking immensely pleased about everything. As the flat door closed, I heard her laughter, now quite shrill, begin again. She had reason to be pleased. Stringham, so it appeared, had been cured by her of 'drink'; now she had captured General Conyers. The one achievement was as remarkable as the other. They were perhaps not so disparate as might at first sight appear. There was a kind of dash about Stringham comparable with the General's manner of facing the world; at the same time, the General's advanced age, like Stringham's taste for the bottle, gave Miss Weedon something ponderable upon which to exercise her talent for 'looking after' people, her taste, in short, for power. General Conyers had seemed as enchanted with Miss Weedon as she with him. I wondered what other men – in addition to Stringham – had been 'in her life', as Mrs Erdleigh would have said; what, for that matter, had been Miss Weedon's true relationship with Stringham. One passes through the world knowing few, if any, of the important things about even the people with whom one has been from time to time in the closest intimacy.

'Valéry asks why one has been summoned to this carnival,' Moreland once said, 'but it's more like blind man's buff. One reels through the carnival in question, blundering into persons one can't see, and, without much success, trying to keep hold of a few of them.'

There could be no doubt that General Conyers had taken on a formidable woman; equally no doubt that he was a formidable man. If he could handle Billson naked, he could probably handle Miss Weedon clothed – or naked, too, if it came to that. I felt admiration for his energy, his determination to cling to life. There was nothing defeatist about him. However, my parents, as I had expected, were not at all pleased by the news. They had, of course, never heard of Miss Weedon. The engagement was, indeed, quite a shock to them. In fact, the whole affair made my father very cross. Now that Uncle Giles was no more, he may have felt himself permitted a greater freedom of expression in openly criticising General Conyers. He did so in just the terms the General had himself envisaged.

'No fool like an old fool,' my father said. 'I shouldn't have believed it of him, Bertha hardly cold in her grave.'

'I hope he hasn't made a silly mistake,' said my mother. 'I like old Aylmer, with all his funny ways of behaving.'

'Very awkward for his daughter too. Why, some of his grandchildren must be almost grown up.'

'Oh, no,' said my mother, who loved accuracy in such matters, 'not grown up.'

'Where did he meet this woman?'

'I really don't know.'

It turned out later that General Conyers had sat next to Miss Weedon at a concert some months before the outbreak of war. They had fallen into conversation. Finding they knew many people in common, they had arranged to meet at another concert the following week. That was how their friendship had begun. In short, General Conyers had 'picked up' Miss Weedon. There was no denying it. It was a true romance.

'Adventures only happen to adventurers,' Mr Deacon had said one evening when we were sitting drinking in the saloon bar of the Mortimer.

'That depends on what one calls adventures,' said Moreland, who was in a hair-splitting mood. 'What you mean, Edgar, is that people to whom adventures happen are never wholly unadventurous. That is not the same thing. It's the latter class who have the real adventures – people like oneself.'

'Don't be pedantic, Moreland,' Mr Deacon had answered.

Certainly General Conyers was not unadventurous. Was he an adventurer? I thought over his advice about the army. Then the answer came to me. I must get in touch with Widmerpool. I wondered why I had not thought of that earlier. I telephoned to his office. They put me through to a secretary.

'Captain Widmerpool is embodied,' she said in an unfriendly voice.

I could tell from her tone, efficient, charmless, unimaginative, that she had been given special instructions by Widmerpool himself to use the term 'embodied' in describing his military condition. I asked where he was to be found. It was a secret. At last, not without pressure on my own part, she gave me a telephone number. This turned out to be that of his Territorial battalion's headquarters. I rang him up.

'Come and see me by all means, my boy,' he boomed down the wire in a new, enormously hearty voice, 'but bring your own beer. There won't be much I can do for you. I'm up to my arse in bumph and don't expect I shall be able to spare you more than a minute or two for waffling.'

I was annoyed by the phrase 'bring your own beer', also by being addressed as 'my boy' by Widmerpool. They were terms he had never, so to speak, earned the right to use, certainly not to me. However, I recognised that a world war was going to produce worse situations than Widmerpool's getting above himself and using a coarsely military boisterousness of tone to which his civilian personality could make no claim. I accepted his invitation; he named a time. The following day, after finishing my article for the paper and looking at some books I had to review, I set out for the Territorial headquarters, which was situated in a fairly inaccessible district of London. I reached there at last, feeling in the depths of gloom. Entry into the most arcane recesses of the Secret Service could not have been made more difficult. Finally an NCO admitted me to Widmerpool's presence. He was sitting, surrounded by files, in a small, horribly stuffy office, which was at the same time freezingly cold. I was still unused to the sight of him in uniform. He looked anything but an army officer – a railway official, perhaps, of some obscure country.

'Been left in charge of details consequent on the unit's move to a training area,' he said brusquely, as I entered the room. 'Suppose I shouldn't have told you that. Security – security – and then security. Everyone must learn that. Well, my lad, what can I do for you? You need not stand. Take a pew.'

I sat on a kitchen chair with a broken back, and outlined my situation.

'The fact is,' said Widmerpool, glaring through his spectacles and puffing out his cheeks, as if rehearsing a tremendous blowing up he was going to give some subordinate in the very near future, 'you ought to have joined the Territorials before war broke out.'

'I know.'

'No good just entering your name on the Reserve.'

'There were difficulties about age.'

'Only after you'd left it too late.'

'It was only a matter of months.'

'Never mind. Think how long I've been a Territorial officer. You should have looked ahead.'

'You said there wasn't going to be a war after "Munich".'

'You thought there was, so you were even more foolish.'

There was truth in that.

'I only want to know the best thing to do,' I said.

'You misjudged things, didn't you?'

'I did.'

'No vacancies now.'

'How can I put that right?'

'The eldest of our last intake of commissioned subalterns was twenty-one. The whole lot of them had done at least eighteen months in the ranks – *at least*.'

'Even so, the army will have to expand in due course.'

'Officers will be drawn from the younger fellows coming up.'

'You think there is nothing for me to do at present?'

'You could enlist in the ranks.'

'But the object of joining the Reserve – being accepted for it – was to be dealt with immediately as a potential officer.'

'Then I can't help you.'

'Well, thanks for seeing me.'

'I will keep an eye out for you,' said Widmerpool, rather less severely. 'As a matter of fact, I may be in a position well placed for doing so before many moons have waned.'

'Why?'

'I am probably to be sent to the Staff College.'

'Oh?'

'Again, for security reasons, that should not be mentioned beyond these four walls.'

He began to gather up his multitudinous papers, stowing some away in a safe, transferring others to a brief-case.

'I shall be coming back to this office again after dinner,' he said. 'Lucky if I get away before midnight. It's all got to be cleared up somehow, if the war is to be won. I gave my word to the Brigade-Major. He's a very sharp fellow called Farebrother. City acquaintance of mine.'

'Sunny Farebrother?'

'Have you met him?'

'Years ago.'

Widmerpool gave a semi-circular movement of his arm, as if to convey the crushing responsibility his promise to the Brigade-Major comprehended. He locked the safe. Putting the key in his trouser-pocket after attaching it to a chain hanging from his braces, he spoke again, this time in an entirely changed tone.

'Nicholas,' he said, 'I am going to ask you to do something.'

'Yes?'

'Let me explain very briefly. As you know, my mother lives in a cottage not very far from Stourwater. We call it a cottage, it is really a little house. She has made it very exquisite.'

'I remember your telling me.'

'Since she lives by herself, there has been pressure – rather severe pressure – applied to her by the authorities to have evacuees there.'

'Oh, yes.'

'Now I do not wish my lady mother to be plagued by evacuees.'

That seemed a reasonable enough sentiment. Nobody wanted evacuees, even if they accepted the fact that evacuees must be endured. Why should they? I could not see, however, in Mrs Widmerpool's case, that I could help in preventing such a situation from arising. I realised at the same time that Widmerpool had suddenly effected in himself one of those drastic changes of policy in which, for example, from acting an all-powerful tyrant, he would suddenly become a humble suppliant. I understood very clearly that something was required of me, but could not guess what I was expected to do. Some persons, knowing that they were later going to ask a favour, would have made themselves more agreeable when a favour was being asked of them. That was not Widmerpool's way. I almost admired him for making so little effort to conceal his lack of interest in my own affairs, while waiting his time to demand something of myself.

'The point is this,' he said, 'up to date, my mother has had an old friend – Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson, sister of that ineffective diplomatist, Sir Gavin – staying with her, so the question of evacuees, until now, has not arisen. Now Miss Walpole-Wilson's work with the Women's Voluntary Service takes her elsewhere. The danger of evacuees is acute.'

I thought how Miss Janet Walpole-Wilson's ordinary clothes must have merged imperceptibly into the uniform of her service. It was as if she had been preparing all her life for that particular dress.

'But how can I help?'

'Some relation of Lady Molly Jeavons – a relative of her husband's, to be more precise – wants accommodation in the country. A place not too far from London. Miss Walpole-Wilson heard about this herself. She told us.'

'Why not ring up the Jeavonses?'

'I have done so. In fact, I am meeting my mother at Lady Molly's tonight.'

Widmerpool was still oppressed by some unsolved problem, which he found difficulty about putting into words. He cleared his throat, swallowed several times.

'I wondered whether you would come along to the Jeavonses tonight,' he said. 'It might be easier.'

'What might?'

Widmerpool went red below his temples, under the line made by his spectacles. He began to sweat in spite of the low temperature of the room.

'You remember that rather unfortunate business when I was engaged to Mildred Haycock?'

'Yes.'

'I haven't really seen anything of the Jeavonses since then.'

'You came to the party Molly gave for Isobel just before we were married.'

'I know,' said Widmerpool, 'but there were quite a lot of people there then. It was an occasion. It's rather different going there tonight to discuss something like my mother's cottage. Lady Molly has never seen my mother.'

'I am sure it will be all right. Molly loves making arrangements.'

'All the same, I feel certain embarrassments.'

'No need to with the Jeavonses.'

'I thought that, since Molly Jeavons is an aunt of your wife's, things might be easier if you were to accompany me. Will you do that?'

'All right.'

'You will come?'

'Yes, if you wish.'

I had not visited the Jeavonses for some little time – not since Isobel had gone to stay with Frederica – so that I was quite glad to make this, as it were, an excuse for calling on them. Isobel would certainly enjoy news of the Jeavons household.

'Very well, then,' said Widmerpool, now returning at once to his former peremptory tone, 'we'll move off forthwith. It is five minutes to the bus. Come along. Party, quick march.'

He gave some final instructions in the adjoining room to a gloomy corporal sitting before a typewriter, surrounded, like Widmerpool himself, with huge stacks of documents. We went out into the street, where the afternoon light was beginning to fade. Widmerpool, his leather-bound stick caught tight beneath his armpit, marched along beside me, tramp-tramp-tramp, eventually falling into step, since I had not taken my pace from his.

'I don't know what Jeavons's relative will be like,' he said. 'I don't feel absolutely confident she will be the sort my mother will like.'

I felt more apprehension for the person who had to share a cottage with Mrs Widmerpool.

'I saw Bob Duport just before war broke out.'

I said that partly to see what Widmerpool would answer, partly because I thought he had been unhelpful about the army, tiresome about the Jeavonses. I hoped the information would displease him. The surmise was correct. He stiffened, strutting now so fiercely that he could almost be said to have broken into the goosestep.

'Did you? Where?'

'He was staying in a hotel where an uncle of mine died. I had to see about the funeral and ran across Duport there.'

'Oh.'

'I hadn't seen him for years.'

'He is a bad-mannered fellow, Duport. Ungrateful, too.'

'What is he ungrateful about?'

'I got him a job in Turkey. You may remember we were talking about Duport's affairs at Stourwater, when I saw you and your wife there about a year or more ago – just after "Munich".'

'He'd recently come back from Turkey when we met.'

'He had been working for me there.'

'So he said.'

'I had to deal rather summarily with Duport in the end,' said Widmerpool. 'He showed no grasp of the international situation. He is insolent, too. So he mentioned my name?'

'He did.'

'Not very favourably, I expect.'

'Not very.'

'I don't know what will happen to Duport,' said Widmerpool. 'He must be in a difficult position financially, owing to his reckless conduct. However, anybody can earn three pounds a week these days as an air-raid warden. Even Jeavons does. So Duport will not starve.'

He sounded rather sorry that Duport was not threatened with that fate.

'He thought Sir Magnus Donners might find him something.'

'Not if I know it.'

'Do you think Donners will be asked to join the Government, if there is a Cabinet reshuffle?'

'The papers speak of him as likely for office,' said Widmerpool, not without condescension. 'In some ways Magnus would make an excellent minister in time of war. In others, I am not so sure. He has certain undesirable traits for a public man in modern days. As you probably know, people speak of – well, mistresses. I am no prude. Let a man lead his own life, say I – but, if he is a public man, let him be careful. More than these allegedly bad morals, I object in Magnus to something you would never guess if you met him casually. I mean a kind of hidden frivolity. Now, what a lamentable scene that was when I looked in on Stourwater when you were there. Suppose some journalist had got hold of it.'

Widmerpool was about to enlarge on the Masque of the Seven Deadly Sins as played in the Stourwater dining-room, when his attention – and my own – was caught by a small crowd of people loitering in the half-light at the corner of a side street. Some sort of a meeting was in progress. From the traditional soapbox, a haggard middle-aged man in spectacles and a cloth cap was addressing fifteen or twenty persons, including several children. The group was apathetic enough, except for the children, who were playing a game that involved swinging their gas-mask cases at each other by the string, then running quickly away. Two women in trousers were hawking a newspaper or pamphlet. Widmerpool and I paused. The orator, his face gnarled and blotched by a lifetime of haranguing crowds out of doors in all weathers, seemed to be coming to the end of his discourse. He used that peculiarly unctuous, coaxing, almost beseeching manner of address adopted by some political speakers, reminding me a little of my brother-in-law, Roddy Cutts, whose voice would sometimes take on that same pleading note when he made a public appeal for a cause in which he was interested.

'. . . why didn't the so-called British Government of the day clinch the Anglo-Soviet alliance when they had the chance . . . get something done . . . Comrade Stalin's invitation to a round-table conference at Bucharest . . . consistent moral policy . . . effective forces of socialism . . . necessary new alignments . . . USSR prestige first and foremost . . .'

The speech came to an end, the listeners demonstrating neither approval nor the reverse. The haggard man stepped down from the soapbox, wiped his spectacles, loosened the peak of his cap from his forehead, lit a cigarette. The children's gas-mask game reached a pitch of frenzied intensity, so that in their scamperings one of the women selling newspapers almost had the packet knocked from her hand. Widmerpool turned to me. He was about to comment, when our attention was engaged by a new speaker. This was the second newspaper-selling woman, who, having now handed over her papers to the man with the cloth cap, herself jumped on to the soapbox. In a harsh clear voice she opened a tremendous tirade, quite different in approach from the quieter, more reasoned appeal of the spectacled man.

'. . . blooming bloody hypocrisy . . . anybody wants this war except a few crackpots . . . see a chance of seizing world power and grinding the last miserable halfpence from the frozen fingers of stricken mankind . . . lot of Fascist, terroristic, anti-semitic, war-mongering, exploiting White Guards and traitors to the masses . . .'

It was Gypsy Jones. I had not set eyes on her since the days when we used to meet in Mr Deacon's antique shop. She had lost a front tooth, otherwise did not look greatly changed from what she had been in the Mr Deacon period: older, harder, angrier, further than ever from her last bath, but essentially the same. Her hair was still cut short like a boy's, her fists clenched, her legs set wide apart. Over her trousers she wore a man's overcoat, far from new, the aggressive inelegance of the ensemble expressing to perfection her own revolutionary, destructive state of mind. In the old days she had worked for Howard Craggs at the Vox Populi Press, was said to be his mistress. Craggs had moved a long way since the Vox Populi Press. Lately, he had been appointed to a high post in the Ministry of Information. I recalled the night when Gypsy Jones had been dressed as Eve in order to accompany Craggs, as Adam, to the Merry Thought fancy-dress party: the encounter we had had at the back of Mr Deacon's shop. There had been a certain grubby charm about her. I felt no regrets. Love had played no part. There was nothing painful to recall. Then Widmerpool had fallen for her, had pursued her, had paid for her 'operation'. Such things seemed like another incarnation.

'. . . not appealing to a lot of half-baked Bloomsbury intellectuals and Hampstead ideologues . . . bourgeois scabs and parlour-socialist nancy boys . . . scum of weak-kneed Trotskyite flunkeys . . . betraying the workers and anyone else it suits their filthy bloody blackleg book to betray . . . I'm talking about politics – socialism – reality – adaptability . . .'

I felt my arm caught tightly. It was Widmerpool. I turned towards him. He had gone quite pale. His thick lips were trembling a little. The sight of Gypsy Jones, rousing vague memories in myself, had caused him to react far more violently. To Widmerpool, she was not the mere handmaid of memory, she was a spectre of horror, the ghastly reminder of failure, misery, degradation. He dragged at my arm.

'For God's sake, come away,' he said.

We continued our course down the street, over which dusk was falling, Widmerpool walking at a much sharper pace, but without any of his former bravura, the stick now gripped in his hand as if to ward off actual physical attack.

'You realised who it was?' he said, as we hurried along.

'Of course.'

'How soon did you see her?'

'Only after she had begun to speak.'

'Me, too. What an escape. It was a near thing.'

'What was?'

'She might have noticed me.'

'Would that have mattered?'

Widmerpool stopped dead.

'What do you mean?' he asked abruptly.

'Supposing she had seen us, even said something to us?'

'I didn't say us, I said *me*.'

'You then?'

'Of course it would have mattered. It would have been disastrous.'

'Why?'

'How can you ask such a question? There are all kind of reasons why it should matter. You know something of my past with that woman. Can't you understand how painful the sight of her is to me? Besides, you heard what she was shouting. She is a Communist. Did you not understand what the words meant? Your denseness is unbelievable. She is attacking the prosecution of the war. Haven't you grasped that Russia is now Hitler's ally? Suppose that woman had suddenly addressed herself to me. That would have been a fine thing. You don't realise what it means to be in an official position. Let me explain. I am not only an army officer, I am a man with heavy responsibilities. I have been left in charge of a headquarters. I have access to all kind of secret documents. You would not guess the nature of some of them. What if she had been seen speaking to me? Have you ever heard of M.I.5? What if its agents had seen us conversing? There may well have been one of them among the crowd. Such meetings are quite rightly kept under supervision by the contre-espionage department.'

I could think of no answer. Although Widmerpool's view of himself as a man handling weighty state secrets was beyond belief in its absurdity, I felt at the same time that I had myself shown lack of feeling in treating so lightly his former love for Gypsy Jones. Love is at once always absurd and never absurd; the more grotesque its form, the more love itself confers a certain dignity on the circumstances of those it torments. No doubt Widmerpool had been through a searing experience with Gypsy Jones, an experience even now by no means forgotten. That could be the only explanation of such an outburst. I had rarely seen him so full of indignation. He had paused for breath. Now, his reproaches began again.

'You come and ask me for advice about getting into the army, Nicholas,' he said, 'and because I spare the time to talk of such things – make time, when my duty lies by rights elsewhere – you think I have nothing more serious to occupy me than your own trivial problems. That is not the case. The General Staff of the Wehrmacht would be only too happy to possess even a tithe of the information I locked away before we quitted the Orderly Room.'

'I don't doubt it. I realise you are busy. It was kind of you to see me.'

Widmerpool was a little placated. Perhaps he also feared that, if he went too far in his reproofs, I might excuse myself from accompanying him to the Jeavonses'. He tapped me with his stick.

'Don't worry further about your remarks,' he said. 'The sight of that woman upset me, especially behaving as she was. Did you hear her language? Besides, I have been overworking as usual. You feel the strain at unexpected moments.'

He made no further comment. We found a bus, which transported us in due course to the neighbourhood of the Jeavons house in South Kensington. The bell was not answered for a long time. We waited outside the faintly Dutch edifice with its over-ornamented dark-red brick façade.

'I expect Mother has preceded us,' said Widmerpool.

He was better now, though still not wholly recovered from the sight of Gypsy Jones. The door was opened at last by Jeavons himself. His appearance took me by surprise. Instead of the usual ancient grey suit, he was wearing a blue one-piece overall and a beret. Some people – as General Conyers had remarked – considered Jeavons a bore. Such critics had a case, undeniably, when he was sunk in one of his impenetrable silences, or, worse still, was trying, in a momentary burst of energy, to make some money by selling one of those commodities generically described by Chips Lovell as 'an automatic boot-jack or infallible cure for the common cold'. To find Jeavons in the latter state was rare, the former, fairly frequent. Even apart from his war wound, Jeavons was not at all fitted for commercial employments. He had hardly done a stroke of work since marrying Molly. His wife did not mind that. Indeed, she may have preferred Jeavons to be dependent on her. Whatever some of her relations may have thought at the time of her marriage, it had turned out a success – allowing for an occasional 'night out' on Jeavons's part, like the one when he had taken me to Dicky Umfraville's night-club.

'Come in,' he said. 'How's your war going? It's touch and go whether we're winning ours. Stanley's here, and a lady who has come to see about lodging Stanley's missus in the country. Then Molly met a fellow at Sanderson's who was trying to find a home for his cat, and she's gone and asked him to stay. The man, I mean, not the cat.'

'The lady who has come about moving your – is it sister-in-law? – is my mother,' said Widmerpool. 'I spoke to you on the telephone about it. I am Kenneth Widmerpool, you know. We have met in the past.'

'So you did,' said Jeavons, 'and so we have. It went out of my head like most other things. I thought Nick had just come to call and brought a friend. You can talk to Molly about it all when she comes downstairs, but I think your Mum has pretty well fixed everything up as it is.'

Jeavons's voice, hoarse and faint, sounded as usual as if he had a cold in his head or had been up too late the night before. He seemed restive, disorientated, but in good form.

'Who is Stanley?' I asked.

'Who's Stanley?' said Jeavons. 'My brother, of course. Who did you think he was?'

'Never knew you had a brother, Ted.'

'Course I've got a brother.'

'What does he do?'

'Accountant.'

'In London?'

'Nottingham. Given it up now, of course. Back to the army. Staff-Captain at the War House. Fancy your never having heard of Stanley. No reason why you should, I suppose. Still, it strikes me as funny. Rather a great man, Stanley, in his way. Gets things done.'

Among so much that was depressing, the news that Jeavons had a brother was for some reason cheering. It was certainly information to fascinate Isobel, when I next saw her, even to stagger Chips Lovell, who, regarding himself as an authority on his wife's relations, had certainly never heard of this outgrowth. Jeavons was known only to possess two or three vague connexions, sometimes to be found staying in the house, though never precisely placed in their kinship, in any case always hopelessly submerged in number by his wife's cousins, nephews and nieces. He had had, it was true, an old aunt, or great-aunt, to whom Molly was said to have been 'very good', who had lingered on in the house for months suffering from some illness, finally dying in one of the upstairs rooms. A Jeavons brother was quite another matter, a phenomenon of wartime circumstances. Jeavons, his dark, insistently curly hair now faintly speckled with grey, had himself taken on a subtly different personality since the onset of war. After all, war was the element which had, in a sense, made his career. Obviously he reacted strongly to its impacts. Until now his appearance had always suggested a temporary officer of the '14–'18 conflict, who had miraculously survived, without in the least ageing, into a much later epoch. The blue overall changed all that. Jeavons had also allowed his Charlie Chaplin moustache to grow outwards towards the corners of his mouth. With his own curious adaptability and sense of survival, he had effortlessly discarded what was in any case no more than a kind of disguise, now facing the world in the more contemporary role, equally artificial, of the man who had come to clean the windows or mend the boiler. We moved up the stairs.

'Met one of Isobel's uncles at the warden-post the other night,' said Jeavons. 'Alfred Tolland, the one Molly always teases.'

'How was he?'

'We had a talk about how difficult it is for people with daughters to bring 'em out properly in wartime,' Jeavons said.

He spoke without levity. Although he remained always utterly himself, Jeavons, after twenty years of marriage to Molly, had taken on much of his wife's way of looking at things. It would be more true to say the way the world into which she had been born looked at things, for Molly herself would probably have given little thought to how daughters were to be 'brought out' in wartime, even had she any daughters of her own. All the same, she would recognise that, to some people, the matter constituted a problem. Jeavons, who had never made the smallest effort to adopt that world's manner of talking, its way of dressing, its general behaviour, had at the same time, quite objectively, absorbed certain of its traditional opinions, whether his wife held them or not. Alfred Tolland, for example, had probably found in Jeavons an unusually sympathetic listener to his – no doubt antediluvian – views on how young ladies should conduct themselves or be conducted, certainly more sympathetic than he would ever have found in Molly herself. The fact that Jeavons had no daughters, had no children at all, would never have prevented him from holding strong views on the subject.

'Take my advice, don't give up your home-farm,' Chips Lovell had once heard Jeavons say to Lord Amesbury, admittedly a fairly formidable figure to counsel when it came to discussing the economics of estate management. 'Eddie Bridgnorth gave up his and never ceased to regret it.'

To have prefaced this recommendation with the avowal that he himself came from a walk of life where people did not own home-farms would have seemed to Jeavons otiose, wearisome, egotistical. Everything about him, he knew, proclaiming that fact, he would have regarded such personal emphasis as in the worst of taste, as well as being without interest. Marriage to Molly had given him opportunities to see how a lot of hitherto unfamiliar forms of life worked. He had developed certain opinions, was prepared to give evidence. Home-farms fell into that category. The notion that he might be trying to pass himself off as a fellow-owner of a home-farm would have seemed to Jeavons laughable. Whether or not Jeavons's advice tipped the scale was never known, but Chips Lovell reported that Lord Amesbury did not sell, so that he may have been convinced by this objectivity of reasoning. Perhaps it was of such matters that Jeavons was thinking when he would stand for hours in the corner of the drawing-room at one of Molly's parties for young people (when the rugs would be turned back and they would dance to the gramophone), smiling to himself, gently clinking the money in his pocket.

'Do help with the drinks, Teddy, dear,' his wife would say on such occasions. 'Are you feeling all right or is it your inside again?'

Then Jeavons would move like a sleep-walker towards the bottles.

'What's it going to be?' he would mutter, almost beneath his breath. 'Rotten tunes they always play nowadays.'

However, although Widmerpool had shown signs of restiveness at our too long delay in the hall, Jeavons was far from one of those comatose, stagnant moods that evening. There could be no doubt that the war had livened him up. He felt at home within its icy grasp. The house was more untidy than ever, the hall, as usual, full of luggage. I noticed that the marquetry cabinet bequeathed by Lady Warminster had reached no farther than the foot of the stairs. Some of the heavier pictures had been taken from their hooks and rested against the wall. Packing cases and trunks were everywhere.

'People keep on arriving for a night or two,' said Jeavons. 'Place might be a doss-house. Of course, Stanley is only here until he can fix himself up. Then Molly must bring this other fellow to stay. Seems a nice bloke. She had to go and see the vet. No avoiding that. Can't fight a war with quite the number of dogs and cats we normally have in the house. Got to find homes for them.'

'What happened to Maisky, your pet monkey?'

'Rather a sad story,' said Jeavons, but did not enlarge.

The conditions he described were less abnormal here than they would have been in most households. Indeed, war seemed to have accelerated, exaggerated, rather than changed, the Jeavons way of life. The place was always in a mess. Mess there was endemic. People were always coming for a night or two, sometimes for much longer periods. There were always suitcases in the hall, always debris, untidiness, confusion everywhere. That was the way Molly liked to live, possibly her method of recovering from the tedium of married life with John Sleaford. Jeavons, whether he liked it or not, was dragged along in her train. No doubt he liked it, too, otherwise he would have left her, for no one could have stood such an existence unless reasonably sympathetic to him at heart. The sight of Jeavons's brother sitting on the sofa beside Mrs Widmerpool brought home to one the innate eccentricity of Jeavons. This man in uniform, with a captain's pips and three 'First War' ribbons, was recognisable as a brother more from build than any great similarity of feature. He was far more anonymous than Jeavons: older, solider, greyer, quieter, in general more staid. When you saw Stanley Jeavons, you recognised the adventurer in Ted. I thought of Moreland's emendation, the distinction he drew between adventurers and those not wholly unadventurous, to both of which categories adventures happened – to the latter, perhaps, more than the former. Jeavons, although tending to play a passive role, could not be said to have led an entirely unadventurous life; perhaps one could go further, say without qualification that Jeavons was an adventurer. There was no time to think longer of such things at that moment, because Jeavons was making some kind of introduction.

'Stanley's a brass-hat now,' he said. 'God, how we used to hate the staff in our war, Stan, didn't we? Fancy your ending up one of that mob.'

As we came into the room, Mrs Widmerpool had at once bared her teeth in a smile to indicate that we had met before. I was about to speak to her, when she jumped to her feet and seized Widmerpool by the shoulders, unable to allow Jeavons the undivided honour of presenting him to his brother.

'My soldier-son,' she said, nodding delightedly like a Japanese doll.

'Oh, don't be absurd, Mother,' said Widmerpool.

He grinned back happily at her through his spectacles, his composure, lately so shattered by Gypsy Jones, now completely restored. Mrs Widmerpool returned to the sofa, continuing to nurse on her knee a cardboard box, which at first I thought might be some sort of present she had brought Widmerpool, but recognised a second later as her gas-mask, carried with her into the drawing-room. She looked, as her son had described her a year earlier, 'younger than ever'. She was squarely built, her heavy, nearly classical nose set between cheeks shining and pink like an apple. She wore a thick tweed suit and a tweed hat with a peak. Stanley Jeavons, who seemed rather glad to be absolved from talking to her further for the time being, turned his attention to Widmerpool.

'What's your outfit?' he asked.

They began to speak of army matters. I was left with Mrs Widmerpool.

'*You* are one of Kenneth's literary friends, I remember,' she said, 'are you not?'

'Well, yes.'

'Kenneth used to be such a reader too,' she said. 'Now, alas, he has no time for books. Indeed, few of us have. But I suppose you continue in the same manner?'

'More or less.'

Before I could enlarge on my own activities, Molly Jeavons came into the room, making all the disturbance that naturally noisy people always bring in their train. Dark, large, still good-looking at fifty, there was something of the barmaid about her, something of the Charles II beauty, although Molly, they said, had never been exactly a 'beauty' when younger, more from lack of temperament to play the part, than want of physical equipment. These two sides she represented, merging in middle age, suited her tomboyish, all-enveloping manner. This manner seemed designed by her to dispense with aristocratic frills unsuitable to the style in which the Jeavonses lived, but – caught by Time, as all idiosyncrasies of talk and behaviour can be – the final result was somewhat to emphasise the background she was at pains to understate. She was wearing various rather ill-assorted woollen garments. After greeting Widmerpool and saying something about his mother's cottage, she turned to me.

'We've been having the most awful time, Nick,' she said, 'trying to fix up the rows of animals that always infest the house. Sanderson, the vet, a great friend of mine, has been an angel. I talked to the sweetest man there who was trying to find a home for his cat. His wife had just left him and he'd just been turned out of the furnished flat he was living in because the owner wanted it back. He had nowhere to go and was absolutely at the end of his tether. He seemed so nice, I couldn't leave until we'd arranged the cat's future. The long and the short of it is he's going to stay for a night or two here. He had his bag with him and was going to some awful hotel, because he has very little money. He seems to know a lot of people we all know. You probably know him yourself, Nick.'

'What is he called?'

'I simply can't remember,' she said. 'I've had such a lot of things to do today that I am feeling quite dizzy and the name has completely gone out of my head. He'll be down in a moment. He is just unpacking his things – and now I must hear how the arrangements about the cottage are getting on.'

She joined the conversation taking place between Jeavons's brother, Widmerpool and Widmerpool's mother. Jeavons, who had been listening abstractedly to these negotiations, came and sat beside me.

'What's happening to all the Tollands, Nick?' he asked. 'I haven't heard anything of them, except that your wife, Isobel, is going to have a baby and is staying in the country with Frederica.'

'George has gone back to his regiment.'

'Ex-Guardsman, isn't he?' said Jeavons. 'He'll be for a holding battalion.'

'Then Hugo has become a Gunner.'

'In the ranks?'

'Yes.'

Hugo, regarded in general by his family as a fairly unsatisfactory figure, in spite of recent achievements in selling antique furniture, had taken the wind out of everyone's sails by his enlistment.

'One will be called up anyway,' Hugo had said. 'Why not have a start of everyone? Get in on the ground floor.'

Such a view from Hugo was unexpected.

'He looks a bit strange in uniform.'

'Must be like that song Billy Bennett used to sing,' said Jeavons:

> 'I'm a trooper, I'm a trooper,
> They call me Gladys Cooper.

Ages since I've been to a music-hall. Aren't what they used to be anyway. Still, it does Hugo credit.'

'Robert has some idea of joining the navy.'

'Plenty of water in the trenches, without going out of your way to look for it,' said Jeavons shuddering. 'Besides, I feel bilious most of the time, even when I'm not rolling about in a boat.'

'Chips Lovell, like me, is thinking things over. Roddy Cutts, being an MP, arranged something – a Yeomanry regiment, I think.'

While we were talking someone came into the room. I had not taken very seriously Molly Jeavons's surmise that I should probably know the man she had picked up at the vet's. She always imagined Isobel and I must know everyone roughly the same age as ourselves. Perhaps she liked to feel that, if necessary, she could draw on our reserves for her own purposes. I thought it most improbable that I should have met this casual acquaintance, certainly never guessed he would turn out to be Moreland. However, Moreland it was. He looked far from well, dazed and unhappy.

'Good God,' he said, catching sight of me.

Molly Jeavons detached herself from the talk about Mrs Widmerpool's lodger.

'So you do know him, Nick.'

'Of course we know each other.'

'I felt sure you would.'

'Why are you here?' said Moreland. 'Did you arrange this?'

'Will you be all right in that room?' Molly asked. 'For goodness sake don't touch the blackout, or the whole thing will come down. It's just fixed temporarily to last the night. Teddy will do something about it in the morning.'

'I really can't thank you enough,' said Moreland. 'Farinelli . . . one thing and another . . . then letting me come here. . . .'

He had probably been drinking earlier in the day, was still overwrought, though not exactly drunk, not far from tears. Molly Jeavons brushed his thanks aside.

'One thing I can't do,' she said, 'is to give either you or Nick dinner here tonight. Nor any of these other people either, except Stanley. We simply haven't got enough food in the house to offer you anything.'

'We'll dine together,' I said. 'Is there anywhere in the neighbourhood?'

'A place halfway up Gloucester Road on the right. It's called the Scarlet Pimpernel. The food is not as bad as it sounds. They'll send out for drinks.'

'Do you feel equal to the Scarlet Pimpernel, Hugh?'

Moreland, almost past speech, nodded.

'Give him your key, Teddy,' said Molly Jeavons. 'We can find him another in the morning.'

Jeavons fumbled in one of the pockets of his overall and handed a key to Moreland.

'I'll probably be pottering about when you come in,' he said, 'can't get to sleep if I turn in early. Come back with him, Nick. We might be able to find a glass of beer for you.'

I went across the room to take leave of Widmerpool and his mother. When I came up to her, Mrs Widmerpool turned her battery of teeth upon me, smiling fiercely, like the Wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, her shining, ruddy countenance advancing closer as she continued to hold my hand in hers.

'I expect you are still occupied with your literary pursuits,' she said, taking up our conversation at precisely the point at which it had been abandoned.

'Some journalism——'

'This is not a happy time for book-lovers.'

'No, indeed.'

'Still, you are fortunate.'

'Why?'

'With your bookish days, not, like Kenneth, in arms.'

'He seems a Happy Warrior.'

'It is not in his nature to remain in civil life at time of war,' she said.

'I will say good night, then.'

'Good luck to you,' she said, 'wherever you may find yourself in these troublous times.'

She gave me another smile of great malignance, returning immediately to her discussions about rent. Widmerpool half raised his hand in a gesture of farewell. Moreland and I left the house together.

'What the hell were you doing in that place?' he asked, as we walked up the street.

'Molly Jeavons is an aunt of Isobel's. It is a perfectly normal place for me to be. Far stranger that you yourself should turn up there.'

'You're right about that,' Moreland said. 'I can't quite make out how I did. Things have been moving rather quickly with me the last few months. Who was that terrifying woman you said good-bye to?'

'Mother of the man in spectacles called Widmerpool. You met him with me at a nursing home years ago.'

'No recollection,' said Moreland, 'though he seemed familiar. His mother began on Scriabin as soon as I arrived in the house. Told me the *Poême de l'Extuse* was her favourite musical work. I say, I'm feeling like hell. Far from *de l'extase*.'

'What's been happening? I didn't even know you'd left the country.'

'The country, as it were, left me,' said Moreland. 'At least Matilda did, which came to much the same thing.'

'How did all this come about?'

'I hardly know myself.'

'Has she gone off with somebody?'

'Gone back to Donners.'

The information was so grotesque that at first I could hardly take it seriously. Then I saw as a possibility that a row might have taken place and Matilda done this from pique. At certain seasons, Matilda, admittedly, had a fairly rough time living with Moreland. She might require a short spell of rich life to put her right, although (as Mrs Widmerpool could have said) wartime was hardly the moment to pursue rich life. Sir Magnus Donners, as a former lover, himself no longer young, would provide a comparatively innocuous vehicle for such a temporary interlude. The Moreland situation, regarded in these cold-blooded terms, might be undesirable certainly, at the same time not beyond hope.

'I'll tell the story when we get to the restaurant,' said Moreland. 'I haven't eaten anything since breakfast. Just had a few doubles.'

We found the Scarlet Pimpernel soon after this. The place was not full. We took a table in the corner at the back of the room. At this early stage of the war, it was still possible to order a bottle of wine without undue difficulty and expense. The food, as Molly Jeavons had said, turned out better than might have been expected from the mob-caps of the waitresses and general tone of the establishment. After some soup and a glass of wine Moreland began to recover himself.

'One always imagines things happen in hot blood,' he said. 'An ill-considered remark starts a row. Hard words follow, misunderstandings. Matters that can be put right in the end. Unfortunately life doesn't work out like that. First of all there is no row, secondly, nothing can be put right.'

'Barnby says he is always on his guard when things are going well with a woman.'

'Still, your wife,' said Moreland, 'it's bloody uncomfortable if things are not going well between yourself and your wife. I speak from experience. All the same, there may be something in Barnby's view. You remember the business about me and – well – your sister-in-law, Priscilla?'

'You conveyed at the time that a situation existed – then ceased to exist, or was stifled in some way.'

I did not see why I should help Moreland out beyond a certain point. If he wanted to tell his story, he must supply the facts, not reveal one half and allow the other to be guessed.

He had always been too fond of doing that when extracting sympathy for his emotional tangles. No one had ever known what had happened about himself and Priscilla, only that some close relationship had existed between them, which had caused a great deal of disturbance in his married life. Some explanation was required. The situation could not be pieced together merely from a series of generalisations about matrimony.

'Anything you like,' said Moreland. 'The point is that, during that rather tricky period, Matty could not have behaved better. She was absolutely marvellous – really marvellous. It was the one thing that made the whole awfulness of life possible when . . .'

He did not finish the sentence, but meant, I supposed, when the affair with Priscilla was at an end.

'Why on earth, if Matty was going to leave me, didn't she leave me then? I'll tell you. She enjoyed the emotional strain of it all. Women are like that, the lame girl in Dostoevsky who said she didn't want to be happy.'

'How did it start?'

'Matilda was in a show that opened in the provinces – Brighton or somewhere. She just wrote and said she was not returning home, would I send her things along, such as they were. She had already taken most of her clothes with her, so I presume she had already decided on leaving when she set out.'

'How long ago?'

'Two or three weeks.'

'Is it generally known?'

'Not yet, I think. Matilda is often away acting, so it is quite usual for her to be absent from home.'

'And you had no warning that all was not well?'

'I am the most modest man in the world when it is a question of trying to make a woman fall for me,' said Moreland. 'I never expect I shall bring it off. On the other hand, once she's fallen, I can never really believe she will prefer someone else. These things are just the way vanity happens to take you.'

'But where does Donners come in? She can't have fallen for him.'

'She has been going over to Stourwater fairly often. She made no secret of that. Why should she? There didn't seem any reason to object. What could I do, anyway? You remember we all dined there that rather grim evening when everyone dressed up as the Seven Deadly Sins. I recall now, that was where I saw your friend Widmerpool before. Does he always haunt my worst moments? Anyway, Matilda's visits to Stourwater were of that sort, nothing serious.'

'Is Matilda living at Stourwater at this moment?'

'No – staying in the flat of a girl she knows in London, another actress. The point is this: if I allow Matilda to divorce me, Donners will marry her.'

'No.'

Moreland laughed.

'Indeed, yes,' he said. 'I see I have surprised you.'

'You certainly have.'

'It now turns out that Donners asked her to marry him before – when she was mixed up with him years ago.'

'What are you going to do?'

'What can I do?'

'But will you let yourself be divorced?'

'I've tried every way of getting her back,' said Moreland. 'She is quite firm. I don't want to be just spiteful about it. If she is consumed with a desire to become Lady Donners, Lady Donners let her be.'

'But to want to be Lady Donners is so unlike Matilda – especially as she turned down the offer in the past.'

'You think it unlike her?'

'Don't you?'

'Not entirely. She can be tough, you know. One of the worst things about life is not how nasty the nasty people are. You know that already. It is how nasty the nice people can be.'

'Have you no idea what went wrong?'

'None – except, as I say, the Priscilla business. I thought that was all forgotten. Perhaps it was, and life with me was just too humdrum. Now I'll tell you something else that may surprise you. Nothing ever took place between Priscilla and myself. We never went to bed.'

'Why not?'

'I don't really know,' said Moreland slowly, 'perhaps because there did not seem anywhere to go. That's so often one of the problems. I've thought about the subject a lot. One might write a story about two lovers who have nowhere to go. They are at their wits' end. Then they pretend they are newly married and apply to a different estate-agent every week to inspect unfurnished houses and flats. As often as not they are given the key and manage to have an hour alone together. Inventive, don't you think? I was crazy about Priscilla. Then Maclintick committed suicide and everything was altered. I felt upset, couldn't think about girls and all that. That was when Priscilla herself decided things had better stop. I suppose the whole business shook the boat so far as my own marriage was concerned. It seemed to recover. I thought we were getting on all right. I was wrong.'

I was reminded of Duport telling me about Jean, although no one could have been less like Jean than Matilda, less like Moreland than Duport.

'The fact is,' said Moreland, 'Matilda lost interest in me. With women, that situation is like a vacuum. It must be filled. They begin to look round for someone else. She decided on Donners.'

'She was still pretty interested in you at the party Mrs Foxe gave for your symphony.'

'How do you know?'

'She talked to me about it.'

'While I was getting off with Priscilla?'

'More or less.'

Moreland made a grimace.

'Surely she'll come back in the end?' I said.

'You see, I'm not absolutely certain I want Matilda back,' he said. 'Sometimes I feel I can't live without her, other times, that I can't bear the thought of having her in the house. In real life, things are much worse than as represented in books. In books, you love somebody and want them, win them or lose them. In real life, so often, you love them and don't want them, or want them and don't love them.'

'You make it all sound difficult.'

'I sometimes think all I myself require is a quiet life,' said Moreland. 'For some unaccountable reason it is always imagined that people like oneself want to be rackety. Of course I want some fun occasionally, but so does everyone else.'

'What does Matilda want? A lot of money?'

'Not in the obvious way, diamonds and things. Matilda has wanted for a long time to spread her wings. She knows at last that she will never be any good as an actress. She wants power. Plenty of power. When we were first married she arranged all my life for me. Arranged rather too much. I'm not sure she liked it when I made a small name for myself – if one may be said to have made a small name for oneself.'

'She will have to play second fiddle to Sir Magnus, more even than to yourself.'

'Not second fiddle as an artist – as an actress, in her case. Being an artist – to use old fashioned terminology, but what other can one use? – partakes of certain feminine characteristics, is therefore peculiarly provoking for women to live with. In some way, the more "masculine" an artist is, the worse her predicament. If he is really homosexual, or hopelessly incapable of dealing with everyday life, it is almost easier.'

'I can think of plenty of examples to the contrary.'

'Anyway, there will be compensations with Donners. Matilda will operate on a large scale. She will have her finger in all kind of pies.'

'Still, what pies.'

'Not very intellectual ones, certainly,' said Moreland, 'but then the minds of most women are unamusing, unoriginal, determinedly banal. Matilda is not one of the exceptions. Is it surprising one is always cuckolded by middlebrows?'

'But you talk as if these matters were all concerned with the mind.'

Moreland laughed.

'I once asked Barnby if he did not find most women extraordinarily unsensual,' he said. 'Do you know what he answered?'

'What?'

'He said, "I've never noticed."'

I laughed too.

'I suppose,' said Moreland, 'had you asked Lloyd George, "Don't you think politics rather corrupt?", he might have made the same reply. Minor factors disappear when you are absorbed by any subject. You know, one of the things about being deserted is that it leaves you in a semi-castrated condition. You're incapable of fixing yourself up with an alternative girl. Deserting people, on the other hand, is positively stimulating. I don't mind betting that Matty is surrounded by admirers at this moment. Do you remember when we heard that crippled woman singing in Gerrard Street years ago:

> Whom do you lead on Rapture's roadway, far,
> Before you agonize them in farewell?

That's what it comes to. But look who has just arrived.'

Three people were sitting down at a table near the door of the restaurant. They were Mark Members, J. G. Quiggin and Anne Umfraville.

'I feel better after getting all that off my chest,' said Moreland.

'Shall we go back?'

'Do you think Lady Molly will have forgotten who I am?' said Moreland. 'It's terribly kind of her to put me up like this, but you know what bad memories warm-hearted people have.'

I saw from that Moreland had perfectly grasped Molly Jeavons's character. Nothing was more probable than that she would have to be reminded of the whole incident of inviting him to the house when she saw him at breakfast the following morning. Like so many persons who live disordered lives, Moreland had peculiar powers of falling on his feet, an instinctive awareness of where to look for help. That was perhaps the legacy of early poverty. He and Molly Jeavons – although she made no claims whatever to know about the arts – would understand each other. If he overstayed his welcome – with Moreland not inconceivable – she would throw him out, without the smallest ill-feeling on either side.

'We might have a word with the literary critics on the way out,' said Moreland.

'What happened to Anne Umfraville in the light of recent developments?'

'I don't know,' said Moreland. 'I thought she was interested in your friend Templer. I understand she was passing out of Donners's life in any case. She must have made some new friends.'

We paid the bill, pausing on the way out at the table by the door.

'Who told you of this restaurant?' said Quiggin. 'I thought it was only known to Anne and myself – you have met, of course?'

His air was somewhat proprietorial.

'Anne has a flat not far from here,' he said. 'Mark and I have been working late there.'

'What at?'

'Proofs,' said Quiggin.

He did not explain what kind of proofs. Neither Moreland nor I inquired.

'How is Matty, Hugh?' asked Members.

'On tour.'

'I do adore Matilda,' said Anne Umfraville. 'Have you been to Stourwater lately? I have rather quarrelled with Magnus. He can be so tiresome. So pompous, you know.'

'I don't live near there any longer,' said Moreland, 'so we haven't met for a month or two. Sir Magnus himself is no longer occupying the castle, of course. It has been taken over by the government, but I can't remember for what purpose. Just as a castle, I suppose.'

'What a ludicrous way this war is being run,' said Quiggin. 'I was talking to Howard Craggs about its inanities last night. Have you got a decent shelter where you live?'

'I'm just going back there,' said Moreland, 'never to emerge.'

'Give my love to Matty when you next see her,' said Members.

'And mine,' said Anne Umfraville.

We said good night.

'I think people know about Matilda,' said Moreland.

We passed through streets lit only by a cold autumnal moon.

'Have you the key?'

Moreland found it at last. We went upstairs to the drawing-room. Jeavons was wandering about restlessly. He had abandoned his beret, now wore a mackintosh over pyjamas. His brother was in an armchair, smoking his pipe and going through a pile of papers beside him on the floor. He would check each document, then place it on a stack the other side of his chair.

'We got rid of them at last,' said Jeavons. 'Molly's gone to bed. They struck a pretty hard bargain with Stanley. Still, the place seems to suit. That's what matters. I'd rather it was Lil than me. What was dinner like?'

'Not bad.'

'How was our blackout as you came up the street?'

'Not a chink of light.'

'Have some beer?'

'I think I'll go straight to bed, if you don't mind,' said Moreland. 'I feel a bit done in.'

I had never heard Moreland refuse a drink before. He must have been utterly exhausted. He had cheered up during dinner. Now he looked like death again.

'I'll come up with you to make sure the blackout won't fall down,' said Jeavons. 'Never do to be fined as a warden.'

'Good night, Nick.'

'Good night.'

They went upstairs. Stanley Jeavons threw down what was apparently the last of his papers. He took the pipe from his mouth and began to knock it out against his heel. He sighed deeply.

'I think I'll have a glass of beer too,' he said.

He helped himself and sat down again.

'It's extraordinary,' he said, 'how you get a hunch from a chap's handwriting if he's done three years for fraudulent conversion.'

'In business?'

'In business, too. I meant in what I'm doing now.'

'What are you doing?'

'Reservists.'

'For the army?'

'Sorting them out. Got a pile of their personal details here. Stacks more at the office. Brought a batch home to work on.'

'Then what happens?'

'Some of them get called up.'

'I'm on some form of the Reserve myself.'

'Which one?'

I told him.

'You'll probably come my way in due course – or one of my colleagues'.'

'Could it be speeded up?'

'What?'

'Finding my name.'

'Would you like that?'

'Yes.'

'Don't see why not.'

'You could?'

'M'm.'

'Fairly soon?'

'How old are you?'

I told him that too.

'Health A.1?'

'I think so.'

'School OTC?'

'Yes.'

'Get a Certificate A there?'

'Yes.'

'What arm is your choice?'

'Infantry.'

'Any particular regiment?'

I made a suggestion.

'You don't want one of the London regiments?'

'Not specially. Why?'

'Everyone seems to want a London regiment,' he said. 'Probably be able to fix you up with an out-of-the-way regiment like that.'

'It would be kind.'

'And you'd like to get cracking?'

'Yes.'

'I'll see what we can do.'

'That's very good of you.'

'Might take a week or two.'

'That's all right.'

'Just let me write your name in my little book.'

Jeavons returned to the room.

'That friend of yours is absolutely cooked,' he said. 'He'd have been happy to sleep on the floor. His blackout is all correct now, if he doesn't interfere with it. Well, Stan, I don't know how much Lil is going to enjoy living in a cottage with Mrs W.'

'Lil will be all right,' said Stanley Jeavons. 'She can get on with all sorts.'

'More than I can,' said Jeavons.

Stanley Jeavons shook his head without smiling. He evidently found his brother's life inexplicable, had no desire whatever to share its extravagances. Jeavons moved towards the table where the beer bottles stood. Suddenly he began to sing in that full, deep, unexpectedly attractive voice, so different from the croaking tones in which he ordinarily conversed:

> 'There's a long, long trail a-winding
> Into the land of . . . my dreams,
> Where the night . . . ingale is singing
> And the white moon beams.
> There's a long, long night of waiting,
> Until my dreams all . . . come true . . .'

He broke off as suddenly as he had begun. Stanley Jeavons began tapping out his pipe again, perhaps to put a stop to this refrain.

'Used to sing that while we were blanco-ing,' said Jeavons. 'God, how fed up I got cleaning that bloody equipment.'

'I shall have to go home, Ted.'

'Don't hurry away.'

'I must.'

'Have some more beer.'

'No.'

'Come and see us soon,' said Jeavons, 'before we all get blown up. I'm still not satisfied with the fold of that curtain. Got the blackout on the brain. You haven't a safety-pin about you, have you, Stan?'

Outside the moon had gone behind a bank of cloud. I went home through the gloom, exhilarated, at the same time rather afraid. Ahead lay the region beyond the white-currant bushes, where the wild country began, where armies for ever campaigned, where the Rules and Discipline of War prevailed. Another stage of life was passed, just as finally, just as irrevocably, as on that day when childhood had come so abruptly to an end at Stonehurst.

Praise for the novels
in the Third Movement
of A Dance to the Music of Time*:*

"Anthony Powell's magnificent chronicle . . . now moves smoothly into its second lap. . . . Mr. Powell has been justly celebrated as a master of comic understatement, and this quality is elegantly present in *The Valley of Bones*. But his comedy has also become more broad. . . . As the novels move on, Mr. Powell looms less as a funnyman and more as a writer of poignant tragicomedy."
– **William Barrett, *Atlantic***

"This book carries such human truth that one finds oneself feeling these folk must be real, and searching in actual memoirs for Powell's creations. . . . Widmerpool . . . is not only one of Powell's most brilliantly conceived characters, but is one of the great characterizations of our time."
– **Elizabeth Janeway, *New York Times Book Review***

"*The Valley of Bones* is sheer delight. It is immaculate in period and military detail; it praises duty, while at the same time making educated play of its absurdities; it recognises heroism, but is swift to prick pretention; it evokes a wry poetry from drabness and boredom; and it is exceedingly funny throughout."
– ***Observer***

"*The Military Philosophers* represents a return to Powell's most accomplished comic vein. His comedy is brisk, hard-headed, masculine . . . but while he is certainly a writer who keeps his distance, he goes beyond unalloyed burlesque. . . . Feeling keeps breaking through."
– **John Gross, *New York Review of Books***

Phoenix Fiction titles from Chicago

The Bridge on the Drina by Ivo Andrić
Concrete by Thomas Bernhard
Correction by Thomas Bernhard
Gargoyles by Thomas Bernhard
The Lime Works by Thomas Bernhard
Old Masters by Thomas Bernhard
Wittgenstein's Nephew by Thomas Bernhard
Woodcutters by Thomas Bernhard
Yes by Thomas Bernhard
The Last, Long Journey by Roger Cleeve
Acts of Theft by Arthur A. Cohen
A Hero in His Time by Arthur A. Cohen
In the Days of Simon Stern by Arthur A. Cohen
Solomon's Folly by Leslie Croxford
The Old Man and the Bureaucrats by Mircea Eliade
In the Time of Greenbloom by Gabriel Fielding
Through Streets Broad and Narrow by Gabriel Fielding
Convergence by Jack Fuller
Concluding by Henry Green
Pictures from an Institution by Randall Jarrell
The Survival of the Fittest by Pamela Hansford Johnson
A Bird in the House by Margaret Laurence
The Diviners by Margaret Laurence
The Fire-Dwellers by Margaret Laurence
A Jest of God by Margaret Laurence
The Stone Angel by Margaret Laurence
Fiela's Child by Dalene Matthee
The Conquerors by André Malraux
The Walnut Trees of Altenberg by André Malraux
The Bachelor of Arts by R. K. Narayan
The Dark Room by R. K. Narayan
The English Teacher by R. K. Narayan
Swami and Friends by R. K. Narayan
A Dance to the Music of Time (in four *Movements*) by Anthony Powell
A Father's Words by Richard Stern
Golk by Richard Stern
An Innocent Millionaire by Stephen Vizinczey
In Praise of Older Women by Stephen Vizinczey
Lord Byron's Doctor by Paul West
The Painted Canoe by Anthony Winkler
A Coin in Nine Hands by Marguerite Yourcenar
Fires by Marguerite Yourcenar
Two Lives and a Dream by Marguerite Yourcenar

FICTION

Includes these novels:

At Lady Molly's ✦ *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* ✦ *The Kindly Ones*

In the background of this second volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time,* the rumble of distant events in Germany and Spain presages the storm of World War II. In England, even as the whirl of marriages and adulteries, fashions and frivolities, personal triumphs and failures gathers speed, men and women find themselves on the brink of fateful choices.

"Anthony Powell is certainly the most interesting novelist writing in England today . . . immensely entertaining and deeply serious."
—Elizabeth Janeway, *New York Times*

"A series of intertwining stories, in mood at once hilarious, raffish and melancholy. . . . The reader who likes to watch history unfold as social comedy while he savors the astringent taste of the best English prose is urged to immerse himself in the works of this astute and enchanting writing."—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Life*

"One of the most important works of fiction since the Second World War. . . . A vastly entertaining, deeply melancholy, yet somehow courageou statement about human experience."—Naomi Bliven, *New Yorker*

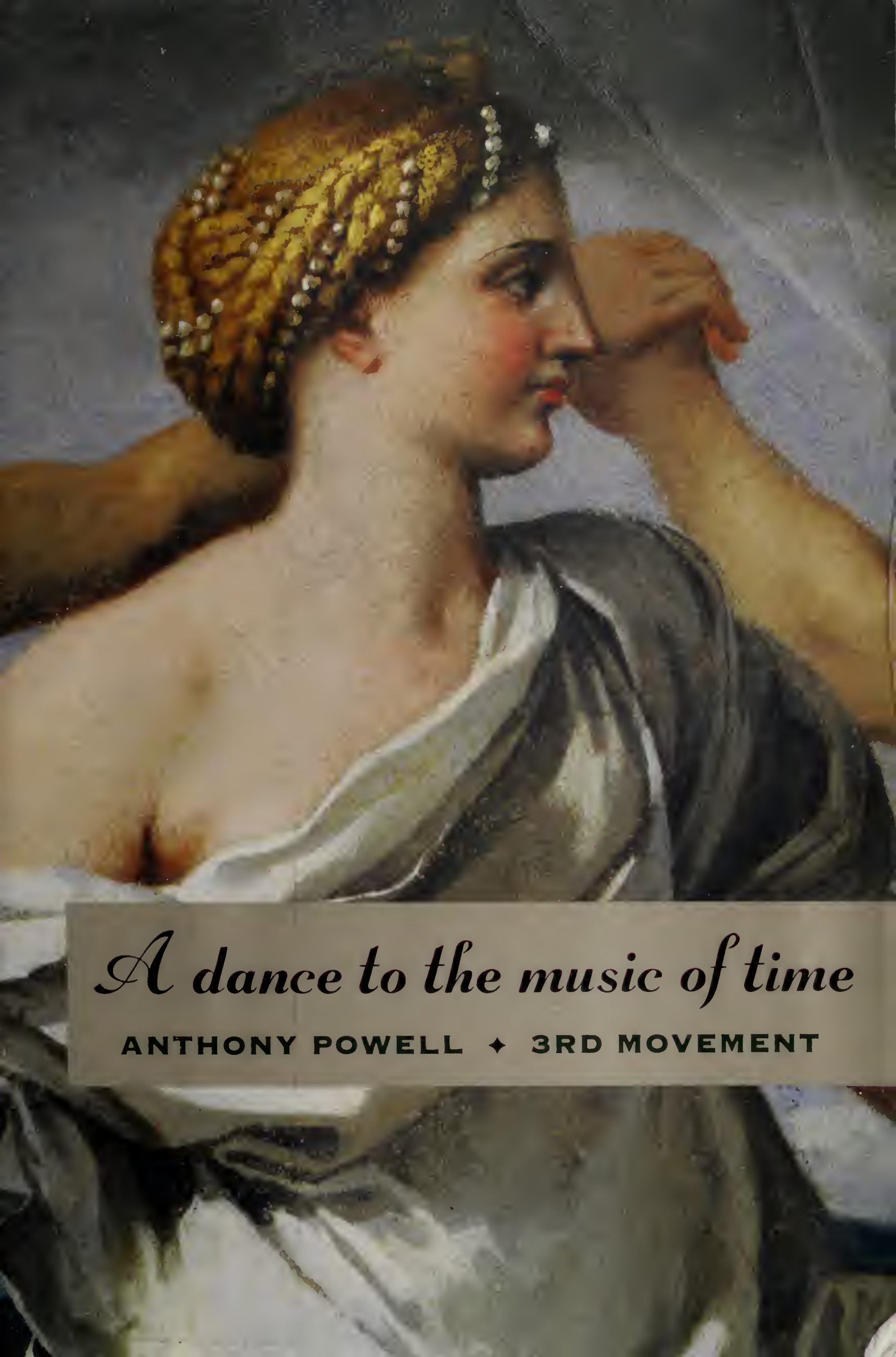
ANTHONY POWELL'S recent works include *Miscellaneous Verdict* and *Under Review,* both available from the University of Chicago Press.

Cover illustration: Nicholas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (detail). c. 1639–40. The Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.

Cover design: Toni Ellis.

ISBN 0-226-67716-8
90000>
9 780226 677163

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS



A dance to the music of time

ANTHONY POWELL ◆ 3RD MOVEMENT

WITHDRAWN

S.S.F. Public Library
West Orange
840 West Orange Ave.
South San Francisco, CA 94080

FEB 2006

S.S.F. Public Library
West Orange
840 West Orange Ave.
South San Francisco

3 9048 06345594 7

SSF

Praise for the
in the* Third Movement *of
Anthony Powell's comic masterpiece:

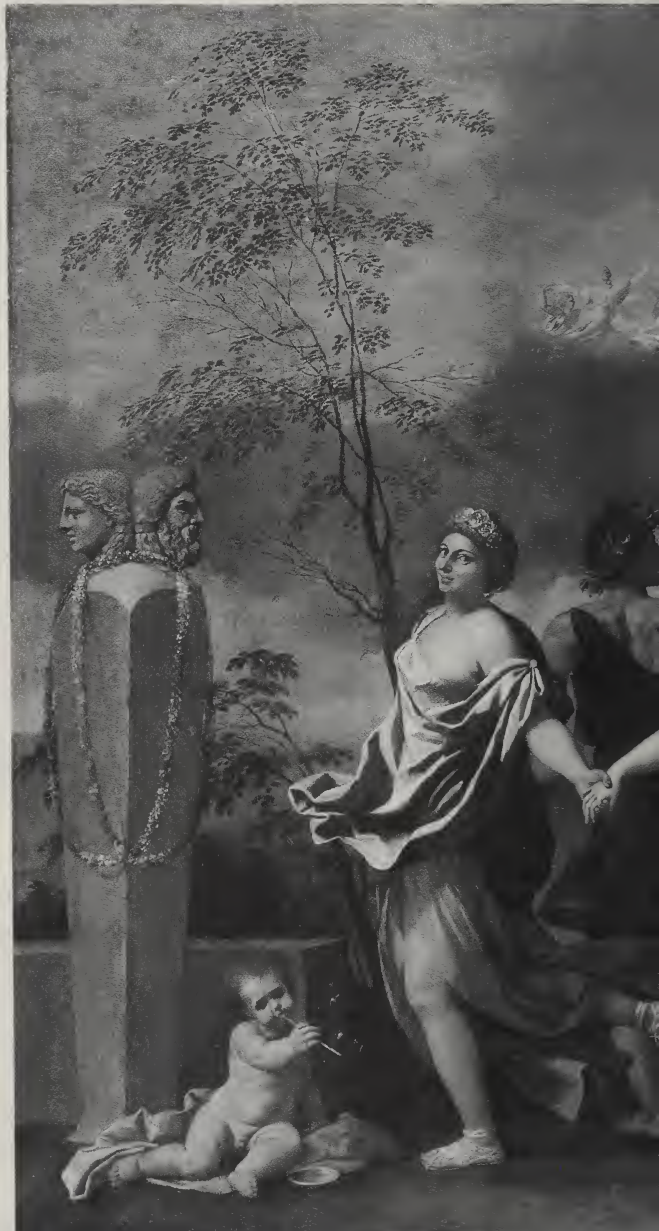
"Anthony Powell's magnificent chronicle . . . now moves smoothly into its second lap. . . . Mr. Powell has been justly celebrated as a master of comic understatement, and this quality is elegantly present in *The Valley of Bones*. . . . As the novels move on, Mr. Powell looms less as a funnyman and more as a writer of poignant tragicomedy."
– William Barrett, *Atlantic*

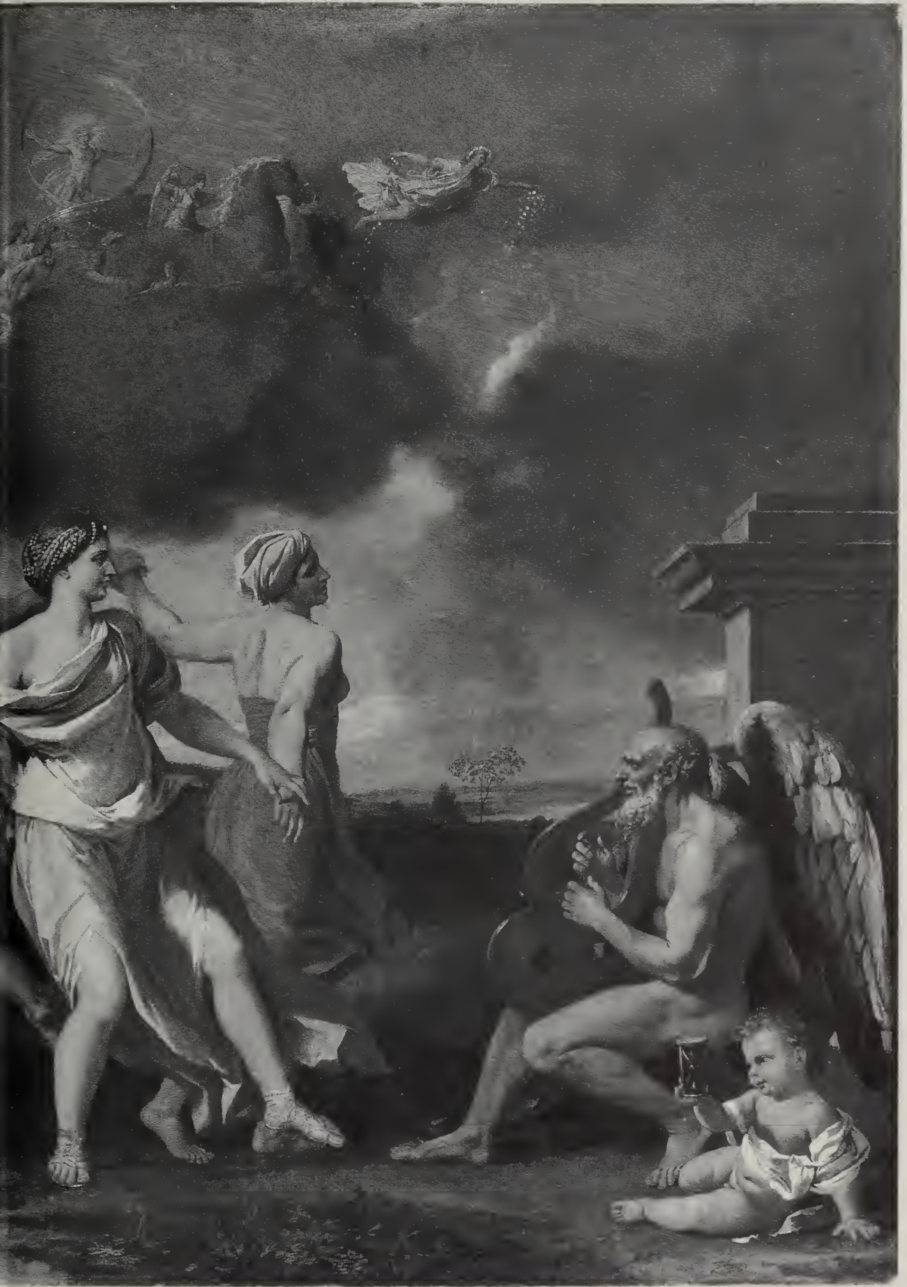
"This book carries such human truth that one finds oneself feeling these folk must be real, and searching in actual memoirs for Powell's creations. . . . Widmerpool . . . is not only one of Powell's most brilliantly conceived characters, but is one of the great characterizations of our time."
– Elizabeth Janeway, *New York Times Book Review*

"When the time comes for the historian to get the sense of what life was like for the British between and during the two big wars . . . he can wrap up the whole era with Anthony Powell's incalculably brilliant series."
– Time

"*The Valley of Bones* is sheer delight. It is immaculate in period and military detail; it praises duty, while at the same time making educated play of its absurdities; it recognises heroism, but is swift to prick pretention; it evokes a wry poetry from drabness and boredom; and it is exceedingly funny throughout."
– Observer

"*The Military Philosophers* represents a return to Powell's most accomplished comic vein. . . . Goes beyond unalloyed burlesque. . . . Feeling keeps breaking through."
– John Gross, *New York Review of Books*





Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, c. 1639–40. The Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.

A Dance to the Music of Time
Third Movement

Books by
Anthony Powell

A Dance to the Music of Time, First Movement
(including the following three novels)
A Question of Upbringing
A Buyer's Market
The Acceptance World

A Dance to the Music of Time, Second Movement
(including the following three novels)
At Lady Molly's
Casanova's Chinese Restaurant
The Kindly Ones

A Dance to the Movement of Time, Third Movement
(including the following three novels)
The Valley of Bones
The Soldier's Art
The Military Philosophers

A Dance to the Music of Time, Fourth Movement
(including the following three novels)
Books Do Furnish a Room
Temporary Kings
Hearing Secret Harmonies

OTHER NOVELS

Afternoon Men
Venusberg
From a View to a Death
Agents and Patients
Fisher King
O, How the Wheel Becomes It!
What's Become of Waring

OTHER WORKS

To Keep the Ball Rolling: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell
Volume I: *Infants of the Spring*
Volume II: *Messengers of Day*
Volume III: *Faces in My Time*
Volume IV: *The Strangers Are All Gone*
John Aubrey and His Friends
Brief Lives: And Other Selected Writings of John Aubrey
Miscellaneous Verdicts: Writings on Writers
Under Review: Further Writings on Writers, 1946–1990

PLAYS

The Garden God
The Rest I'll Whistle

S.S.F. Public Library
West Orange
840 West Orange Ave.
South San Francisco, CA 94080

A Dance to the Music of Time

Third Movement

THE VALLEY OF BONES
THE SOLDIER'S ART
THE MILITARY PHILOSOPHERS

BY

Anthony Powell

★ ★ ★

The University of Chicago Press

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
Copyright © 1964, 1966, 1968 by Anthony Powell
Copyright renewed 1992, 1994 by Anthony Powell
All rights reserved. Originally published 1971
University of Chicago Press Edition 1995
Printed in the United States of America

13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04 9 8 7 6 5

ISBN 0-226-67717-6 (pbk.)

The *Third Movement* of *A Dance to the Music of Time* includes the seventh, eighth, and ninth of the twelve novels that make up the entire opus. *The Valley of Bones* was first published in 1964. *The Soldier's Art* was first published in 1966, and *The Military Philosophers* was first published in 1968. The three novels were first published in one volume in the United States in 1971.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Powell, Anthony, 1905–
A dance to the music of time / by Anthony Powell.
p. cm.
Contents: 1st movement. A question of upbringing ; A buyer's market ; The acceptance world — 2nd movement. At Lady Molly's ; Casanova's Chinese restaurant ; The kindly ones — 3rd movement. The valley of bones ; The soldier's art ; The military philosophers — 4th movement. Books do furnish a room ; Temporary kings ; Hearing secret harmonies.
1. England—Social life and customs—20th century—Fiction.
2. Autobiographical fiction, English. I. Title.
PR6031.074D33 1995
823′.912—dc20 94-47228
CIP

Cover image credit: Bridgeman/Art Resource, NY

⊗The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

The Valley of Bones

for
Arthur and Rosemary

1

SNOW FROM YESTERDAY'S FALL STILL LAY in patches and the morning air was glacial. No one was about the streets at this hour. On either side of me in the half-light Kedward and the Company Sergeant-Major stepped out briskly as if on parade. Some time in the past – long, long ago in another existence, an earlier, less demanding incarnation – I had stayed a night in this town, idly come here to cast an eye over a countryside where my own family had lived a century or more before. One of them (rather a hard case by the look of it, from whom Uncle Giles's failings perhaps stemmed) had come west from the Marches to marry the heiress of a small property overlooking a bay on this lost, lonely shore. The cliffs below the site of the house, where all but foundations had been obliterated by the seasons, enclosed untidy banks of piled-up rock against which spent Atlantic waters ceaselessly dissolved, ceaselessly renewed steaming greenish spray: *la mer, la mer, toujours recommençée*, as Moreland was fond of quoting, an everyday landscape of heaving billows too consciously dramatic for my own taste. Afterwards, in the same country, they moved to a grassy peninsula of the estuary, where the narrowing sea penetrated deep inland. There moss and ivy spread over ruined, roofless walls on which broad sheets of rain were descending. In the church nearby, a white marble tablet had been raised *in memoriam*. Those were the visible remains. I did not remember much of the town itself. The streets, built at constantly changing levels, were not without a bleak charm, an illusion of tramping through Greco's Toledo in winter, or one of those castellated upland townships of Tuscany, represented without great regard for perspective in the background of *quattrocento* portraits. For some reason one was always aware, without knowing why the fact should be so inescapable, that the sea was not far away. The poem's emphasis on ocean's aqueous reiterations provoked in the mind a thousand fleeting images, scraps of verse, fragments of painting, forgotten tunes, disordered souvenirs of every kind: anything, in fact, but the practical matters required of one. When I tried to pull myself together, fresh daydreams overwhelmed me.

Although they had remained in these parts only a couple of generations, there was an aptness, something fairly inexorable, in reporting under the badges of second-lieutenant to a spot from which quite a handful of forerunners of the same blood had set out to become unnoticed officers of Marines or the East India Company; as often as not to lay twenty-year-old bones in the cemeteries of Bombay and Mysore. I was not exactly surprised to find myself committed to the same condition of service, in a sense always knowing that part of a required pattern, the fulfilment of which was in some ways a relief. Nevertheless, whatever military associations were to be claimed with these regions, Bonaparte's expressed conviction was irrefutable – French phrases seemed to offer support at that moment – *A partir de trente ans on commençe à être moins propre à faire la guerre*. That was exactly how I felt myself; no more, no less. Perhaps others of the stock, too, had embarked with reservations on a career by the sword. Certainly there had been no name of the least distinction for four or five hundred years. In mediaeval times they had been of more account in war; once, a long way back – in the disconcerting, free-for-all manner of Celtic lineage – even reigning, improbable as that might now appear, in this southern kingdom of a much disputed land. One wondered what on earth such predecessors had been like personally; certainly not above blinding and castrating when in the mood. A pale, mysterious sun opaquely glittered on the circlet of gold round their helmets, as armed men, ever fainter in outline and less substantial, receded into the vaporous, shining mists towards intermediate, timeless beings, at once measurably historical, yet at the same time mythically heroic: Llywarch the Old, a discontented guest at the Arthurian Table: Cunedda – though only in the female line – whose horse men had mounted guard on the Wall. For some reason the Brython, Cunedda, imposed himself on the imagination. Had his expulsion of the Goidels with great slaughter been at the express order of Stilicho, that Vandal captain who all but won the Empire for himself? I reviewed the possibility as we ascended, without breaking step, a short, very steep, very slippery incline of pavement. At the summit of this little hill stood a building of grey stone surrounded by rows of spiked railings, a chapel or meeting house, reposing in icy gloom. Under the heavy portico a carved scroll was inscribed:

SARDIS
1874

Kedward came smartly to a halt at the entrance of this tabernacle. The Sergeant-Major and I drew up beside him. A gale began to blow noisily up the street. Muffled yet disturbing, the war horns of Cunedda moaned in the frozen wind, as far away he rode upon the cloud.

'This is the Company's billet,' said Kedward, 'Rowland is meeting us here.'

'Was he in the Mess last night?'

'Not when you were there. He was on his rounds as Captain of the Week.'

I followed Kedward through the forbidding portals of Sardis – one of the Seven Churches of Asia, I recollected – immediately entering a kind of cave, darker than the streets, though a shade warmer. The Sergeant-Major formally called the room to attention, although no visible presence stirred in an ominous twilight heavy with the smell of men recently departed, a scent on which the odour of escaping gas had been superimposed. Kedward bade the same unrevealed beings 'carry on'. He had explained earlier that 'as bloody usual' the Company was 'on fatigues' that week. At first it was not easy to discern what lay about us in a Daumier world of threatening, fiercely slanted shadows, in the midst of which two feeble jets of bluish gas, from which the pungent smell came, gave irregular, ever-changing contours to an amorphous mass of foggy cubes and pyramids. Gradually the adjacent shapes contracted into asymmetrical rows of double-decker bunks upon which piles of grey-brown blankets were folded in a regulated manner. Then suddenly at the far end of the cave, like the anthem of the soloist bursting gloriously from a hidden choir, a man's voice, deep throated and penetrating, sounded, rose, swelled, in a lament of heartbreaking melancholy:

'That's where I fell in love,
While stars above
Came out to play;
For it was *mañana*,
And we were so gay,
South of the border,
Down Mexico way . . .'

Another barrack-room orderly, for that was whom I rightly judged the unseen singer to be, now loomed up from the darkness at my elbow, joining in powerfully with the last two lines. At the same time, he swung his broom with considerable violence backwards and forwards through the air, like a conductor's baton, finally banging it with all his force against the wooden legs of one of the bunks.

'All right, all right, there,' shouted the Sergeant-Major, who had at first not disallowed the mere singing. 'Not so much noise am I telling you.'

As one's eyes grew used to the gloom, gothic letters of enormous size appeared on the walls of the edifice, picked out in red and black and gold above the flickering gas-jets, a text whose message read straight across the open pages of a huge volume miraculously confronting us high above the paved floor, like the mural warning at Belshazzar's feast:

> 'Thou hast a few names even in Sardis
> which have not defiled their garments:
> and they shall walk with me in white:
> for they are worthy.'
> Rev. III. 4.

'Some of these blankets aren't laid out right yet, Sergeant-Major,' said Kedward. 'It won't do, you know.'

He spoke gravely, as if emphasising the Apocalyptic verdict of the walls. Although he had assured me he was nearly twenty-two, Kedward's air was that of a small boy who had dressed up for a lark in officer's uniform, completing the rag by rubbing his upper lip with burnt cork. He looked young enough to be the Sergeant-Major's son, his grandson almost. At the same time, he had a kind of childish dignity, an urchin swagger, in its way quite impressive, which lent him a right to be obeyed.

'Some of the new intake was taught different to fold them blankets,' said the Sergeant-Major cautiously.

'Look at that – and those.'

'I thought the lads was getting the idea better now, it was.'

'Never saw anything like it.'

'A Persian market, you might think,' agreed the Sergeant-Major.

Cleanshaven, with the severely puritanical countenance of an Ironside in a Victorian illustration to a Cavalier-and-Roundhead romance, CSM Cadwallader was not as old as he looked, nor for that matter – as I discovered in due course – nearly so puritanical. His resounding surname conjoined him with those half-historical, half-mythical times through which my mind had been straying a minute or two before, the stern nobility of his features suggesting a warrior from an heroic epoch, returned with dragon banners to sustain an army in time of war. Like the rest of the 'other ranks' of the Battalion, he was a miner. His smooth skull, entirely hairless, was streaked with an intricate pattern of blue veins, where coal dust of accumulated years beneath the ground had found its way under the skin, spreading into a design that resembled an astrological nativity – his own perhaps – cast in tattoo over the ochre-coloured surface of the cranium. He wore a Coronation medal ribbon and the yellow-and-green one for Territorial long service. The three of us strolled round the bunks.

'Carry on with the cleaning,' said Kedward sharply.

He addressed the barrack-room orderlies, who, taking CSM Cadwallader's rebuke as an injunction to cease from all work until our party was gone, now stood fidgetting and whispering by the wall. They were familiar later as Jones, D., small and fair, with almost white hair, a rarity in the Battalion, and Williams, W. H., tall and dark, his face covered with spots. Jones, D., had led the singing. Now they began to sweep again energetically, at the same time accepting this bidding as also granting permission to sing once more, for, as we moved to the further end of the room, Jones, D., returned to the chant, though more restrainedly than before, perhaps on account of the song's change of mood:

'There in a gown of white,
By candlelight,
She stooped to pray . . .'

The mournful, long-drawn-out notes died for a moment. Glancing round, I thought the singer, too, was praying; then saw his crouched position had been adopted the better to sweep under one of the bunks. This cramped attitude no doubt impeded the rendering, or perhaps he had paused for a second or two, desire provoked by the charming thought of a young girl lightly clothed in shimmering white – like the worthy ones of Sardis – a picture of peace and innocence and promise of a good time, very different from the stale, cheerless atmosphere of the barrack-room. Rising, he burst out again with renewed, agonised persistence:

'. . . The Mission bell told me
That I mustn't stay
South of the border,
Down Mexico way . . .'

The message of the bell, the singer's tragic tone announcing it, underlined life's inflexible call to order, reaffirming the illusory nature of love and pleasure. Even as the words trailed away, heavy steps sounded from the other end of the chapel, as if forces of authority were already on the move to effect the unhappy lover's expulsion from the Mission premises and delights of Mexico. Two persons had just come through the door. Kedward and the Sergeant-Major were still leaning critically over one of the bunks, discussing the many enormities of its incorrectly folded bedclothes. I turned from them and saw an officer approaching, accompanied by a sergeant. The officer was a captain, smallish, with a black moustache like Kedward's, though much better grown; the sergeant, a tall, broad shouldered, beefy young man, with fair hair and very blue eyes – another Brythonic type, no doubt – that reminded me of Peter Templer's. The singing had died down again, but the little captain stared angrily at the bunks, as if they greatly offended him.

'Don't you call the room to attention when your Company Commander comes in, Sergeant-Major?' he asked harshly.

Kedward and CSM Cadwalladar hastily straightened themselves and saluted. I did the same. The captain returned a stiff salute, keeping his hand up at the peak of the cap longer than any of the rest of us.

'Indeed, I'm sorry, sir,' said the Sergeant-Major, beginning to shout again, though apparently not much put out by this asperity of manner. 'See you at first, I did not, sir.'

Kedward stepped forward, as if to put an end to further fault finding, if that were possible.

'This is Mr Jenkins,' he said. 'He joined yesterday and has been posted to your company, Captain Gwatkin.'

Gwatkin fixed me with his angry little black eyes. In appearance, he was in several respects an older version of Kedward. I judged him to be about my own age, perhaps a year or two younger. Almost every officer in the unit looked alike to me at that very early stage; Maelgwyn-Jones, the Adjutant, and Parry, his assistant sitting beside him at the table, indistinguishable as Tweedledum and Tweedledee, when I first reported to the Orderly Room the evening before. Later, it was incredible persons so dissimilar could ever for one moment have appeared to resemble one another in any but the most superficial aspects. Gwatkin, although he may have had something of Kedward's look, was at the same time very different. Even this first sight of him revealed a novelty of character, at once apparent, though hard to define. There was, in the first place, some style about him. However much he might physically resemble the rest, something in his air and movements also showed a divergence from the humdrum routine of men; if, indeed, there is a humdrum routine.

'It's no more normal to be a bank-manager or a bus-conductor, than to be Baudelaire or Genghis Khan,' Moreland had once remarked. 'It just happens there are more of the former types.'

Satisfied at last that he had taken in sufficient of my appearance through the dim light of the barrack-room, Gwatkin held out his hand.

'Your name was in Part II Orders, Mr Jenkins,' he said without smiling. 'The Adjutant spoke to me about you, too. I welcome you to the Company. We are going to make it the best company in the Battalion. That has not been brought about yet. I know I can rely on your support in trying to achieve it.'

He spoke this very formal speech in a rough tone, with the barest suggestion of sing-song, his voice authoritative, at the same time not altogether assured.

'Mr Kedward,' he went on, 'have the new intake laid out their blankets properly this morning?'

'Not all of them,' said Kedward.

'Why not, Sergeant-Major?'

'It takes some learning, sir. Some of them is not used to our ways yet. They are good boys.'

'Never mind whether they are good boys, Sergeant-Major, those blankets must be correct.'

'Indeed, they should, sir.'

'See to it, Sergeant-Major.'

'That I will, sir.'

'When was the last rifle inspection?'

'At the pay parade, sir.'

'Were the Company's rifles correct?'

'Except for Williams, T., sir, that is gone on the MT course and taken his rifle with him, and Jones, A., that is sick with the ring-worm, and Williams, H,. that is on leave, and those two rifles the Sergeant-Armourer did want to look at that I told you of, sir, and the one with the faulty bolt in the Company Store for the time being, you said, and I will see about. Oh, yes, and Williams, G. E., that has been lent to Brigade for a week and has his rifle with him. That is the lot I do believe, sir.'

Gwatkin seemed satisfied with this reckoning.

'Have you rendered your report?' he asked.

'Not yet, sir.'

'See I have the nominal roll this evening, Sergeant-Major, by sixteen-hundred hours.'

'That I will, sir.'

'Mr Kedward.'

'Sir?'

'Your cap badge is not level with the top seam of the cap-band.'

'I'll see to it as soon as I get back to the Mess.'

Gwatkin turned to me.

'Officers of our Battalion wear bronze pips, Mr Jenkins.'

'The Quartermaster told me in the Mess last night he could get me correct pips by this evening.'

'See the QM does so, Mr Jenkins. Officers incorrectly dressed are a bad example. Now it happens that Sergeant

Pendry here, who is Battalion Orderly Sergeant this week, will be your own Platoon Sergeant.'

Sergeant Pendry grinned with great friendliness, his blue eyes flashing in high-lights caught by the gas-jets, making them more than ever like Peter Templer's in the old days. He held out his hand. I took it, not sure whether this familiarity would conform with Gwatkin's ideas about discipline. However, Gwatkin seemed to regard a handshake as normal in the circumstances. His tone had been austere until that moment; intentionally, though perhaps rather unconvincingly austere. Now he spoke in a more friendly manner.

'What is your Christian name, Mr Jenkins?'

'Nicholas.'

'Mine is Rowland. The Commanding Officer says we should not be formal with each other off parade. We are brother officers – like a family, you see. So, when off duty, Rowland is what you should call me. I shall say Nicholas. Mr Kedward told you his name is Idwal.'

'He has. I'm calling him that. In practice, it's Nick for me.'

Gwatkin gazed at me fixedly, as if not altogether sure what I meant by 'in practice', or whether it was a term properly to be used by a subaltern to his Company Commander, but he did not comment.

'Come along, Sergeant Pendry,' he said, 'I want to look at those urine buckets.'

We saluted. Gwatkin set off on his further duties as Captain of the Week – like the Book of the Month, I frivolously thought to myself.

'That went off all right,' said Kedward, as if presentation to Gwatkin might have proved disastrous. 'I don't think he took against you. What must I show you now? I know, the ablutions.'

That was my first sight of Rowland Gwatkin. It could hardly have been more characteristic, in so much as he appeared on that occasion almost to perfection in the part for which he had cast himself: in command, something of a martinet, a trifle unapproachable to his subordinates, at the same time not without his human side, above all a man dedicated to duty. It was a clear-cut, hard-edged picture, into which Gwatkin himself, for some reason, never quite managed to fit. Even his name seemed to split him into two halves, poetic and prosaic, 'Rowland' at once suggesting high deeds:

. . . When Rowland brave, and Olivier,
And every paladin and peer,
On Roncesvalles died!

'Gwatkin', on the other hand, insinuated nothing more impressive than 'little Walter', which was not altogether inappropriate.

'Rowland can be a bloody nuisance sometimes,' said Kedward, when we knew each other better. 'He thinks such a mighty lot of himself, do you know. Lyn Craddock's dad is manager of Rowland's branch, and he told Lyn, Rowland's not all that bloody marvellous at banking. Not the sort that will join the Inspectorate, or anything like that, not by a long chalk. Rowland doesn't care much about that, I expect. He just fancies himself as a great soldier. You should keep the right side of Rowland. He can be a tricky customer.'

That was precisely the impression of Gwatkin I had myself formed; that he took himself very seriously, was eminently capable of becoming disagreeable if he conceived a dislike for someone. At the same time, I felt an odd kind of interest in him, even attraction towards him. There was about him something melancholy, perhaps even tragic, that was hard to define. His excessively 'regimental' manner was certainly over and above anything as yet encountered among other officers of the Battalion. We were still, of course, existing in the comparatively halcyon days at the beginning of the war, when there was plenty to eat and drink, tempers better than they subsequently became. If you were over thirty, you thought yourself adroit to have managed to get into uniform at all, everyone behaving almost as if they were attending a peacetime practice camp (this was a Territorial unit), to be home again after a few weeks' change of routine. Gwatkin's manner was different from that. He gave the impression of being something more than a civilian keen on his new military role, anxious to make a success of an unaccustomed job. There was an air of resolve about him, the consciousness of playing a part to which a high destiny had summoned him. I suspected he saw himself in much the same terms as those heroes of Stendhal – not a Stendhalian lover, like Barnby, far from that – an aspiring, restless spirit, who, released at last by war from the cramping bonds of life in a provincial town, was about to cut a dashing military figure against a backcloth of Meissonier-like imagery of plume and breastplate: dragoons walking their horses through the wheat, grenadiers at ease in a tavern with girls bearing flagons of wine. Esteem for the army – never in this country regarded, in the continental manner, as a popular expression of the national will – implies a kind of innocence. This was something quite different from Kedward's hope to succeed. Kedward, so I found, did not deal in dreams, military or otherwise. By that time he and I were on our way back to the Mess. Kedward gratifyingly treated me as if we had known each other all our lives, not entirely disregarding our difference in age, it is true, but at least accepting that as a reason for benevolence.

'I expect you're with one of the Big Five, Nick,' he said.

'Big five what?'

'Why, banks, of course.'

'I'm not in a bank.'

'Oh, aren't you. You'll be the exception in our Battalion.'

'Is that what most of the officers do?'

'All but about three or four. Where do you work?'

'London.'

Banks expunged from Kedward's mind as a presumptive vocation, he showed little further curiosity as to how otherwise I might keep going.

'What's London like?'

'Not bad.'

'Don't you ever get sick of living in such a big place?'

'You do sometimes.'

'I've been in London twice,' Kedward said. 'I've got an aunt who lives there – Croydon – and I stayed with her. I went up to the West End several times. The shops are bloody marvellous. I wouldn't like to work there though.'

'You get used to it.'

'I don't believe I would.'

'Different people like different places.'

'That's true. I like it where I was born. That's quite a long way from where we are now, but it's not all that different. I believe you'd like it where my home is. Most of our officers come from round there. By the by, we were going to get another officer reinforcement yesterday, as well as yourself, but he never turned up.'

'Emergency commission?'

'No, Territorial Army Reserve.'

'What's he called?'

'Bithel – brother of the VC. Wouldn't it be great to win a VC.'

‘He must be years younger than his elder brother then. Bithel got his VC commanding one of the regular battalions in 1915 or 1916. I’ve heard my father speak of him. That Bithel must be in his sixties at least.’

‘Why shouldn’t he be much younger than his brother? This one played rugger for Wales once, I was told. That must be great too. But I think you’re right. This Bithel is not all that young. The CO was complaining about the age of the officers they are sending him. He said it was dreadful, you are much too old. Bithel will probably be even older than you.’

‘Not possible.’

‘You never know. Somebody said they thought he was thirty-seven. He couldn’t be as old as that, could he. If so, they’ll have to find him an administrative job after the Division moves.’

‘Are we moving?’

‘Quite soon, they say.’

‘Where?’

‘No one knows. It’s a secret, of course. Some say Scotland, some Northern Ireland. Rowland thinks it will be Egypt or India. Rowland always has these big ideas. It might be, of course. I hope we do go abroad. My dad was in this battalion in the last war and got sent to the Holy Land. He brought me back a prayer-book bound in wood from the Cedars of Lebanon. I wasn’t born then, of course, but he got the prayer-book for his son, if he had one. Of course that was if he didn’t get killed. He hadn’t even asked my mum to marry him then.’

‘Do you use it every Sunday?’

‘Not in the army. Not bloody likely. Somebody would pinch it. I want to hand it on to my own son, you see, when I have one. Are you engaged?’

‘I was once. I’m married as a consequence.’

'Are you really. Well, I suppose you would be at your age. Yanto Breeze – that's Rowland's other Platoon Commander – is married now. The wedding was a month ago Yanto's nearly twenty-five, of course. What's your wife's name?'

'Isobel.'

'Is she in London?'

'She's living in the country with her sister. She's waiting to have a baby.'

'Oh, you are lucky,' said Kedward, 'I wonder whether it will be a daughter. I'd love a little daughter. I'm engaged. Would you like me to show you a photograph of my fiancée?'

'Very much.'

Kedward unbuttoned the breast-pocket of his tunic. He took out a wallet from one of the compartments of which he extracted a snapshot. This he handed over. Much worn by constant affectionate reference, the features of the subject, recognisably the likeness of a girl, were otherwise all but effaced. I expressed appreciation.

'Bloody marvellous, isn't she,' said Kedward.

He kissed the faded outlines before returning the portrait to the notecase.

'We're going to get married if I become a captain,' he said.

'When will that be, do you think?'

Kedward laughed.

'Not for ages, I suppose,' he said. 'But I don't see why I shouldn't be promoted one of these days, if the war goes on for a while and I work hard. Perhaps you will too, Nick. You never know. There's this bloody eighteen months to get through as second-lieutenant before you get your second pip. I think the war is going on, don't you? The French will hold them in the Maginot Line until this country builds up her air strength. Then, when the Germans try to advance, chaps like you and me will come in, do you see. Of course we might be sent to the help of Finland before that, fight the Russkis instead of the Germans. In any case, the decisive arm is infantry. Everybody agrees about that – except Yanto Breeze who says it's the tank.'

'We shall see.'

'Yanto says he's sure he will remain with two pips all the war. He doesn't care. Yanto has no ambition.'

I had met Evan Breeze – usually known by the diminutive 'Yanto' – in the Mess the previous night, a tall, shambling, unmoustached figure, not at all military, who, as an accountant, stood like myself a little apart from the norm of working in a bank. Gwatkin, so I found in due course, did not much like Breeze. In fact it would be true to say he hated him, a sentiment Breeze quietly returned. Mutual antipathy was in general attributed to Gwatkin's disapproval of Breeze's unsmart appearance, and unwillingness to adapt himself to army methods and phraseology. That attitude certainly brought him some persecution at the hands of Gwatkin and others in authority. Besides, Breeze always managed to give the impression that he was laughing at Gwatkin, while at the same time allowing no word or act of his to give reasonable cause for offence. However, there was apparently another matter. When we knew each other better, Kedward revealed that Gwatkin, before his marriage, had been in love with Breeze's sister; had been fairly roughly treated by her.

'Rowland falls like a ton of bricks when he does, believe me,' Kedward said, 'when he takes a fancy to a girl. He was so stuck on Gwenllian Breeze, you would have thought he had the measles.'

'What happened?'

'She wouldn't look at him. Married a college professor. One of those Swansea people.'

'And Rowland married someone else?'

'Oh, yes, of course. He married Blodwen Davies that had lived next door all their lives.'

'How did that work out?'

Kedward looked at me uncomprehendingly.

'Why, what do you mean?' he said. 'All right. Why should it not? They've been married a long time now, though they haven't any kids. All that about Gwen Breeze was years ago. Yanto must have forgotten by now that Rowland could ever have been his brother-in-law. What a couple they would have been in one family. They would have been at each other like a dog-fight. Rowland always knows best. He likes bossing it. Yanto likes his own way too, but different. Yanto should clean himself up. He looks like an old hen in uniform.'

All the same, although Breeze might not possess Kedward's liveliness, ambition, capacity for doing everything with concentrated energy, I found later that he was not, in his own way, a bad officer, however unkempt his turnout. The men liked him; he was worth consulting about the men.

'Keep an eye on Sergeant Pendry, Nick,' he said, when he heard Pendry was my Platoon Sergeant. 'He is making a great show-off now, but I am not sure he is going on that way. He has only just been promoted and at present is very keen. But he was in my platoon for a time as a corporal and I am not certain about him, that he can last. He may be one of those NCOs who put everything into it for two or three weeks, then go to pieces. You'll find a lot like that. They have to be stripped. There is nothing else to do.'

It was Breeze, on the evening of the day I had been shown round the lines by Kedward, who took me to the bar of the hotel where the officers of the unit were billeted. After dinner, subalterns were inclined to leave the ante-room of the Mess to the majors and captains, retiring to where talk was less restricted and rounds of drinks could be 'stood'. This saloon bar was smoky and very crowded. In addition to a large civilian clientele and a sprinkling of our own Regiment, were several officers from the Divisional signals unit located in the town, also two or three from the RAF. Pumphrey, one of our subalterns, was leaning against the bar talking to a couple of army chaplains, and a lieutenant I had not seen before, wearing the Regiment's badges. This officer had a large, round, pasty face and a ragged moustache, the tangled hairs of which glistened with beer. His thick lips were closed on the stub of a cigar. In spite of the moustache and the fact that he was rather bald, he shared some of Kedward's look of a small boy dressed up in uniform for fun, though giving that impression for quite different reasons. In strong contrast with Kedward's demeanour, this man had an extraordinary air of guilt which somehow suggested juvenility; a schoolboy wearing a false moustache (something more than burnt cork this time), who only a few minutes before had done something perfectly disgusting, and was pretty sure that act was about to be detected by the headmaster with whom he had often been in trouble before. Before I could diagnose more, Kedward himself came into the bar. He joined us.

'I will buy you a bitter, Idwal,' said Breeze.

Kedward accepted the offer.

'Finland is still knocking the Red Army about on the news,' he said. 'We may go there yet.'

Pumphrey, another of our non-banking officers (he sold second-hand cars), beckoned us to join the group with the chaplains. Red-haired, noisy, rather aggressive, Pumphrey was always talking of exchanging from the army into the RAF.

'This is our new reinforcement, Yanto,' he shouted, 'Lieutenant Bithel. He's just reported his arrival at the Orderly Room and has been shown his quarters. Now he's wetting his whistle with me and the padres.'

We pushed through the crowd towards them.

'Here is Iltyd Popkiss, the C. of E.,' said Breeze, 'and Ambrose Dooley that saves the souls of the RCs, and is a man to tell you some stories to make you sit up.'

Popkiss was small and pale. It was at once evident that he had a hard time of it keeping up with his Roman Catholic colleague in heartiness and avoidance of seeming strait-laced. Dooley, a large dark man with an oily complexion and appearance of not having shaved too well that morning, accepted with complaisance this reputation as a retailer of hair-raising anecdote. The two chaplains seemed on the best of terms. Bithel himself smiled timidly, revealing under his straggling moustache a double row of astonishingly badly fitting false teeth. He hesitantly proffered a flabby hand. His furtiveness was quite disturbing.

'I've just been telling them what an awful journey I had coming here from where I live,' he said. 'The Adjutant was very decent about the muddle that had been made. It was the fault of the War Office as usual. Anyway, I'm here now, glad to be back with the Regiment and having a drink, after all I've been through.'

I thought at first he might be a commercial traveller by profession, as he spoke as if accustomed to making social contacts by way of a kind of patter, though he seemed scarcely sure enough of himself for that profession. The way he talked might be caused by mere embarrassment. The cloth of his tunic was stained on the lapels with what seemed egg, the trousers ancient and baggy. He looked as if he had consumed quite a few drinks already. There could be no doubt, I saw with relief, that he was older than myself. If he had ever played rugby for Wales, he had certainly allowed himself to run disastrously to seed. There could be no doubt about that either. He seemed almost painfully aware of his own dilapidation, also of the impaired state of his uniform, at which he now looked down apologetically, holding out the flap of one of the pockets from its tarnished button for our inspection.

'When I'm allotted a batman, I'll have to get this tunic pressed,' he said. 'Haven't worn it since I was in Territorial camp fifteen or more years ago. Managed to spill a glass of gin-and-italian over the trousers on the way here, I don't know how.'

'You won't get any bloody marvellous valeting from your batman here, I'm telling you,' said Pumphrey. 'He'll be more used to hewing coal than pressing suits, and you'll be lucky if he even gets a decent polish on those buttons of yours, which are needing a rub up.'

'I suppose we mustn't expect too much now there's a war on,' said Bithel, unhappy that he might have committed a social blunder by speaking of pressing tunics. 'But what about another round. It's my turn, padre.'

He addressed himself to the Anglican chaplain, but Father Dooley broke in vigorously.

'If I go on drinking so much of this beer, it will have a strong effect on my bowels,' he said, 'but all the same I will oblige you, my friend.'

Bithel smiled doubtfully, evidently not much at ease with such plain speaking in the mouth of the clergy.

'I don't think one more will do us any harm,' he said. 'I drink a fair amount of ale myself in civilian life without bad results.'

'You want to keep your bowels open anyway,' said

Dooley, pursuing the subject. 'That's what I believe in. Have a good sluicing every day. Nothing like it.'

He held up his glass to the light, as if assessing the aperient potentialities of the contents.

'Army food gives me squitters anyway,' he went on, roaring with delight at the thought. 'I've hardly had a moment's peace since we mobilized.'

'It makes me as constipated as an owl,' said Pumphrey. 'I should just about say so.'

Dooley finished his beer at a gulp, again giving his jolly monk's laugh at the thought of man's digestive vicissitudes.

'Even if I'm all bound up, I always carry plenty of toilet paper round with me,' he said. 'Never be without it. That's my rule. You can't know when you're not going to be taken short in the army.'

'That's a good notion,' said Pumphrey. 'We must follow His Reverence's advice, mustn't we. Take proper precautions in case we have to spend a penny. Perhaps you do already, Iltyd. The Church seems to teach these things.'

'Oh, why, yes, I do indeed,' said Popkiss.

'What do you take Iltyd for?' said Dooley. 'He's an old campaigner, aren't you, Iltyd?'

'Why, yes, indeed,' said Popkiss, evidently pleased to be given this opening, 'and what do you think? In my last unit, when I took off my tunic to play billiards one night, they did such a trick on me. You'd never guess. They wrapped a french letter, do you know, between those sheets of toilet paper in my pocket.'

There was a good deal of laughter at this, in which the RC chaplain amicably joined, although it was clear from his expression that he recognised Popkiss to have played a card he himself might find hard to trump.

'And did it fall out in the middle of Church Parade?' asked Pumphrey, after he had finished guffawing.

'No, indeed, thank to goodness. I just found it next day on my dressing table by my dog-collar. I threw it down the lavatory and pulled the chain. Very thankful I was when it went away, which was not for a long time. I pulled the chain half a dozen times, I do believe.'

'Now listen to what happened to me when I was with the 2nd/14th—' began Father Dooley.

I never heard the climax of this anecdote, no doubt calculated totally to eclipse in rough simplicity of language and narrative force anything further Popkiss might attempt to offer, in short to blow the Anglican totally out of the water. I was sorry to miss this consummation, because Dooley obviously felt his own reputation as a raconteur at stake, a position he was determined to retrieve. However, before the story was properly begun, Bithel drew me to one side.

'I'm not sure I like all this sort of talk,' he muttered in an undertone. 'Not used to it yet, I suppose. You must feel the same. You're not the rough type. You were at the University, weren't you?'

I admitted to that.

'Which one?'

I told him. Bithel had certainly had plenty to drink that day. He smelt strongly of alcohol even in the thick atmosphere of the saloon bar. Now, he sighed deeply.

'I was going to the 'varsity myself,' he said. 'Then my father decided he couldn't afford it. Business was a bit rocky at that moment. He was an auctioneer, you know, and had run into a spot of trouble as it happened. Nothing serious, though people in the neighbourhood said a lot of untrue and nasty things at the time. Nothing people won't say. He passed away soon after that. I suppose I could have sent myself up to college, so to speak. The money would just about have run to it in those days. Somehow, it seemed too late by then. I've always regretted it. Makes a difference to a man, you know. You've only got to look round this bar.'

He swayed a little, adjusting his balance by clinging to the counter.

'Had a tiring day,' he said. 'Think I'll smoke just one more cigar and go to bed. Soothing to the nerves, a cigar. Will you have one? They're cheap, but not bad.'

'No, thanks very much.'

'Come on. I've got a whole box with me.'

'Don't really like them, thanks all the same.'

'A 'varsity man and don't smoke cigars,' said Bithel, speaking with disappointment. 'I shouldn't have expected that. What about sleeping pills? I've got some splendid ones, if you'd like to try them. Must use them if you've had just the wrong amount to drink. Fatal to wake up in the night when that's happened.'

By this time I had begun to feel pretty tired myself, in no need of sleeping pills. The bar was closing. There was a general move towards bed. Bithel, after gulping down a final drink by himself, went off unsteadily to search for a greatcoat he had mislaid. The rest of us, including the chaplains, made our way upstairs. I was sleeping in the same bedroom as Kedward, Breeze and Pumphrey.

'Old Bithel's been allotted that attic on the top floor to himself,' said Pumphrey. 'He'll feel pretty lonely up there. We ought to make a surprise for him when he comes to bed. Let's give him a good laugh.'

'Oh, he'll just want to go quietly to bed,' said Breeze, 'not wish for any tomfoolery tonight.'

Kedward took the opposite view.

'Why, yes,' he said, 'Bithel seems a good chap. He would like some sort of a rag. Make him feel at home. Show him that we like him.'

I was glad no such welcome had been thought necessary for myself the previous night, when there had been no sign of horseplay, merely a glass or two of beer before bed. There was perhaps something about Bithel that brought into being such schemes. What shape the joke should best take was further discussed. The end of it was we all climbed the stairs to the top floor of the hotel, where Bithel was housed in one of the attics. The chaplains came too, Dooley particularly entering into the idea of a rag. At first I had envied Bithel the luxury of a room to himself, but, when we arrived there, it became clear that such privacy, whatever its advantages, was paid for by a severe absence of other comfort. The room was fairly big, with a low ceiling under the eaves. Deep shelves had been built along one side, so that in normal times the attic was probably used as a large linen cupboard. The walls were unpapered. There was a strong smell of mice.

'What shall we do?' asked Kedward.

'Put his bed upside down,' suggested Pumphrey.

'No,' said Breeze, 'that's plain silly.'

'Make it apple-pie.'

'That's stale.'

The padres wanted to see the fun, but without too deeply involving themselves. The idea that we should all lie on the shelves, then, when Bithel was already in bed, appear as a horde of ghosts, was abandoned as impracticable. Then someone put forward the project of making an effigy. This was accepted as a suitable solution to the problem. Pumphrey and Kedward therefore set about creating a figure to rest in Bithel's camp-bed, the theory being that such a dummy would make Bithel suppose that he had come into the wrong room. The shape of a man that was now put together was chiefly contrived by rolling up the canvas cover of Bithel's valise, which, under the blankets, gave the fair semblance of a body. Two of Bithel's boots were placed so that they stuck out at the foot of the bed, a head on the pillow represented by his sponge-bag, surmounted by Bithel's 'fore-and-aft' khaki cap. No doubt there were other properties too, which I have forgotten. The thing was quite well done in the time available, a mild enough joke, perfectly good natured, as the whole affair would not take more than a couple of minutes to dismantle when Bithel himself wanted to go to bed. The effigy was just completed when the sound came of Bithel plodding heavily up the stairs.

'Here he is,' said Kedward.

We all went out on to the landing.

'Oh, Mr Bithel,' shouted Pumphrey. 'There is something you should look at here. Something very worrying.'

Bithel came slowly on up the stairs. He was still puffing at his cigar as he held the rail of the banisters to help him on his way. He seemed not to hear Pumphrey's voice. We stood aside for him to enter the room.

'Such a fat officer has got into your bed, Bithel,' shouted Pumphrey, hardly able to control himself with laughter.

Bithel lurched through the door of the attic. He stood for several seconds looking hard at the bed, as if he could not believe his eyes; not believe his luck either, for a broad smile spread over his face, as if he were delighted beyond words. He took the cigar from his mouth and placed it with great care in the crevice of a large glass ashtray marked with a coloured advertisement for some brand of beer, the sole ornament in the room. This ashtray stood on a small table, which, with a broken chair and Bithel's camp-bed, were its only furniture. Then, clasping his hands together above his head, Bithel began to dance.

'Oh, my,' said Breeze. 'Oh, my.'

Bithel, now gesticulating whimsically with his hands, tripped slowly round the bed, regularly changing from one foot to the other, as if following the known steps of a ritual dance.

'A song of love . . .' he intoned gently. 'A song of love . . .'

From time to time he darted his head forward and down, like one longing to embrace the figure on the bed, always stopping short at the moment, overcome by coyness at being seen to offer this mark of affection – perhaps passion – in the presence of onlookers. At first everyone, including myself, was in fits of laughter. It was, indeed, an extraordinary spectacle, unlike anything before seen, utterly unexpected, fascinating in its strangeness. Pumphrey was quite scarlet in the face, as if about to have an apoplectic fit, Breeze and Kedward equally amused. The chaplains, too, seemed to be greatly enjoying themselves. However, as Bithel's dance continued, its contortions became increasingly grotesque. He circled round the bed quicker and quicker, writhing his body, undulating his arms in oriental fashion. I became gradually aware that, so far as I was myself concerned, I had had sufficient. A certain embarrassment was making itself felt. The joke had gone on long enough, perhaps too long. Bithel's comic turn should be brought to a close. It was time for him, and everyone else, to get some sleep. That was how I felt. At the same time, I had nothing but admiration for the manner in which Bithel had shown himself equal to being ragged; indeed, the way in which he had come out completely on top of those who had tried to make him look silly. In similar circumstances I should myself have fallen far short of any such mastery of the situation. Nevertheless, an end should now be made. We had seen enough. You could have too much of a good thing. It must, in any case, stop soon. These were idle hopes. Bithel showed no sign whatever of wanting to terminate his dance. Now he placed the palms of his hands together as if in the semblance of prayer, now violently rocked his body from side to side in religious ecstasy, now whirled past kicking out his feet before him in a country measure. All the time he danced, he chanted endearments to the dummy on the bed. I think Popkiss was the first, after myself, to begin to tire of the scene. He took Dooley by the arm.

'Come along, Ambrose,' he said, 'Sunday tomorrow. Busy day. It's our bedtime.'

At that moment, Bithel, no doubt by this time dizzy with beer and dervish-like dancing, collapsed on top of the dummy. The camp-bed creaked ominously on its trestles, but did not buckle under him. Throwing his arms round the outline of the valise, he squeezed it with abandon, at the same time covering the sponge-bag with kisses.

'Love 'o mine . . .' he mumbled, 'Love 'o mine . . .'

I was wondering what would happen next, when I realized that he and I were alone in the room. Quite suddenly the others must have decided to leave, drifting off to bed, bored, embarrassed, or merely tired. The last seemed the most probable. Their instincts told them the rag was at an end; that time had come for sleep. Bithel still lay face-downwards on the bed, fondling and crooning.

'Will you be all right, Bithel? We are all going to bed now.'

'What's that?'

'We're all going to bed.'

'You lucky people, all going to bed . . .'

'I'll say good night, Bithel.'

'Night-night,' he said, 'Night-night. Wish I'd decided to be a 'varsity man.'

He rolled over on his side, reaching across the dummy for the remains of his cigar. It had gone out. He managed to extract a lighter from his trouser pocket and began to strike wildly at its mechanism. Hoping he would not set fire to the hotel during the night, I shut the door and went down the stairs. The others in the room were at various stages of turning in for the night.

'He's a funny one is old Bithel,' said Breeze, who was already in bed.

'A regular caution,' said Kedward. 'Never saw anything like that dance.'

'Went on a bit long, didn't it,' said Pumphrey, removing a toothbrush from his mouth to speak. 'Thought he'd be at it all night till he fell down.'

However, although there was general agreement that Bithel had unnecessarily prolonged the dance, he did not, so far as his own personality was concerned, seem to have made a bad impression. On the contrary, he had established a certain undoubted prestige. I did not have much time to think over the incident, because I was very tired. In spite of unfamiliar surroundings, I went to sleep immediately and slept soundly. The following morning, although there was much talk while we dressed, nothing further was said of Bithel. He was forgotten in conversation about Church Parade and the day's routine. Breeze and Pumphrey had already finished their dressing and gone downstairs, when Pumphrey's soldier-servant (later to be identified as Williams, I.G.) came up to Kedward in the passage as we were on the way to breakfast. He was grinning.

'Excuse me, sir.'

'What is it, Williams?'

'I was ordered to look after the new officer till he had a batman for hisself.'

'Mr Bithel?'

'The officer don't seem well.'

'What's wrong with him?'

'Better see, sir.'

Williams, I.G., enjoyed giving this information.

'We'll have a look,' said Kedward.

We went upstairs again to the attic. Kedward opened the door. I followed him, entering a stratosphere of stale, sickly beer-and-cigar fumes. I half expected to find Bithel, still wearing his clothes, sleeping on the floor; the cap-surmounted sponge-bag still resting on the pillow. However, in the manner of persons long used to turning in for the night the worse for drink, he had managed to undress and get to bed, even to make himself reasonably comfortable there. His clothes were carefully folded on the floor beside him, one of the habits of the confirmed alcoholic, who knows himself incapable of arranging garments on a chair. The dummy had been ejected from the bed, which Bithel himself now occupied. He lay under the grey-brown blankets in a suit of yellow pyjamas, filthy and faded, knees raised to his chin. His body in this position looked like a corpse exhumed intact from some primitive burial ground for display in the showcase of a museum. Except that he was snoring savagely, cheeks puffing in and out, the colour of his face, too, suggested death. Watch, cigar-case, sleeping pills, stood on the broken chair beside the bed. In addition to these objects was another exhibit, something of peculiar horror. At first I could not imagine what this might be. It seemed either an ornament or a mechanical contrivance of complicated design. I looked closer. Was it apparatus or artefact? Then the truth was suddenly made plain. Before going to sleep, Bithel had placed his false teeth in the ashtray. He had removed the set from his mouth bodily, the jaws still clenched on the stub of the cigar. The effect created by this synthesis was extraordinary, macabre, surrealist. Again one thought of an excavated tomb, the fascination aroused in archaeologists of a thousand years hence at finding these fossilized vestiges beside Bithel's hunched skeleton; the speculations aroused as to the cultural significance of such related objects. Kedward shook Bithel. This had no effect whatever. He did not even open his eyes, though for a moment he ceased to snore. The sleeping pills must have been every bit as effective as Bithel himself had proclaimed them. Apart from gasping, snorting, animal sounds, which issued again so soon as his head touched the pillow, he gave no sign of life. Kedward turned to Williams, I.G., who had followed us up the stairs and was now standing in the doorway, still grinning.

'Tell the Orderly Corporal Mr Bithel is reporting sick this morning, Williams,' he said.

'Right you are, sir.'

Williams went off down the stairs two at a time.

'I'll come and have a look at old Bithel later,' said Kedward. 'Tell him he's been reported sick. Nothing much will be expected of him this morning, Sunday and newly joined.'

This was prudent handling of the situation. Kedward clearly knew how to act in an emergency. I suspected that Gwatkin, confronted with the same situation, might have made a fuss about Bithel's state. This show of good sense on Kedward's part impressed me. I indicated to him the false teeth gripping the cigar, but their horror left him cold. We moved on to breakfast. It had to be admitted Bithel had not made an ideal start to his renewed army career.

'I expect old Bithel had a glass too much last night,' said Kedward, as we breakfasted. 'I once drank more than I ought. You feel terrible. Ever done that, Nick?'

'Yes.'

'Awful, isn't it?'

'Awful, Idwal.'

'We'll go along early together, and you can take over your platoon for Church Parade.'

He told me where to meet him. However, very unexpectedly, Bithel himself appeared downstairs before it was time for church. He smiled uncomfortably when he saw me.

'Never feel much like breakfast on Sundays for some reason,' he said.

I warned him that he had been reported sick.

'I found that out from the boy, Williams, who is acting as my batman,' said Bithel. 'Got it cancelled. While I was talking to him, I discovered there was another boy called Daniels from my home town who might take on being my regular servant. Williams got hold of him for me. I liked the look of him.'

We set off up the street together. Bithel was wearing the khaki side-cap that had been set on the sponge-bag the night before. A size too small for him, it was placed correctly according to Standing Orders – in this respect generally disregarded in wartime – squarely on the centre of his head. The cap was also cut higher than normal (like Saint-Loup's, I thought), which gave Bithel the look of a sprite in pantomime; perhaps rather – taking into consideration his age, bulk, moustache – some comic puppet halfway between the Walrus and the Carpenter. His face was pitted and blotched like the surface of a Gruyère cheese, otherwise he seemed none the worse from the night before, except for some shortness of breath. He must have seen me glance at his cap, because he smiled ingratiatingly.

'Regulations allow these caps,' he said. 'They're more comfortable than those peaked SD affairs. Cheaper, too. Got this one for seventeen bob, two shillings off because slightly shop-soiled. You don't notice the small stain on top, do you?'

'Not at all.'

He looked behind us and lowered his voice.

'None of the rest of them were at the 'varsity,' he said.

'I've been making inquiries. What do you do in Civvy Street – that's the correct army phrase, I believe.'

I indicated that I wrote for the papers, not mentioning books because, if not specifically in your line, authorship is an embarrassing subject for all concerned. Besides, it never sounds like a serious occupation. Up to that moment, no one had pressed inquiries further than that, satisfied that journalism was a known form of keeping body and soul together, even if an esoteric one.

'I thought you might do something of the sort,' said Bithel, speaking with respect. 'I was trained for professional life too – intended for an auctioneer, like my pa. Never cared for the work somehow. Didn't even finish my training, as a matter of fact. Always been more or less interested in the theatre. Had walk-on parts once or twice but I'm no actor. I'm quite aware of that. I like doing odd jobs in any case. Can't bear being tied down. Worked for a time in our local cinema, for instance. Didn't have to do much except turn up in the evening wearing a dinner jacket.'

'Does that sort of thing bring in enough?'

'Not much cash in it, of course. You'll never make a fortune that way, but I rub along all right with the few pennies I have already. Helps not being married. I expect you're married?'

'I am, as a matter of fact.'

He made marriage sound as if it required some excuse.

'I thought you would be,' he said. 'As I mentioned, I'm not. Never found the right girl somehow.'

Bithel looked infinitely uncomfortable when he admitted that. There was a pause in our conversation. I could not think of anything to suggest. Girls certainly did not appear much in his line, though you never could tell. I asked how he came to be in the Territorial Army Reserve, which seemed to require explanation.

'Joined the Terriers years ago,' he said. 'Seemed the thing to do. Never thought I'd wear uniform again when I gave them up. Rather glad to get back now and have some regular money rolling in. I've been out of a job, as a matter of fact, and what I've got doesn't support me. We draw Field Allowance here, so I heard last night. I expect you know that already. Makes a nice addition to the pay. Funds were running rather low, to tell the truth. Always such a lot to spend money on. Reading, for instance. I expect you're an omnivorous reader, if you're a journalist. What digests do you take?'

At first I thought he referred to some sort of medical treatment, harping back to the conversation of the chaplains the night before, then realized the question had something to do with reading. I had to admit I did not take any digests. Bithel seemed disappointed at this answer.

'I don't really buy a lot of digests myself,' he admitted. 'Perhaps not as many as I should. They have interesting articles in them sometimes. About sex, for instance. Sex psychology, I mean. Do you know about that?'

'I've heard of it.'

'I don't mean the cheap stuff just to catch the eye, girls and legs, all that. There are abnormal sides you'd never guess. It's wiser to know about such things, don't you think?'

'Certainly.'

Bithel moved nearer as we walked, lowering his voice again. There was a faint suggestion of scented soap at this close, too close, range.

'Did they say anything about me before I arrived?' he asked in a troubled tone.

'Who?'

'Anybody in the Battalion?'

'How do you mean?'

'Any details about my family?'

'Somebody said you were a brother of the VC.'

'They did?'

'Yes.'

'What did you say when they told you that?'

'I thought you must be too young to be his brother – more likely his nephew.'

'Quite right. I'm not Bithel VC's brother.'

'You are his nephew?'

'I never said so, did I? But don't let's talk any more about that. There was something else I wanted to ask you. Did they say anything about games?'

'What sort of games?'

'Did they say I played any special game?'

'There was some talk of your having played rugger for Wales.'

Bithel groaned.

'There was talk of that?' he asked, as if to make sure he had heard right.

'Yes.'

'I knew there'd been a misunderstanding,' he said.

'What about?'

'Why, about my playing football – about rugger. You know what it is when you've had a few drinks. Very easy to give a wrong impression. I must have done that when I phoned that officer dealing with TA Reservists. Talked too much about local matters, sport, other people of the name of Bithel and so on.'

'So the VC is no relation, and you didn't play rugger for Wales?'

'I wouldn't go so far as to say he was no relation. Never know who you may be related to in this part of the world. He's not a brother or uncle anyway. I must have managed to mislead that fellow completely if he got that idea into his head. He didn't sound very bright on the phone. I thought so at the time. One of these old dug-outs, I suppose. Colonel Blimp type. But it isn't Bithel VC who worries me so much. It's this rugger misunderstanding.'

'How did it arise?'

'God knows. Something misheard on the phone too, I should think. I believe there was a merchant called Bithel in the Welsh Fifteen one year. Perhaps there was a Bithel who played cricket for Glamorgan and I've muddled it. One or the other, I'm sure. It was a few years back anyway. I must have mentioned it for some reason.'

'It doesn't really matter, does it?'

'It would if we had to play rugger.'

'That isn't very likely.'

'The fact is I've never played rugger in my life,' said Bithel. 'Never had the chance. Not particularly keen to either. Do you think we shall have to play?'

'Not much time with all the training, I should imagine.'

'I hope not,' he said, rather desperately. 'There's a rumour we're going to move almost at once in any case.'

'Any idea where?'

'People seem to think Northern Ireland. I say, this parade ground is a long way off, isn't it. Hope we shan't be inspected too closely, I'm not all that well shaved. I cut myself this morning. Hand shaky, for some reason'

'That dance was a splendid affair.'

'What dance?'

'The dance you did round the dummy in your bed last night.'

'Ah,' said Bithel laughing, 'I've heard that one before – having somebody on by pretending he made a fool of himself the night before. I know when I'm having my leg pulled. As a matter of fact I was rather relieved when everyone went off quietly to bed last night. I thought there might be some ragging, and I was feeling tired after the journey. They used to rag a lot when I was in Territorial camp years ago. I never liked it. Not cut out for that sort of thing. But to get back to razors – what shaving soap do you use? I'm trying a new kind. Saw it advertized in *Health and Strength*. Thought I'd experiment. I like a change of soaps from time to time. It freshens you up.'

By that time we had reached the parade ground. Kedward was already there. He took me off to the platoon I was to command. Bithel disappeared in another direction. Kedward explained certain matters, then we marched up and down side by side until officers were ordered to fall in. The service was held in one of the parish churches of the town. Later, from the pulpit, Popkiss, transformed now from the pale, embarrassed cleric of the saloon bar, orated with the ease and energy shared by officers and men throughout the Battalion. His text was from Ezekiel. Popkiss read the passage at length:

'The hand of the Lord was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones, and caused me to pass them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley: and, lo, they were very dry. And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God thou knowest. Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus saith the Lord God unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath into you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the Lord. So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to bone. And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them above; and there was no breath in them. Then he said unto me, Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came unto them and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army . . .'

Popkiss paused, looked up from his Testament, stretched out his arms on either side. The men were very silent in the pitch-pine pews.

'. . . Oh, my brethren, think on that open valley, think on it with me . . . a valley, do I picture it, by the shaft of a shut-down mine, where, under the dark mountain side, the slag heaps lift their heads to the sky, a valley such as those valleys in which you yourselves abide . . . Journey with me, my brethren, into that open valley, journey with me . . . Know you not those same dry bones? . . . You know them well. . . . Bones without flesh and sinew, bones without skin or breath . . . They are our bones, my brethren, the bones of you and of me, bones that await the noise and the mighty shaking, the gift of the four winds of which the prophet of old did tell . . . Must we not come together, my brethren, everyone of us, as did the bones of that ancient valley, quickened with breath, bone to bone, sinew to sinew, skin to skin . . . Unless I speak falsely, an exceeding great army . . .'

2

THE MOVEMENT ORDER CAME NOT MUCH more than a week afterwards, before I had properly awakened from the dream through the perspectives of which I ranged, London as remote from me as from Kedward, Isobel's letters the only residuum of a world occupied by other matters than platoon training or turning out the guard. As if by the intoxication of a drug, or compulsive hypnotic influences on the will, another world had been entered by artificial means, through which one travelled irresistibly, ominously, like Dr Trelawney and his fellow magicians, borne by their spells out on to the Astral Plane. Now, at last, I was geared to the machine of war, no longer an extraneous organism existing separately in increasingly alien conditions. For the moment, routine duties scarcely allowed thought. There was a day frantically occupied with packing. Then the whole Battalion was on parade. Orders were shouted. We moved off in column of route, leaving behind us Sardis, one of the Seven Churches of Asia, where the garments were white of those few who remained undefiled. The men, although departing from their own neighbourhoods and country, were in a fairly buoyant mood. Something was beginning at last. They sang softly:

'Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land:
I am weak, but thou art mighty,
Hold me with thy powerful hand,

Bread of heaven,
Bread of heaven
Feed me till I want no more . . .'

This singing on the march, whatever form it took, always affirmed the vicissitudes of life, the changes, so often for the worse, that beset human existence, especially in the army, especially in time of war. After a while they abandoned the hymn, though not those accustomed themes of uncertainty, hardship, weariness, despondency, vain effort, contemplation of which gives such support to the soldier:

'We had ter join,
We had ter join,
We had ter join Belisha's army:

Ten bob a week,
Bugger all to eat,
Great big boots and blisters on yer feet.

We had ter join,
We had ter join,
We had ter join Belisha's army:

Sitting on the grass,
Polishing up the brass,
Great black spiders running up yer – back.

We had ter join – we had ter join—
We had ter join – we had ter join . . .'

Gwatkin was in a state of unconcealed excitement. He bawled out his commands, loud as if through a megaphone, perpetually checking Kedward, Breeze and myself about minor matters. I could just see Bithel plodding along with his platoon at the rear of the company immediately ahead of us. He had turned up on parade carrying a small green leather dressing-case, much battered, which he grasped while he marched.

'Didn't like to trust it with the heavy baggage,' he said, adjusting the worn waterproof cover, while we stood easy at the railway station. 'The only piece of my mother's luggage I have left. She's gone to a Better Place now, you know.'

The train set out towards the north. This was the beginning of a long journey to an unknown destination. Night fell. Hours later, we detrained in stygian darkness. Here was a port. Black craft floated on a pitchy, infernal lake. Beyond the mouth of the harbour, the wash of waves echoed. The boat on which the Battalion embarked was scarcely large enough to accommodate our strength. The men were fitted in at last, sitting or lying like the cargo of a slave ship. The old steamer chugged away from the jetty, and into open sea. Wind was up. We heaved about in choppy waters. There was not going to be much sleep for anyone that night. After much scurrying about on the part of officers and NCOs, Sergeant Pendry reported at last that all was correct. He was accompanied by Corporal Gwylt, one of the Company's several wits, tiny, almost a dwarf, with a huge head of black curly hair; no doubt a member of that primitive race of which the tall, fair Celt had become overlord. Not always to be relied upon to carry out purely military duties to perfection, Gwylt was acceptable as an NCO because he never stopped talking and singing, so that his personality, though obtrusive, helped the Platoon through some of the tedium inseparable from army life.

'Has everyone had their cocoa issue, Sergeant Pendry?'

'That they have, sir, very good it was.'

'Some of the boys was too sick to drink their cocoa, sir,' said Corporal Gwylt, who felt his comment always required.

'Are a lot of the Platoon sea-sick?'

'I told them to lie still and it would pass,' said Sergeant Pendry. 'They do make a lot of fuss, some of them.'

'Oh, bloody sick, some of them,' said Corporal Gwylt, like a Greek chorus. 'That fair boy, Jones, D., bloody sick he has been.'

The boat ploughed through wind and wave. Was this the night journey on the sea of a thousand dreams loaded with hidden meaning? Certainly our crossing was no less mysterious than those nocturnal voyages of sleep. Towards morning I retired below to shave, feeling revived when I returned to deck. The sky was getting lighter and land was in sight. An easterly breeze was blowing when we went ashore, which sprayed about a gentle drizzle. Beyond the harbour stretched a small town, grey houses, factory chimneys. In the distance, mountains were obscured by cloud. Everything looked mean and down-at-heel. There was nothing to make one glad to have arrived in this country.

'March your men ashore promptly when the order comes, platoon commanders,' said Gwatkin. 'Show initiative. Don't hang about. Get cracking.'

He looked rather green in the face, as if, like Jones, D., he too had been sick during the crossing, himself far from the condition required for 'getting cracking'. The companies filed down the gangway, one by one, forming up later by a railway line. There were the usual delays. The rain, borne towards us on a driving wind, was increasing in volume. The Battalion stood easy, waiting for word from the Embarkation Staff. Girls with shawls over their heads were on their way to work. Disregarding the rain, they stopped and watched us from the side of the road, standing huddled together, talking and laughing.

'Aigh-o, Mary,' shouted Corporal Gwylt. 'Have you come to see the foreigners?'

The girls began to giggle purposefully.

'It's no brave day ye've brought with ye,' one of them called back.

'What was that you said, Mary, my love?'

'Why did ye not bring a braver day with ye, I'm asking. 'Tis that we've been wanting since Sunday, sure.'

'What kind of a day, Mary, my own?'

'Why a brave day. 'Tis prosperous weather we're needing.'

Corporal Gwylt turned to Sergeant Pendry and made a gesture with his hand to convey absolute incredulity at such misuse of language.

'*Brave* day?' he said. 'Did you hear what she called it, Sergeant Pendry?'

'I did that, Corporal Gwylt.'

'So that's a funny way to talk.'

'That it is.'

'Now you can tell the way people speak we're far from home.'

'You'll be getting many surprises in this country, my lad,' said Sergeant Pendry. 'You may be sure of that.'

'Will some of them be nice surprises, Sergeant?'

'Ask not that of me.'

'Oh, don't you think I'll be getting some nice surprises, Sergeant Pendry,' said Corporal Gwylt in a soft wheedling tone, 'like a plump little girl to keep me warm at night.'

CSM Cadwallader was pottering about nearby, like a conscientious matron at a boys' school determined to make sure all was well. He had the compact professional feeling of the miner, which he combined with a rather unusual taste for responsibility, so that any company commander was lucky to claim his services.

'We'll be keeping you warm, Corporal Gwylt,' he said. 'Make no mistake. There'll be plenty of work for you, I'll tell you straight. Do not worry about the night-time. Then you will want your rest, not little girls, nor big ones neither.'

'But a plump little girl, Sergeant-Major? Do not yourself wish to meet a plump little girl?'

'Put not such ideas into the Sergeant-Major's head, Corporal Gwylt,' said Sergeant Pendry. 'He does not wish your dirty things.'

'Nor me, the *dirty* girls,' said Corporal Gwylt. 'I never said the dirty ones.'

'Nor then the clean ones, understand.'

'Oh, does he not?' said Corporal Gwylt, in feigned astonishment. 'Not even the clean ones? Do you think that indeed, Sergeant Pendry?'

'I do think that, I tell you.'

'And why, whatever?'

'The Sergeant-Major is a married man, you must know.'

'So you think girls are just for young lads like me, Sergeant-Major? That is good for me, I'm sure.'

'Never mind what I think, Corporal.'

'He is a lucky man, the Sergeant Major,' said Sergeant Pendry sententiously. 'You will be glad when you reach his age, no longer foolish and running after girls.'

'Oh, dear me, is it true what Sergeant Pendry says, Sergeant-Major, that girls are for you no longer? I am that sorry to hear.'

CSM Cadwallader allowed himself a dry smile.

'Have you never heard, Corporal Gwylt, there's those to find many a good tune played on old fiddles?' he said benevolently.

The Embarkation Staff Officer turned up at that moment with a sheaf of papers. The Battalion was on the move again. Corporal Gwylt had just time to blow a kiss to the girls, who waved frantically, redoubling their gigglings. The Company tramped off towards the train in a siding.

'Now then, there,' shouted the Sergeant-Major, 'pick up the step in the rear files. Left – left – left, right, left . . .'

We steamed through bare, dismal country, wide fields, white cabins, low walls of piled stones, stretches of heather, more mountains far away on the horizon.

'This will give us better training areas than back home,' said Gwatkin.

He had recovered from his sea sickness and the tension brought on by the move. Now he was relatively calm.

'We shall be more like soldiers here,' he said with satisfaction.

'What happens when we arrive, Rowland?' Breeze asked. 'I hope there'll be something to eat.'

Breeze's questions were usually aimed to score the textbook answer from Gwatkin.

'The second echelon of the supply column will have preceded us,' said Gwatkin sharply.

'And what do they do?'

'They will have broken bulk and be ready to issue to units. You should spend more time on your *Field Service Pocket Book*, Yanto.'

We arrived at a small, unalluring industrial town. Once more the Battalion formed up. By now the men were tired. Singing was sombre as we marched in:

> 'My lips smile no more, my heart loses its lightness,
> No dream of the future my spirit can cheer,
> I only would brood on the past and its brightness,
> The dead I have mourned are again gathered here.
> From every dark nook they press forward to meet me,

> I lift up my eyes to the broad leafy dome.
> And others are there looking downward to greet me,
> The ashgrove, the ashgrove, alone is my home . . .'

Gwatkin was right about being more like soldiers in these new surroundings. Barracks had been created from a disused linen factory, the long narrow sheds in which the flax had formerly been treated offering barrack-rooms stark as a Foreign Legion film set. Officers were billeted in a forlorn villa on the outskirts of the town, a house that had no doubt once belonged to some successful local businessman. It was a mile or more away from the barracks. There, I still shared a room with Kedward, Breeze and Pumphrey, the last of whom had not yet achieved his RAF transfer. Another subaltern, Craddock, was in with us too, brother of the girl to whom Kedward was engaged. Craddock, fat and energetic, was Messing Officer, which meant he returned to billets in the middle of the night several times a week, when he would either turn on the light, or blunder about the room in the dark, falling over other people's camp-beds in a fruitless effort to find his own. Both methods were disturbing. There was, in any case, not much room to manœuvre round the beds, even when the light was on. Craddock's midnight arrivals were not the only inconvenience. Breeze left old razor blades about in profusion, causing Pumphrey to cut his foot one morning. Kedward talked in his sleep throughout the night, shouting commands, as if he were drilling a company: 'At the halt – on the left – form close column of – platoons . . .'

Pumphrey, inclined to bicker, would throw towels about and sponges. A window pane was broken, which no one ever seemed responsible for mending, through which the night wind whistled, while cold struck up insistently from the floor, penetrating the canvas of a camp-bed. Snow had returned. I record these conditions not as particularly formidable in the circumstances, but to indicate they were sufficiently far from ideal to encourage a change, when, as it happened, opportunity arose. This came about through Gwatkin in an unexpected manner. During the weeks that followed our arrival in these new surroundings, I began to know him better. He was nearer my own age than the other subalterns, except Bithel. Even the captains tended to be younger than Gwatkin and myself, as time went on, some of the older ones being gradually shifted, as insufficiently proficient at their job, to Holding Battalions or the Infantry Training Centre.

'We're getting rid of the dead wood,' said Gwatkin. 'Just as well.'

His own abrupt manner of speaking continued, and he loved to find fault for its own sake. At the same time, he evidently wanted to be friendly, while fearing that too easy a relationship with a subordinate, even one of similar age, might be unmilitary. There were unexpected sides to Gwatkin, sudden displays of uncertainty under a façade meant to be very certain. Some of his duties he carried out very well; for others, he had little or no natural talent.

'A company commander,' said Dicky Umfraville, when we met later that year, 'needs the qualifications of a ringmaster in a first-class circus, and a nanny in a large family.'

Gwatkin aspired to this dazzling combination of gifts – to become (as Pennistone later said) a military saint. Somehow he always fell short of that coveted status. His imperfections never derived from any willingness to spare himself. On the contrary, inability to delegate authority, insistence that he must do everything himself, important or unimportant, was one of Gwatkin's chief handicaps in achieving his high aim. For example, he instituted a 'Company Officer of the Day', one of whose duties was to make sure all was well at the men's dinners. This job, on the whole redundant, since the Orderly Officer of necessity visited all Mess Rooms to investigate 'any complaints', was made additionally superfluous by Gwatkin himself appearing as often as not at dinners, in order to make sure the Company Officer of the Day was not shirking his rounds. In fact, he scarcely allowed himself any time off at all. He seemed half aware that this intense keenness was not, in final result, what was required; at least not without more understanding on his own part. Besides, Gwatkin had none of that faculty, so necessary in the army, of accepting rebuke – even unjust rebuke – and carrying on as if nothing had happened. Criticism from above left him dreadfully depressed.

'It's no good letting the army get you down,' the Adjutant, Maelgwyn-Jones, used to say. 'Just remember, when you're worrying about the Brigadier's inspection, that day will pass, as other days in the army pass.'

Maelgwyn-Jones himself did not always act upon this teaching. He was an efficient, short-tempered Regular, whose slight impediment of speech became a positive stutter when he grew enraged. He wanted to get back to the battalion he came from, where there was more hope of immediate action and consequent promotion. Thoroughly reliable as an officer, hard working as an adjutant, Maelgwyn-Jones did not share – indeed was totally unapprehending of – Gwatkin's resplendent vision of army life. When he pulled up Gwatkin for some such lapse as unpunctual disposal of the Company's swill, Gwatkin would behave as if his personal honour had been called into question; then concentrate feverishly on more energetic training, smarter turn-out. In a sense, of course, that was correct enough, but the original cause of complaint was not always put right in the most expeditious manner. The fact was

Gwatkin lacked in his own nature that grasp of 'system' for which he possessed such admiration. This deficiency was perhaps connected in some way with a kind of poetry within him, a poetry which had somehow become a handicap in its efforts to find an outlet. Romantic ideas about the way life is lived are often to be found in persons themselves fairly coarse-grained. This was to some extent true of Gwatkin. His coarseness of texture took the form of having to find a scapegoat after he himself had been in trouble. The scapegoat was usually Breeze, though any of the rest of the Company might suffer. Bithel, usually in hot water of some kind, would have offered an ever available target for these punitive visitations of Gwatkin's, but Bithel was in another company. All the same, although no concern of his in the direct sense, Bithel's appearance and demeanour greatly irked Gwatkin in a general way. He spoke of this one afternoon, when Bithel, wearing one of his gaiters improperly adjusted, crossed our path on the way back from afternoon training.

'Did you ever see such an unsoldierly type?' Gwatkin said. 'And his brother a VC too.'

'Is it certain they're brothers, not just fairly distant relations?'

I was not sure whether Bithel's words to me on that earlier occasion had been spoken in confidence. The tone he had adopted suggested something of the sort. Besides, Bithel might suddenly decide to return to the earlier cycle of legends he had apparently disseminated about himself to facilitate his Reserve call-up; or at least he might not wish to have them specifically denied on his own authority. However, Gwatkin showed no wish to verify the truth, or otherwise, of Bithel's alleged kinships.

'Even if they are not brothers, Bithel is a disgrace for a man with a VC in the family,' Gwatkin said severely. 'He should be ashamed. That VC ought to give him a pride in himself. I wish a relative of mine had won the VC, won an MC even. And it is my belief, I am telling you, Nick, that all about Bithel's rugger is tommy-rot.'

That last conviction was unanswerable by this time. No one who had seen Bithel proceeding at the double could possibly suppose his abilities in the football field had ever been more than moderate.

'Do you know when Idwal was Orderly Officer last week,' said Gwatkin, 'he found Bithel in his dressing-gown listening to the gramophone with the Mess waiters. Bithel said he was looking for Daniels, that servant of his I don't much like either. And then we are expected to keep discipline in the unit.'

'That bloody gramophone makes a frightful row at all hours.'

'So it does, too, and I'm not going to stay in those billets any longer. I have had enough. My camp-bed was taken down to the Company Office this morning. That is the place for a company commander to be. Half the day is lost in this place walking backwards and forwards from billets to barracks. We are lucky enough to have an office next door to the Company Store. The bed can be folded up and go into the store for the day.'

We had reached a fork in the road. One way led to barracks, the other to billets. Gwatkin seemed suddenly to come to a decision.

'Why don't you come down to the Company Office too?' he asked.

He spoke roughly, almost as if he were demanding why I had disobeyed an order.

'Would there be room?'

'Plenty.'

'We're pretty thick on the ground where I am at present, even though Idwal is on the Anti-gas course at the moment.'

'It won't be so lively sleeping in the office.'

'I can stand that.'

'The great thing is you're on the spot. Near the men. Where every officer should be.'

I was flattered by the suggestion. Kedward was at the Corps School of Chemical Warfare at Castlemallock – usually known as the Anti-gas School – so that Breeze and I were Gwatkin's only subalterns at that moment, and there was a lot of work to do. As I have said, accommodation at the billets had little to recommend it. The Company Office was at least no worse a prospect. To be in barracks would be convenient, not least in its reduction of continual trudging backwards and forwards to the billets.

'I'll have my kit taken down this evening.'

That was the beginning of my comparative intimacy with Gwatkin. Sharing with him the Company Office at night altered not only our mutual relationship, but also the whole tempo of night and morning. Instead of the turmoil of Kedward, Breeze, Pumphrey and Craddock getting dressed, talking, scuffling, singing, there was only the occasional harsh, serious, professional comment of Gwatkin; his tense silences. He slept heavily, often dropping off before the electric light was out and the blackout down; never, like myself, lying awake listening to the talk in the Company Store next door. The partition between the store and the office did not reach all the way to the ceiling, so that conversation held in the store after Lights Out, although usually carried out in comparatively low tones – in contrast with the normal speech of the unit – was often audible. Only the storeman, Lance-Corporal Gittins, was supposed to sleep in the store at night, but, in practice, the room usually housed several others; semi-official assistants of Gittins, friends, relations, Company personalities, like Corporal Gwylt. These would gather in the evening, if not on guard duties, and listen to the wireless; several of those assembled later staying the night among the crates and piles of blankets, to slumber in the peculiar, musty smell of the store, an odour somewhere between the Natural History Museum and an oil-and-colour shop. Lance-Corporal Gittins was CSM Cadwallader's brother-in-law. He was a man not always willing to recognise the artificial and temporary hierarchy imposed by military rank.

'Now, see it you must, Gareth,' I heard the Sergeant-Major's voice once insisting on the other side of the partition. 'In time of peace – in the mine – you are above me, Gareth, and above Sergeant Pendry. Here, that is not. No longer is it the mine. In the Company we are above you. It would be good you remember that, Gareth.'

Gittins was a figure of some prestige in the Company, not only on account of dominion over valuable stock-in-trade, but also for his forcible character. Dark, stocky, another strongly pre-Celtic type, he could probably have become sergeant – even sergeant-major – without difficulty, had he wished for promotion. Like many others, he preferred to avoid such responsibilities, instead ruling the store, where he guarded every item as if it were his own personal property acquired only after long toil and self-denial. Nothing was more difficult than to extort from him the most insignificant replacement of kit.

'I tell you, not without the Skipper's direct order,' was his usual answer to such requests. This circumspection was very generally respected. To coax anything from Gittins was considered a triumph. One of the attractions of the store was its wireless, which would sometimes be tuned in to Haw-Haw's propaganda broadcast from Germany. These came on just after midnight:

'. . . This is *Chairmany* calling . . . *Chairmany* calling . . . These are the stations Köln, Hamburg and DJA . . .

Here is the news in English . . . Fifty-three more British aircraft were shot down over Kiel last night making a total of one hundred and seventeen since Tuesday . . . One hundred and seventeen more British aircraft have been shot down in forty-eight hours . . . The British people are asking their Government why British pilots cannot stay in the air . . . They are asking why British aircraft is inferior to *Chairman* aircraft . . . The British people are asking themselves why they have lost the war in the air . . . They are asking, for example, what has happened to the Imperial Airways Liner *Ajax* . . . Why is the Imperial Airways Liner *Ajax* three weeks overdue, they are asking . . . We can tell you . . . The Imperial Airways Liner *Ajax* is at the bottom of the sea . . . The fishes are swimming in and out of the wreckage of the Imperial Airways Liner *Ajax* . . . The Imperial Airways Liner *Ajax* and her escort were shot down by *Chairman* fighter planes . . . The British have lost the war in the air . . . They have lost the war in the air . . . It is the same on the water . . . The Admiralty is wondering about the *Resourceful* . . . They are worried at the Admiralty about the *Resourceful* . . . They need not worry about the *Resourceful* any more . . . We will tell them about the *Resourceful* . . . The *Resourceful* is at the bottom of the sea with the Imperial Airways Liner *Ajax* . . . The *Resourceful* was sunk by a *Chairman* submarine . . . The Admiralty is in despair at *Chairman* command of the sea . . . Britain has lost the war on the sea . . . One hundred and seventy-five thousand *gross registered* tons of British shipping was sent to the bottom last week . . . The British Government is in despair at these losses in the air and on the water . . . That is not the only thing that makes the British Government despair . . . Not by any means . . . The food shortage in Britain is becoming acute . . . The evacuated women and children are living in misery . . . Instead of food, they are being fed on lies . . . Government lies . . . Only *Chairmany* can tell you the truth . . . The *Chairman* radio speaks the truth . . . The *Chairman* radio gives the best and latest news . . . *Chairmany* is winning the war . . . Think it over, Britain, think it over . . . *Chairmany* is winning the war . . . Listen, Britain . . . Listen, Britain . . . We repeat to all listeners in the Far East . . . Listen, South America . . .'

Someone in the store turned the button. The nagging, sneering, obsessive accents died away with a jerk, as if a sack had been advantageously thrust over the speaker's head, bestowing an immediate sense of relief at his extinction. There was a long pause next door.

'I do wonder he can remember all that,' said a voice, possibly that of Williams, W.H., one of the singers of Sardis, now runner in my platoon.

'Someone writes it down for him, don't you see,' said another voice that could have been Corporal Gwylt's.

'And do they give him all those figures too?'

'Of course they do.'

'So that is it.'

'You must know that, lad.'

'What a lot he do talk.'

'That's for they pay him.'

'Bloody sure he is Germany will win the war. Why does he call it like that – *Chairmany* – it's a funny way to speak to be sure.'

'Maybe that's the way they say it there.'

'If Hitler wins the war, I tell you, lad, we'll go down the mine for sixpence a day.'

No one in the store attempted to deny this conclusion. There was another pause and some coughing. It was not easy to tell how many persons were collected there. Gittins himself appeared to have gone to sleep, only Gwylt and Williams, W. H., unable to bring the day to a close. I thought they too must have nodded off, when suddenly Williams's voice sounded again.

'How would you like to go up in an aircraft, Ivor?'

'I would not mind that so much.'

'I hope I do not have to do that.'

'We are not in the RAF, lad, what are you thinking?'

'I would not like it up there I am sure too.'

'They will not put you up there, no worry.'

'You do not know what they will do, look at those parachutists, indeed.'

'You make me think of Dai and Shoni when they went up in a balloon.'

'And what was that, I wonder.'

'They took two women with them.'

'Did they, then?'

'When the balloon was in the sky, the air began to leak something terrible out of it, it did, and Dai was frightened, so frightened Dai was, and Dai said to Shoni, Look you, Shoni, this balloon is not safe at all, and the air is leaking out of it terrible, we shall have to jump for it, and Shoni said to Dai, But, Dai, what about the women? and Dai said, Oh, fook the women, and Shoni said, But have we time?'

'We shall not have any time to sleep till morning break, I am telling you, if you will jaw all through the night,' spoke another voice, certainly Lance-Corporal Gittins, the storeman, this time. 'How many hundred and hundred of those Dai and Shoni stories have I in all my days had to hear, I should like to know, and most of them said by you, Ivor. Is tarts never out of your thought.'

'Why, Gareth, you talk about tarts too,' said Williams, W. H. 'What was that you was telling my butty of Cath Pendry yesterday?'

'What about her?'

Gittins sounded more truculent this time.

'Her and Evans the checkweighman.'

'You was not meant to hear that, I tell you, Williams, W. H.'

'Come on, Gareth,' said Gwylt.

'Never mind you, Ivor.'

'Oh, that do sound something I would like to hear.'

No one answered Gwylt. There was a lot more coughing, some throat clearing, then silence. They must all have gone to sleep. I was on the point of doing the same, had even reached a state of only semi-consciousness, when there was a sudden exclamation from the direction of Gwatkin's bed. He had woken with a start and was feeling for his electric torch. He found the torch at last and, clambering out of bed, began to put up the blackout boards on the window frame.

'What is it, Rowland?'

'Turn the light on,' he said, 'I've got this board fixed now.'

I switched on the light, which was nearer my bed than his.

'I've just thought of something,' Gwatkin said agitatedly. 'Do you remember I said units had been issued with a new codeword for intercommunication within the Brigade?'

'Yes.'

'What did I do with it?'

He seemed almost to be talking in his sleep.

'You put it in the box, didn't you?'

Gwatkin's usual treatment of the flow of paper that entered the Company Office daily was to mark each item with the date in the inked letters of the Company's rubber-stamp, himself initialling the centre of its circular mauve impression. He would treat the most trivial printed matter in this way, often wryly smiling as he remarked: 'This becomes a habit.' The click of the instrument on an official document, together with his own endorsement 'R. G.' – written with a flourish – seemed to give him a feeling of having settled that matter once and for all, a faint but distinct sense of absolute power. If classified as 'Secret' or 'Confidential', the stuff was put in a large cashbox, of which Gwatkin himself kept the key. The Company's 'Imprest Account' was locked away in this box, together with all sorts of other papers which had taken Gwatkin's fancy as important. The box itself was kept in a green steel cupboard, the shape of a wardrobe, also locked, though its key was considered less sacred than that of the cashbox.

'Are you sure I put it in the box?'

'Pretty sure.'

'Codewords are vital.'

'I know.'

'I'd better make certain.'

He put on a greatcoat over his pyjamas, because the nights were still fairly cold. Then he began fumbling about with the keys, opening the cupboard and bringing out the cashbox. There was not much room in the Company Office at the best of time, when both beds were erected, scarcely any space at all in which to operate, so that the foot of my own bed was the only convenient ledge on which to rest the box while Gwatkin went through its contents. He began to sort out the top layer of papers, arranging them in separate piles over the foot of my bed, all over my greatcoat, which was serving as eiderdown. I sat up in bed, watching him strew my legs with official forms and instructional leaflets of one kind or another. He dealt them out with great care, as if diverting himself with some elaborate form of Patience, military pamphlets doing duty for playing cards. The deeper he delved into the cashbox, the more meticulously he arranged the contents. Among other items, he turned out a small volume bound in faded red cloth. This book, much tattered, was within reach. I picked it up. Opening at the fly-leaf: I read: R. Gwatkin, Capt.', together with the designation of the Regiment. The title-page was that of a pocket edition of *Puck of Pook's Hill*. Gwatkin gave a sudden grunt. He had found whatever he was seeking.

'Here it is,' he said. 'Thank God. I remember now. I put it in a envelope in a special place at the bottom of the box.'

He began to replace the papers, one by one, in the elaborate sequence he had ordained for them. I handed him *Puck of Pook's Hill*. He took the book from me, still apparently pondering the fearful possibilities consequent on failure to trace the codeword. Then he suddenly became aware I had been looking at the Kipling stories. He took the little volume from me, and pushed it away under a *Glossary of Military Terms and Organization in the Field*. For a second he seemed a shade embarrassed.

'That's a book by Rudyard Kipling,' he said defensively, as if the statement explained something.

'So I see.'

'Ever read anything by him?'

'Yes.'

'Read this one?'

'Ages ago.'

'What did you think of it?'

'I liked it.'

'You've read a lot of books, haven't you, Nick?'

'I have to in my profession.'

Gwatkin locked the tin box and replaced it in the cupboard.

'Turn the light out,' he said. 'And I'll take the blackout down again.'

I switched out the light. He removed the window boards. I heard him arranging the greatcoat over himself in the bed.

'I don't expect you remember,' he said, 'but there's a story in that book about a Roman centurion.'

'Of course.'

'That was the one I liked.'

'It's about the best.'

'I sometimes read it again.'

He pulled the greatcoat higher over him.

'I've read it lots of times really,' he said. 'I like it. I don't like any of the others so much.'

'The Norman knight isn't bad.'

'Not so good as the centurion.'

'Do you like his other books?'

'Whose?'

'Kipling's.'

'Oh, yes, of course. I know he wrote a lot of other books. I did try one of them. I couldn't get on with it somehow.'

'Which one did you try?'

'I can't remember the name. Can't remember much about it, to tell the truth. I just didn't like it. All written in a special sort of language I didn't understand. I don't read much. Got other things to do. It's not like you, reading more or less as a business.'

He stopped speaking, was almost immediately asleep and breathing heavily. This was the first evidence come to light that anyone in the unit had ever read a book for pleasure, unless Bithel's 'digests' might be thought to have brought him to a public library in search of some work on sexual psychology. This was an interesting discovery about Gwatkin. By now snores were sounding from the store. I rolled over towards the wall and slept too. The following day Gwatkin made no reference to this nocturnal conversation. Perhaps he had forgotten about it. Leaving barracks that evening there was a small incident to illustrate the way in which he took failure to heart. This happened when Gwatkin, Kedward and I were passing the vehicle park, where the bren-carriers stood.

'I'd like to try driving one of those buses,' Kedward said.

'They're easy enough,' said Gwatkin.

He scrambled into the nearest carrier and started up the engine. However, when he put the vehicle in gear, it refused to move, only rocking backwards and forwards on its tracks. Gwatkin's small head and black moustache bobbed up and down at the end of the carrier, so that he seemed part of the chassis, a kind of figurehead, even the front half of an armoured centaur. There was also something that recalled a knight in the game of chess, immensely large and suddenly animated by some inner, mysterious power. For a time Gwatkin heaved up and down there, as if riding one of the cars on a warlike merry-go-round; then completely defeated by the machinery, perhaps out of order, he climbed slowly to the ground and rejoined us.

'I shouldn't have done that,' he said, humiliated.

All the same, this sort of thing did not at all impair his confidence in himself when it came to dealing with the men. Gwatkin prided himself on his relationship with the 'other ranks' in his company. He did not talk about it much, but the conviction was implicit in his behaviour. His attitude towards Sayce provided a good example. That was clear even before I witnessed their great scene together. Sayce was the Company bad character. He had turned up with another couple of throw-outs voided as unsuitable for employment from one of the regular battalions. His previous unit must have been thankful to get rid of him. Small and lean, with a yellow face and blackened teeth, his shortcomings were not to be numbered. Apart from such recurrent items as lateness on parade, deficiency of shaving kit, lack of clean socks, mislaid paybook, filthy rifle, generally unsatisfactory turnout, Sayce would produce some new, hitherto unthought-of crime most days. Dirty, disobliging, quarrelsome, little short of mutinous, he was heartily disliked by all ranks. Although a near criminal, he possessed none of the charm J. G. Quiggin, as a reviewer, used to attribute to criminals who wrote memoirs. On the contrary, Sayce, immoderately vain, was also stupid and unprepossessing. From time to time, in order to give him a chance to redeem himself from a series of disasters, he would be assigned some individual task, easy to undertake, but within range of conferring credit by its simple discharge. Sayce always made a hash of it; always, too, for the worst of reasons. He seemed preordained for detention.

'It will be the Glasshouse for that bugger Sayce,' Sergeant Pendry, who got along pretty well with almost everyone, used often to remark.

In dealing with Sayce, therefore, it might be thought Gwatkin would assume his favoured role of martinet, imposing a series of punishments that would eventually bring Sayce before the Commanding Officer; and certainly Sayce took his share of CBs from Gwatkin in the Company Office. At the same time, their point of contact, at least on Gwatkin's side, was not entirely unsympathetic. The fact was, Sayce appealed to Gwatkin's imagination. Those stylized pictures of army life on which Gwatkin's mind loved to dwell did not exclude a soldier of Sayce's type. Indeed, a professional bad character was obviously a type from which no army could remain wholly free. Accordingly, Gwatkin was prepared to treat Sayce with what many company commanders would have considered excessive consideration, to tolerate him up to a point, even to make serious efforts to reform him. Gwatkin had spoken to me more than once about these projects for Sayce's reformation, before he finally announced that he had planned a direct appeal to Sayce's better feelings.

'I'm going to have a straight talk with Sayce,' he said one day, when Sayce's affairs had reached some sort of climax. 'I'd like you to be present, Nick, as he's in your platoon.'

Gwatkin sat at the trestle table with the army blanket over it. I stood behind. Sayce, capless, was marched in by CSM Cadwallader and a corporal.

'You and the escort can leave the room, Sergeant-Major,' said Gwatkin. 'I want to have a word with this soldier in private – that is to say myself and his Platoon Commander, Mr Jenkins.'

The Sergeant-Major and other NCO withdrew.

'You can stand easy, Sayce,' said Gwatkin.

Sayce stood easy. His yellow face showed distrust.

'I want to speak to you seriously, Sayce,' said Gwatkin. 'To speak to you as man to man. Do you understand what I mean, Sayce?'

Sayce made some inaudible reply.

'It is not my wish, Sayce, to be always punishing you,' said Gwatkin slowly. 'Is that clear? I do not like doing that at all.'

Sayce muttered again. It seemed very doubtful that he found Gwatkin's statement easy to credit. Gwatkin leant forward over the table. He was warming up. Within him were deep reserves of emotion. He spoke now with that strange cooing tone he used on the telephone.

'You can do better, Sayce. I say you can do better.'

He fixed Sayce with his eye. Sayce's own eyes began to roll.

'You're a good fellow at heart, aren't you, Sayce?'

All this was now beginning to tell on Sayce. I had to admit to myself there was nothing I should have liked less than to be grilled by Gwatkin in this fashion. A week's CB would be infinitely preferable. Sayce began swallowing.

'You are, Sayce, aren't you?' Gwatkin repeated more pressingly, as if time were becoming short for Sayce to reveal that unexpected better side of himself, and gain salvation.

'Yes, sir,' said Sayce, very low.

He spoke without much conviction. That could scarcely be because there was doubt in his mind of his own high qualifications. He probably suspected any such information, freely given, might be a dangerous admission, lead to more work.

'Well, Sayce,' said Gwatkin, 'that is what I am going to believe about you. Believe you are a good fellow. You know why we are all here?'

Sayce did not answer.

'You know why we are all here, Sayce,' said Gwatkin again, louder this time, his voice shaking a little with his own depths of feeling. 'Come on, Sayce, you know.'

'Don't know, sir.'

'Yes, you do.'

'Don't, sir.'

'Come on, man.'

Sayce made a great effort.

'To give me CB for being on a charge,' he offered wretchedly.

It was a reasonable hypothesis, but Gwatkin was greatly disturbed at being so utterly misunderstood.

'No, no,' he said, 'I don't mean why we are in the Company Office at this moment. I mean why we are all in the army. You must know that, Sayce. We are here for our country. We are here to repel Hitler. You know that as well as I do. You don't want Hitler to rule over you, Sayce, do you?'

Sayce gulped again, as if he were not sure.

'No, sir,' he agreed, without much vigour.

'We must all, every one of us, do our best,' said Gwatkin, now thoroughly worked up. 'I try to do my best as Company Commander. Mr Jenkins and the other officers of the Company do their best. The NCOs and privates do their best. Are you going to be the only one, Sayce, who is not doing his best?'

Sayce was now in almost as emotional a state as Gwatkin himself. He continued to gulp from time to time, looking wildly round the room, as if for a path of escape.

'Will you do your best in future, Sayce?'

Sayce began sniffing frantically.

'I will, sir.'

'Do you promise me, Sayce.'

'All right, sir.'

'And we're agreed you're a good chap, aren't we?'

'Yes, sir.'

Indeed, Sayce seemed moved almost to tears by the thought of all his own hitherto unrevealed goodness.

'Never had a chance since I've been with the unit,' he managed to articulate.

Gwatkin rose to his feet.

'We're going to shake hands, Sayce,' he said.

He came round to the front of the table and held out his palm. Sayce took it gingerly, as if he still suspected a trick, a violent electric shock, perhaps, or just a terrific blow on the ear administered by Gwatkin's other hand. However, Gwatkin did no more than shake Sayce's own hand heartily. It was like the termination of some sporting event. Gwatkin continued to shake hands for several seconds. Then he returned to his seat behind the table.

'Now,' he said, 'I'm going to call in the escort again, so stand to attention, Sayce. All right? Get them in, Mr Jenkins.'

I opened the door and said the word. CSM Cadwallader and the corporal returned to their places, guarding Sayce.

'Prisoner admonished,' said Gwatkin, in his military voice.

The Sergeant-Major was unable to conceal a faint tightening of the lips at the news of Sayce escaping all punishment. No doubt he had supposed it would be a matter for the Commanding Officer this time.

'Prisoner and escort – about turn – quick march – left wheel—'

They disappeared into the passage, like comedians retiring in good order from their act, only music lacking, CSM Cadwallader, with an agility perfected for such occasions, closing the door behind him without either pausing or turning.

Gwatkin sat back in his chair.

'How was that?' he asked.

'All right. Jolly good.'

'You thought so?'

'Certainly.'

'I think we shall see a change in Sayce,' he said.

'I hope so.'

This straight talk to Sayce on the part of Gwatkin had a stimulating effect, as it turned out, on Gwatkin, rather than Sayce. It cheered up Gwatkin greatly, made him easier to work with; Sayce, on the other hand, remained much what he had been before. The fact was Gwatkin needed drama in his life. For a brief moment drama had been supplied by Sayce. However, this love of the dramatic sent Gwatkin's spirits both up and down. Not only did his own defeats upset him, but also, vicariously, what he considered defeats for the Battalion. He felt, for example, deeply dishonoured by the case of Deafy Morgan, certainly an unfortunate incident.

'Somebody ought to have been shot for it,' Gwatkin said at the time.

When we had arrived on this side of the water, Maelgwyn-Jones had given a talk to all ranks on the subject of internal security.

'This Command is very different from the Division's home ground,' he said. 'The whole population of this island is not waging war against Germany – only the North. A few miles away from here, over the Border, is a neutral state where German agents abound. There and on our side too elements exist hostile to Britain and her Allies. There have been cases of armed gangs holding up single soldiers separated from their main body, or trying to steal weapons by ruse. You may have noticed, even in this neighbourhood, that some of the corner boys look sullen when we pass and the children sing about hanging up washing on the Maginot – rather than the Siegfried – Line.'

Accordingly, rifles were checked and re-checked, and Gwatkin was given additional opportunity for indulging in those harangues to the Company which he so greatly enjoyed delivering:

'Stand the men easy, Sergeant-Major,' he would say. 'No talking. Move up a little closer at the back so that you can hear me properly. Right. Now I want you all to attend very clearly to what I have to say. The Commanding Officer has ordered me to tell you once again you must all take care of your rifles, for a man's rifle is his best friend in time of war, and a soldier is no longer a soldier when his weapon is gone from him. He is like a man who has had that removed which makes him a man, something sadder, more useless, than a miner who has lost his lamp, or a farmer his plough. As you know, we are fighting Hitler and his hordes, so this Company must show the stuff she is made of, and you must all take care of your rifles or I will put you on a serious charge which will bring you before the Colonel. There are those not far from here who would steal rifles for their own beastly purpose. That is no funny matter, losing a rifle, not like long hair nor a dirty button. There is a place at Aldershot called the Glasshouse, where men who have not taken proper care of their rifles do not like to visit a second time. Nevertheless, I would not threaten you. That is not how I wish to lead you. It is for the honour of the Regiment that you should guard your rifles, like you would guard your wife or your little sister. Moreover, it may be some of the junior NCOs have not yet a proper sense of their own responsibilities in the matter of rifles and others. You Corporals, you Lance-Corporals, consider these things in your hearts. All rifles will be checked at Pay Parade each week, so that a man will bring his rifle to the table when he receives his due, and where you must remember to come smartly to attention and look straight in front of you without moving. That is the way we shall all pull together, and, as we heard the Rev. Popkiss, our Chaplain, read out at Church Parade last Sunday, so may it be said of this Company: Arise Barak, and lead thy captivity captive, thou son of Abinoam. So let your rifles be well guarded and be the smartest company of the Battalion both on parade and in the field. All right, Sergeant-Major . . .'

I was impressed by the speech, though there were moments when I thought Gwatkin's listeners might deride the images he conjured up, such as a man losing what made him a man, or little sisters who had to be protected. On the contrary, the Company listened spellbound, giving a low grunt of emphasis when the Glasshouse was mentioned, like a cinema audience gasping aloud in pleasurable appreciation of some peculiarly agonising sequence of horror film. I remembered Bracey, my father's soldier-servant, employing that very same phrase about his rifle being the soldier's best friend. After twenty-five years, that sentiment had stood up well to the test of time and the development of more scientific weapons of war.

'It does the lads good to be talked to like that,' said CSM Cadwallader afterwards. 'Captain does know how to speak. Very excellent would he have been to preach the Word.'

Even Gittins, whose inherent strain of scepticism was as strong as any in the Battalion, had enjoyed Gwatkin's talk.

He told me so when I came to the Store later, to check supplies of web equipment held there.

'A fine speech that was, the Skipper's,' said Gittins. 'That should make the boys take care of their rifles proper, it should. And the rest of their stuff, too, I hope, and not come round here scrounging what they've lost off me, like a present at Christmas, it was.'

Kedward was less impressed

'Rowland doesn't half love jawing,' he said, 'I should just say so. But what's he going to be like when we get into action, I wonder, he is so jumpy. Will he keep his head at that?'

The doubts Kedward felt about Gwatkin were to some extent echoed by Gwatkin himself in regard to Kedward.

'Idwal is a good reliable officer in many ways,' he confided his opinion to me, 'but I'm not sure he has just the quality for leading men.'

'The men like him.'

'The men can like an officer without feeling he inspires them. Yanto told me the other day he thought the men liked Bithel. You wouldn't say Bithel had the quality of leadership, would you?'

Gwatkin's dislike of Bithel was given new impetus by the Deafy Morgan affair, which followed close on the homily about rifles. Deafy Morgan, as his cognomen – it was far more than a mere nickname – implied, was hard of hearing. In fact, he was as deaf as a post. Only in his middle to late thirties, he gave the impression – as miners of that age often do – of being much older than his years. His infirmity, in any case, set him apart from the hurly-burly of the younger soldiers' life, giving him a mild, even beatific cast of countenance, an expression that seemed for ever untroubled by moral turmoil or disturbing thought. It was probably true to say that Deafy Morgan did not have many thoughts, disturbing or otherwise, because he was not outstandingly bright, although at the same time possessing all sorts of other good qualities. In short, Deafy Morgan was the precise antithesis of Sayce. Always spick and span, he was also prepared at all times to undertake boring or tedious duties without the least complaint – in what could only be called the most Christlike spirit. Even among good soldiers, that is a singular quality in the army. No doubt it was one of the reasons why Deafy Morgan had not been relegated to the Second Line before the Division moved. Not at all fit, he would obviously have to be transferred sooner or later to the rear echelons. However, his survival was mainly due not so much to this habit of working without complaint, rare as that might be, as to the fact that everyone liked him. Besides, he had served as a Territorial longer than any other soldier in the ranks, wanted to remain with his friends – he was alleged to possess at home a nagging wife – so that no one in authority had had the heart to put Deafy Morgan's name on whatever Army Form was required to effect his removal. He was in Bithel's platoon.

Bithel himself had recently been appointed Musketry Officer. This was not on account of any notable qualifications for that duty, simply because the Battalion was short of officers on the establishment, several being also absent on courses. By this time Bithel's individual status had become more clear to me. He was a small-town misfit, supporting himself in peacetime by odd jobs, preferably those on the outskirts of the theatrical world, living a life of solitude and toping, always on the verge of trouble, always somehow managing to extricate himself from anything serious. In the Battalion, there had been no repetition of the dance of love round the dummy, not anything comparable with that in exoticism. All the same, I suspected such expressions of Bithel's personality were dormant rather than totally suppressed. He was always humble, even subservient, in manner, but this demeanour seemed to cloak a good opinion of himself, perhaps even delusions of grandeur.

'Have you ever been interested in the Boy Scout movement?' he asked. 'I was keen about it at one time. Wonderful thing for boys. Gives them a chance. I threw it up in the end. Some of them are little brutes, you know. You'd never guess the things they say. I was surprised they knew about such matters. And their language among themselves. You wouldn't credit it. I was told I was greatly missed after my resignation. They have a great deal of difficulty in getting *suitable* fellows to help. There are some nasty types about.'

The army is at once the worst place for egoists, and the best. Thus it was in many ways the worst for Bithel, always being ordered about and reprimanded, the best for Gwatkin, granted – anyway up to a point – the power and rank he desired. Nevertheless, in the army, as elsewhere, nothing is for ever. Maelgwyn-Jones truly said: 'That day will pass, like other days in the army.' Gwatkin's ambition – the satisfaction of his 'personal myth', as General Conyers would have called it – might be temporarily realized, but there was always the danger that a re-posting, promotion, minor adjustment of duties, might alter everything. Even the obstacles set in the way of Bithel indulging the pottering he loved, could, for the same reasons, be alleviated, if not removed entirely. For instance, Bithel was tremendously pleased at being appointed Musketry Officer. There were several reasons for this. The job gave him a certain status, which he reasonably felt lacking, although there was probably less to do at the range than during the day by day training of a platoon. In addition, Bithel's soldier-servant, Daniels, was on permanent duty at the butts.

'I call him the priceless jewel,' Bithel used to say. 'You know how difficult it is to get a batman in this unit. They just don't want to do the job, in spite of its advantages. Well, Daniels is a little marvel. I don't say he's always on time, or never forgets things. He fails in both quite often. But what I like about him is that he's always got a cheerful word in all weathers. Besides, he's as clean as a whistle. A real pleasure to look at when he's doing PT, which is more than you can say for some of them in early morning. In any case, Daniels is not like all those young miners, nice boys as they are. He is more used to the world. You're not boots for three months at the Green Dragon in my home town without hearing some gossip.'

Others took a less favourable view of Daniels, who, although skilled in juggling with dummy grenades, was in general regarded as light-fingered and sly. There was, I found in due course, nothing unusual in an officer being preoccupied – one might almost say obsessed – by the personality of his servant, though on the whole that was apt to occur in ranks senior to subaltern. The relationship seems to develop a curious state of intimacy in an unintimate society; one, I mean, far removed from anything to be thought of as overstepping established limits of propriety or everyday discipline. Indeed, so far from even approaching the boundaries of sexual aberration or military misconduct, the most normal of men, and conscientious of officers, often provided the most striking instances. Even my father, I remembered, had possessed an almost mystic bond with Bracey, certainly a man of remarkable qualities. It was a thing not easily explicable, perhaps demanded by the emotional conditions of an all-male society. Regular officers, for example, would sometimes go to great pains to prevent their servants suffering some deserved minor punishment for an infringement of routine. Such things made Bithel's eulogies of Daniels no cause for comment. In any case, even if Bithel enjoyed the presence of Daniels at the range, it was not Daniels, but Deafy Morgan, who was source of all the trouble.

'Why on earth did Bith ever send Deafy back there and then?' said Kedward afterwards. 'That bloody rifle could perfectly well have waited an hour or two before it was mended.'

The question was never cleared up. Perhaps Bithel was thereby given opportunity for a longer hob-nob with Daniels. Even if that were the object, I am sure nothing dubious took place between them, while the 'musketry details' were still at the butts. Anything of the sort would have been extremely difficult, even if Bithel had been prepared to take such a risk. Much more likely – Deafy Morgan being one of his own men – Bithel had some idea of avoiding, by immediate action, lack of a rifle in his platoon. Whatever the reason, Bithel sent Deafy Morgan back to barracks by himself with a rifle that had developed some defect requiring the attention of the Sergeant-Armourer. The range, where musketry instruction took place, was situated in a deserted stretch of country, two or three miles by road from the town. This distance could be reduced by taking a short cut across the fields. In wet weather the path across the fields was apt to be muddy, making the journey heavy going. Rain was not falling that day – something of a rarity – and Deafy Morgan chose the path through the fields.

'I suppose I ought to have ordered him to go by road,' Bithel said later. 'But it takes such a lot of shouting to explain anything to the man.'

The incident occurred in a wood not far from the outskirts of the town. Deafy Morgan, by definition an easy victim to ambush, was surrounded by four young men, two of whom threatened him with pistols, while the other two possessed themselves of his rifle. Deafy Morgan struggled, but it was no good. The four of them made off at a run, disappearing behind a hedge, where, so the police reported later, a car had been waiting. There was nothing for Deafy Morgan to do but return to barracks and report the incident. Sergeant Pendry, as it happened, was Orderly Sergeant that day. He handled the trouble with notable competence. Contact was made with the Adjutant, who was touring the country in a truck in the course of preparing a 'scheme': the Constabulary, who handled such matters of civil subversion, were at once informed. Deafy Morgan was, of course, put under arrest. There was a considerable to-do. This was just such an incident as Maelgwyn-Jones outlined in his 'internal security' talk. The Constabulary, perfectly accustomed to ambuscades of this type, corroborated the presence of four suspects in the neighbourhood, who had later withdrawn over the Border. It was an unhappy episode, not least because Deafy Morgan was so popular a figure. Gwatkin, as I have said, was particularly disturbed by it. His mortification took the form of blaming all on Bithel.

'The CO will have to get rid of him,' Gwatkin said. 'It can't go on. He isn't fit to hold a commission.'

'I don't see what old Bith could have done about it,' said Breeze, 'even though it was a bit irregular to send Deafy back on his own like that.'

'It may not have been Bithel's fault directly,' said Gwatkin sternly, 'but when something goes wrong under an officer's command, the officer has to suffer. That may be unjust. He has to suffer all the same. In my opinion, there would be no injustice in this case. Why, I shouldn't wonder if the Colonel himself was not superseded for this.'

That was true enough. Certainly the Commanding Officer was prepared for the worst, so far as his own appointment was concerned. He said so in the Mess more than once. However, in the end nothing so drastic took place. Deafy Morgan was courtmartialled, getting off with a reprimand, together with transfer to the Second Line and his nagging wife. He had put up some fight. In the circumstances, he could hardly be sent to detention for losing his weapon and failing to capture four youngish assailants for whom he had been wholly unprepared; having been certainly too deaf to hear either their approach, or, at an earlier stage, the substance of Maelgwyn-Jones's security talk. The findings of the court-martial had just been promulgated, when the Battalion was ordered to prepare for a thirty-six-hour Divisional exercise, the first of its kind in which the unit had been concerned.

'This is the new Divisional Commander making himself felt,' said Kedward. 'They say he is going to shake us up, right and proper.'

'What's he called?'

To those serving with a battalion, even brigadiers seem infinitely illustrious, the Divisional Commander, a remote, godlike figure.

'Major-General Liddament,' said Gwatkin. 'He's going to ginger things up, I hope.'

It was at the start of this thirty-six-hour exercise – reveille at 4.30 a.m., and the first occasion we were to use the new containers for hot food – that I noticed all was not well with Sergeant Pendry. He did not get the Platoon on parade at the right time. That was very unlike him. Pendry had, in fact, shown no sign of breaking down after a few weeks energetic work, in the manner of Breeze's warning about NCOs who could not perform their promise. On the contrary, he continued to work hard, and his good temper had something of Corporal Gwylt's liveliness about it. No one could be expected to look well at that hour of the morning, but Sergeant Pendry's face was unreasonably greenish at breakfast, like Gwatkin's after the crossing, something more than could be attributed to early rising. I thought he must have been drinking the night before, a foolish thing to do as he knew the early hour of reveille. On the whole, there was very little drinking throughout the Battalion – indeed, small opportunity for it with the pressure of training – but Pendry had some reputation in the Sergeants' Mess for capacity in sinking a pint or two. I thought perhaps the moment had come when Breeze's prediction was now going to be justified, that Pendry had suddenly reached the point when he could no longer sustain an earlier efficiency. The day therefore opened badly, Gwatkin justifiably angry that my Platoon's unpunctuality left him insufficient time to inspect the Company as thoroughly as he wished, before parading with the rest of the Battalion. We were to travel by bus to an area some way from our base, where the exercise was to take place.

'Oh, I do like to ride in a smart motor-car,' said Corporal Gwylt. 'A real pleasure it is to spin along.'

Sergeant Pendry, usually as noisy as any of them, sat silent at the back of the bus, looking as if he might vomit at any moment. Outside, it was raining as usual. We drove across a desolate plain set against a background of vast grey skies, arriving at our destination an hour or two later. Gwatkin had gone ahead in his Company Commander's truck. He was waiting impatiently by the road when the platoons arrived.

'Get the men off the buses at once,' he said, 'and on to the other side of the road – and get some ack-ack defence out, and an anti-gas scout – and have the buses facing up the lane towards that tree, with No. 2 Platoon's vehicle at the head, not where it is now. Do that right away. Then send a runner to B Company to cancel the earlier message that we are going to recce the country on the left flank between us. That order has been changed to the right flank. Now, I want to say a word of warning to all Platoon Commanders before

I attend the Commanding Officer's conference for Company Commanders. I wish to make clear that I am not at all satisfied so far today. You've none of you shown any drive up to date. It's a bad show. You've got to do better, or there will be trouble. Understand? Right. You can rejoin your platoons.'

He had draped a rubber groundsheet round him like a cloak, which, with his flattish-brimmed steel helmet, transformed him into a figure from the later Middle Ages, a captain-of-arms of the Hundred Years War, or the guerrilla campaigning of Owen Glendower. I suddenly saw that was where Gwatkin belonged, rather than to the soldiery of modern times, the period which captured his own fancy. Rain had wetted his moustache, causing it to droop over the corners of the mouth, like those belonging to effigies on tombs or church brasses. Persons at odds with their surroundings not infrequently suggest an earlier historical epoch. Gwatkin was not exactly at odds with the rest of the world. In many ways, he was the essence of conventional behaviour. At the same time, he never mixed with others on precisely their own terms. Perhaps people suspected – disapproved – his vaulting dreams. The platoons had by this time, after much shouting and commanding, unwillingly withdrawn from the comfort of the buses into the pouring rain, and were gloomily forming up.

'Rowland is in a bloody rotten temper this morning,' said Breeze. 'What did he want to bite our heads off for?'

'He's in a state,' said Kedward. 'He nearly left his maps behind. He would have done, if I had not reminded him. Why were you late, Nick? That started Rowland being browned off.'

'Had some trouble with Sergeant Pendry. He doesn't seem well today.'

'I heard the Sergeant-Major say something about Pendry last night,' said Breeze. 'Did you hear what it was, Idwal?'

'Something about his leave,' said Kedward. 'Just like old Cadwallader to tackle Rowland about an NCO's leave when he was in the middle of preparing for the exercise.'

Gwatkin returned some minutes later, the transparent talc surface of his map-cover marked all over with troop dispositions shown in chinagraph pencil of different colours. 'The Company is in support,' he said. 'Come over here, Platoon Commanders, and look at the map.'

He started to explain what we had to do, beginning with a few general principles regarding a company 'in support'; then moving on to the more specific technical requirements of the moment. These two aspects of the operation merged into an interwoven mass of instruction and disquisition, no doubt based, in the first instance, on sound military doctrine, but not a little confusing after being put through the filter of Gwatkin's own complex of ideas. He had obviously pondered the theory of being 'in support', poring in his spare time over the pages of *Infantry Training*. In addition, Gwatkin had also memorized with care phrases used by the Commanding Officer in the course of his issue of orders . . . start-line . . . RVs . . . forming-up areas . . . B echelon . . . These milestones in the efficiency of the manœuvre were certainly intended to be considered in relation to ground and other circumstances; in short, left largely to the discretion of the junior commander himself. However, that was not the way Gwatkin looked at things. Although he liked saying that he wanted freedom to make his own tactical arrangements, he always found it hard to disregard the words of the textbook, or those of a comparatively senior officer. By the time he had finished talking, it was clear the Company was to be put through every movement possible to associate with the state of being 'in support'.

'Right,' said Gwatkin. 'Any questions?'

There were no questions; chiefly because of the difficulty in disentangling one single item from the whole. We checked map references; synchronised watches. Rain had stopped falling. The day was still grey, but warmer. When I returned to my platoon trouble was in progress. Sayce, the near criminal, was having an altercation with Jones, D., who carried the anti-tank rifle. As usual, Sayce was morally in the wrong, though technically perhaps on this occasion in the right. That was if Sayce were telling the truth, in itself most improbable. The row was something to do with a case of ammunition. In ordinary circumstances, Sergeant Pendry would have cleared up in a moment anything of this sort. In his present state, higher authority had to be brought in. I adjudicated, leaving both contestants with a sense of grievance. We moved off across open country. At first I closely followed Gwatkin's instructions; then, finding my Platoon lagging behind Breeze and his men, took them on at greater speed. Even so, when we arrived, later in the morning, at the field where the Company was to reassemble, much time had been lost by the formality of the manœuvring. The men were 'stood easy', then allowed to lie on the grass with groundsheets beneath them.

'Wait orders here,' said Gwatkin.

He was still in that tense state which desire to excel always brought about in him. However, his temper was better than earlier in the day. He spoke of the ingenuity of the tactical system as laid down in the book, the manner in which the Company had put this into practice.

'It's all worked out to the nearest minute,' he said.

Then he strolled away, and began to survey the country through field-glasses.

'That's bloody well wrong,' said Kedward, under his breath. 'We ought to be a mile further on at least, if we're going to be any use at the Foremost Defended Localities when the moment comes.'

Holding no strong views on the subject myself, I was inclined to think Kedward right. All was confusion. I had only a very slight idea what was happening by now, and what role the Company should rightly play. I should have liked to lie on the ground and stretch my legs out like the men, instead of having to be on the alert for Gwatkin's next order and superintend a dozen small matters. Some minutes later a runner came up with a written message for Gwatkin.

'Good God,' he said.

Something had evidently gone badly amiss. Gwatkin took off his helmet and shook the rain from it. He looked about him hopelessly.

'It hasn't worked out right,' he said agitatedly.

'What hasn't?'

'Fall in your men at once,' he said. 'It's long past the time when we should have been in position. That's what the message says.'

Instead of being close up behind the company we were supposed to support, here we were, in fact, hanging about miles away; still occupied, I suppose, with some more preliminary involution of Gwatkin's labyrinthine tactical performance. Kedward was right. We ought to have been advancing at greater speed. Gwatkin had done poorly. Now, he began to issue orders right and left. However, before anything much could happen, another runner appeared. This one carried an order instructing Gwatkin to halt his company for the time being, while we 'let through' another company, by now close on our heels. Like golfers who have lost their ball, we allowed this company to pass between our deployed ranks. They were on their way to do the job assigned to ourselves. Bithel was one of their platoon commanders. He trotted by quite near me, red in the face, panting like a dog. As he came level, he paused for a moment.

'Haven't got an aspirin about you?' he asked.

'Afraid not.'

'Forgot to bring mine.'

'Sorry.'

'That's all right,' he said, loosening the helmet from his forehead for a moment, 'just felt an aspirin might be the answer.'

His teeth clicked metallically. He hurried on again to catch up his men, rejoining the platoon as they were already beginning to disappear from sight. We 'stood by' for ages, awaiting an order.

'Can the men sit down again?' asked Breeze.

'No,' said Gwatkin.

He was deeply humiliated by these circumstances, standing silent, fidgeting with his revolver holster. At last the order came. Gwatkin's company was to proceed by road to Battalion Headquarters in the field. He was himself to report to the Commanding Officer forthwith.

'I've let the whole Battalion down,' he muttered, as he went off towards his Company Commander's truck.

Kedward thought the same.

'Did you ever see such frigging about,' he said. 'Why, even as it was, I was behindhand in bringing my platoon up level with the main body of the Company, and by then I'd cut out at least half the things Rowland had told me to do. If I'd done them all, it would have taken a week. We wouldn't even have got as far as that field where we had a breather.'

We set off for Battalion HQ. By the time I brought my platoon in, it was late in the afternoon. Rain had begun to fall again. The place was a clearing in some woods where field kitchens had been set up. At last there was prospect of something to eat, a subject much on the men's minds, scarcely less on my own. I was very ready for a meal, breakfast soon after 5 a.m. by now a long way off. For some reason, probably because it was becoming hard to obtain, I carried no chocolate in my haversack. Gwatkin was waiting for us when we arrived. From his appearance it was clear he had been hauled pretty roughly over the coals by the Commanding Officer for failure to bring up the Company in time earlier that day. His face was white.

'You are to take your platoon out at once on patrol,' he said.

'But they've had no dinner.'

'The men just have time for a mouthful, if they're quick. You can't. I've got to go over the map with you. You are to make a recce, then act as a Standing Patrol. It can't be helped that you haven't eaten yourself.'

He gave the impression of rather enjoying this opportunity for working off his feelings. There seemed no necessity to underline the fact that I was to starve until further notice. Whatever the Commanding Officer had said had certainly not improved Gwatkin's state of mind. He was thoroughly upset. His hand shook when he pointed his pencil at names on the map. He was in a vile temper.

'You will take your men up to this point,' he said. 'There you will establish an HQ. Here is the canal. At this map reference the Pioneers have thrown a rope bridge across. You will personally cross by the rope bridge and make a recce of the far bank from here to here. Then return to your platoon and carry out the duties of a Standing Patrol as laid down in *Infantry Training*, having reported the map reference of your HQ by runner to me at this point here. In due course I shall come and inspect the position and receive your report. All right?'

'Yes.'

He handed over some map references.

'Any questions?'

'None.'

Gwatkin strode off. I returned to my platoon, far from pleased. The fact that missing a meal or two in the army must be regarded – certainly by an officer – as all in the day's work, makes these occasions no more acceptable. Sergeant Pendry was falling in the men when I returned to the area of the wood that had been allotted to the Platoon. They were grumbling at the hurried nature of dinner, complaining the stew had 'tasted' from being kept in the new containers. The only bright spot was that we were to be transported by truck some of the distance towards the place where we were to undertake these duties. Thirty men take an age to get on, or off, a vehicle of any kind. Jones, D., slipped while climbing up over the wheel, dropping the anti-tank rifle – that inordinately heavy, already obsolete weapon – on the foot of Williams, W. H., the platoon runner, putting him temporarily out of action. Sayce now began a long story about feeling faint, perhaps as a result of eating the stew, and what the MO had said about some disease he, Sayce, was suffering from. These troubles were unwillingly presented to me through the sceptical medium of Corporal Gwylt. I was in no mood for pity. If the meal had made Sayce feel queasy, that was better than having no meal at all. Such was my answer. All these things obstructed progress for about ten minutes. I feared Gwatkin might return to find reasonable cause for complaint in this delay, but Gwatkin had disappeared, bent on making life uncomfortable for someone else, or perhaps anxious only to find a quiet place where he could himself mope for a short period, while recovering his own morale. Sergeant Pendry was still showing less than his usual vigour in keeping things on the move. There could be no doubt Breeze had been right about Pendry, I thought, unless he turned out to be merely unwell, sickening for some illness, rather than suffering from a hangover. He dragged his feet when he walked, hardly able to shout out a command. I took him aside as the last man settled into the truck.

'Are you feeling all right, Sergeant?'

He looked at me as if he did not understand.

'All right, sir?'

'You got something to eat with the others just now?'

'Oh, yes, sir.'

'Enough?'

'Plenty there, sir. Didn't feel much like food, it was.'

'Are you sick?'

'Not too good, sir.'

'What's wrong?'

'Don't know just what, sir.'

'But you must know if you're feeling ill.'

'Had a bit of a shock back home, it was.'

This was no time to go into the home affairs of the platoon's personnel, now that at last we were ready and I wanted to give the driver the order to move off.

'Have a word with me when we get back to barracks.'

'All right, sir.'

I climbed into the truck beside the driver. We travelled several miles as far as some crossroads. There we left the truck, which returned to its base. Platoon HQ was set up in a dilapidated cowshed, part of the buildings of a small farm that lay not far away across the fields. When everything was pretty well established in the cowshed, including the siting of the imaginary 2-inch mortar which travelled round with us, I went off to look for the rope bridge over the canal. This was found without much difficulty. A corporal was in charge. I explained my mission, and enquired about the bridge's capacity.

'It do wobble a fair trifle, sir.'

'Stand by while I cross.'

'That I will, sir.'

I started to make the transit, falling in after about three or four yards. The water might have been colder for the time of year. I swam the rest of the way, reaching the far bank not greatly wetter than the rain had left me. There I wandered about for a time, making notes of matters to be regarded as important in the circumstances. After that, I came back to the canal, and, disillusioned as to the potentialities of the rope bridge, swam across again. The canal banks were fairly steep, but the corporal helped me out of the water. He did not seem in the least surprised to find that I had chosen this method of return in preference to his bridge.

'Very shaky, those rope bridges,' was all he said.

By now it was dark, rain still falling. I returned to the cowshed. There a wonderful surprise was waiting. It appeared that Corporal Gwylt, accompanied by Williams, W. H., had visited the neighbouring farm and managed to wheedle from the owners a jug of tea.

'We saved a mug for you, sir. Wet you are, by Christ, too.'

I could have embraced him. The tea was of the kind Uncle Giles used to call 'a good sergeant-major's brew'. It tasted like the best champagne. I felt immediately ten years younger, hardly wet at all.

'She was a big woman that gave us that jug of tea, she was,' said Corporal Gwylt.

He addressed Williams, W. H.

'Ah, she was,' agreed Williams, W. H.

He looked thoughtful. Good at running and singing, he was otherwise not greatly gifted.

'She made me afraid, she did,' said Corporal Gwylt. 'I would have been afraid of that big woman in a little bed.'

'Indeed, I would too that,' said Williams, W. H., looking as if he were sincere in the opinion.

'Would you not have been afraid of her, Sergeant Pendry, a great big woman twice your size?'

'Shut your mouth,' said Sergeant Pendry, with unexpected force. 'Must you ever be talking of women?'

Corporal Gwylt was not at all put out.

'I would be even more afeared of her in a *big* bed,' he said reflectively.

We finished our tea. A runner came in, brought by a sentry, with a message from Gwatkin. It contained an order to report to him at a map reference in half an hour's time. The place of meeting turned out to be the crossroads not far from the cowshed.

'Shall I take the jug back, Corporal?' asked Williams, W. H.

'No, lad, I'll return that jug,' said Corporal Gwylt. 'If I have your permission, sir?'

'Off you go, but don't stay all night.'

'I won't take long, sir.'

Gwylt disappeared with the jug. The weather was clearing up now. There was a moon. The air was fresh. When the time came, I went off to meet Gwatkin. Water dripped from the trees, but a little wetness, more or less, was by then a matter of indifference. I stood just off the road while I waited, expecting Gwatkin would be late. However, the truck appeared on time. The vehicle drew up in the moonlight just beside me. Gwatkin stepped out. He gave the driver instructions about a message he was to take and the time he was to return to this same spot. The truck drove off. Gwatkin began to stride slowly up the road. I walked beside him.

'Everything all right, Nick?'

I told him what we had been doing, giving the results of the reconnaissance on the far side of the canal.

'Why are you so wet?'

'Fell off the rope bridge into the canal.'

'And swam?'

'Yes.'

'That was good,' he said, as if it had been a brilliant idea to swim.

'How are things going in the battle?'

'The fog of war has descended.'

That was a favourite phrase of Gwatkin's. He seemed to derive support from it. There was a pause. Gwatkin began to fumble in his haversack. After a moment he brought out quite a sizeable bar of chocolate.

'I brought this for you,' he said.

'Thanks awfully, Rowland.'

I broke off a fairly large portion and handed the rest back to him.

'No,' he said. 'It's all for you.'

'All this?'

'Yes.'

'Can you really spare it?'

'It's meant for you. I thought you might not have any chocolate with you.'

'I hadn't.'

He returned to the subject of the exercise, explaining, so far as possible, the stage things had reached, what our immediate movements were to be. I gnawed the chocolate. I had forgotten how good chocolate could be, wondering why I had never eaten more of it before the war. It was like a drug, entirely altering one's point of view. I felt suddenly almost as warmly towards Gwatkin as to Corporal Gwylt, though nothing would ever beat that first sip of tea. Gwatkin and I had stopped by the side of the road to look at his map in the moonlight. Now he closed the case, buttoning down its flap.

'I'm sorry I sent you off like that without any lunch,' he said.

'That was the order.'

'No,' said Gwatkin. 'It wasn't.'

'How do you mean?'

'There would have been lots of time for you to have had something to eat,' he said.

I did not know what to answer.

'I had to work off on someone that rocket the CO gave me,' he said. 'You were the only person I could get at – anyway the first one I saw when I came back from the Colonel. He absolutely took the hide off me. I'd have liked to order the men off, too, right away, without their dinner, but I knew I'd only get another rocket – an even bigger one – if it came out they'd missed a meal unnecessarily through an order of mine.'

I felt this a handsome apology, a confession that did Gwatkin credit. Even so, his words were nothing to the chocolate. There were still a few remains clinging to my mouth. I licked them from the back of my teeth.

'Of course you've got to go,' said Gwatkin vehemently. 'lunch or no lunch, if it's an order. Go and get caught up on a lot of barbed wire and be riddled by machine-gun fire, stabbed to death with bayonets against a wall, walk into a cloud of poison gas without a mask, face a flame-thrower in a narrow street. Anything. I don't mean that.'

I agreed, at the same time feeling no immediate necessity to dwell at length on such undoubtedly valid aspects of military duty. It seemed best to change the subject. Gwatkin had made amends – one of the rarest things for anyone to attempt in life – now he must be distracted from cataloguing further disagreeable potentialities to be encountered in the course of a soldier's life.

'Sergeant Pendry hasn't been very bright today,' I said. 'I think he must be sick.'

'I wanted to talk to you about Pendry,' said Gwatkin. 'You noticed he was in poor shape?'

'He came to me last night. There wasn't time to tell you before, with all the preparations going on for the exercise – or at least I forgot to tell you.'

'What's wrong with Pendry?'

'His wife, Nick.'

'What about her?'

'Pendry had a letter from a neighbour saying she was carrying on with another man.'

'I see.'

'You keep on reading in the newspapers that the women of this country are making a splendid war effort,' said Gwatkin, speaking with all that passion which would well up in him at certain moments. 'If you ask me, I think they are making a splendid effort to sleep with as many other men as possible while their husbands are away.'

Even if that were an exaggeration, as expressed by Gwatkin, it had to be admitted letters of this kind were common enough. I remembered my brother-in-law, Chips Lovell, once saying: 'The popular Press always talk as if only the rich committed adultery. One really can't imagine a more snobbish assumption.' Certainly no one who administered the Company's affairs for a week or two would make any mistake on that score. I asked Gwatkin if details were known about Pendry's case. None seemed available.

'It makes you sick,' Gwatkin said.

'I suppose the men have some fun too. It isn't only the women. Not that any of us are given much time for it here – except perhaps Corporal Gwylt.'

'It's different for a man,' said Gwatkin. 'Unless he gets mixed up with a woman who makes him forget his duty.'

These words recalled a film Moreland and I had seen together in days before the war. A Russian officer – the story had been set in Tsarist times – had reprimanded an unpunctual subordinate with just that phrase: 'A woman who causes a man to neglect his duty is not worth a moment's consideration.' The young lieutenant in the film, so far as I could remember, had arrived late on parade because he had been spending the night with the Colonel's mistress. Afterwards, Moreland and I had often quoted to each other that stern conclusion.

'It's just the way you look at it,' Moreland had said. 'I know Matilda, for instance, would take the line that no woman was worth a moment's consideration unless she were capable of making a man neglect his duty. Barnby, on the other hand, would say no duty was worth a moment's consideration if it forced you to neglect women. These things depend so much on the subjective approach.'

I wondered if Gwatkin had seen the film too, and memorized that scrap of dialogue as a sentiment which appealed to him. On the whole it was unlikely that the picture, comparatively highbrow, had penetrated so deep in provincial distribution. Probably Gwatkin had simply elaborated the idea for himself. It was a high-minded, but not specially original one. Widmerpool, for example, when involved with Gypsy Jones, had spoken of never again committing himself with a woman who took his mind from his work. Gwatkin rarely spoke of his own wife. He had once mentioned that her father was in bad health, and, if he died, his mother-in-law would have to come and live with them.

'What are you going to do about Pendry?' I asked.

'Arrange for him to have some leave as soon as possible. I'm afraid that will deprive you of a platoon sergeant.'

'Pendry will have to go on leave sooner or later in any case. Besides, he's not much use in his present state.'

'The sooner Pendry goes, the sooner he will bring all this trouble to a stop.'

'If he can.'

Gwatkin looked at me with surprise.

'Everything will come right when he gets back home,' he said.

'Let's hope so.'

'Don't you think Pendry will be able to deal with his wife?'

'I don't know anything about her.'

'You mean she might want to go off with this other man?'

'Anything might happen. Pendry might do her in. You can't tell.'

Gwatkin hesitated a moment.

'You know that Rudyard Kipling book the other night?'

'Yes.'

'There are sort of poems at the beginning of the stories.'

'Yes?'

'One of them always stuck in my head – at least bits of it. I can never remember all the words of anything like that.'

Gwatkin stopped again. I feared he thought he had already said too much, and was not going to admit the verse of his preference.

'Which one?'

'It was about – was it some Roman god?'

'Oh, Mithras.'

'You remember it?'

'Of course.'

'Extraordinary.'

Gwatkin looked as if he could scarcely credit such a mental feat.

'As you said, Rowland, it's my profession to read a lot. But what about Mithras?'

'Where it says "Mithras also a soldier—" '

Gwatkin seemed to think that sufficient clue, that I must be able to guess by now all he hoped to convey. He did not finish the line.

'Something about helmets scorching the forehead and sandals burning the feet. I can't imagine anything worse than marching in sandals, especially on those cobbled Roman roads.'

Gwatkin disregarded the logistic problem of sandal-shod infantry. He was very serious.

' "—keep us pure till the dawn",' he said.

'Oh, yes.'

'What do you make of that?'

'Probably a very necessary prayer for a Roman legionary.'

Again, Gwatkin did not laugh.

'Does that mean women?' he asked, as if the notion had only just struck him.

'I suppose so.'

I controlled temptation to make flippant suggestions about other, more recondite vices, for which, with troops of such mixed origin as Rome's legions, the god's hasty moral intervention might be required. That sort of banter did not at all fit in with Gwatkin's mood. Equally pointless, even hopelessly pedantic, would be a brief exegesis explaining that the Roman occupation of Britain, historically speaking, was rather different from the picture in the book. At best one would end up in an appalling verbal tangle about the relationship of fact and poetry.

'Those lines make you think,' said Gwatkin slowly.

'About toeing the line?'

'Make you glad you're married,' he said. 'Don't have to bother any more about women.'

He turned back towards the place where we had first met. There was the sound of a car further up the road. The truck came into sight again. Gwatkin abandoned further speculations about Mithras. He became once more the Company Commander.

'We've talked so much I haven't inspected your platoon position,' he said. 'There's nothing special I ought to see there?'

'Nothing.'

'Bring your men right away to the place I showed you on the map. We've got some farm buildings for a billet tonight. It's not far from here. Everyone will have a bit of a rest. Nothing much expected of us until midday tomorrow. All right?'

'All right.'

He climbed into the truck. It drove off again. I returned to the platoon. Sergeant Pendry came forward to report. He looked just as he had looked that morning; no better, no worse.

'Captain Gwatkin just had a word with me about your leave, Sergeant. We'll arrange that as soon as the exercise is over.'

'Thank you very much, sir.'

He spoke tonelessly, as if the question of leave did not interest him in the least.

'Fall the platoon in now. We're billeted in a farm near here. There's prospect of some sleep.'

'Right, sir.'

As usual, the distance to march turned out further than expected. Rain came on again. However, the farm buildings were pretty comfortable when we arrived. The platoon was accommodated in a thatched barn where there was plenty of straw. Corporal Gwylt, as always, was unwilling to believe that agricultural surroundings could ever be tolerable.

'Oh, what nasty smells there are here,' he said. 'I do not like all these cows.'

I slept like a log that night. It must have been soon after breakfast the following morning, when I was checking sentry duties with Sergeant Pendry, that Breeze hurried into the barn to issue a warning.

'A staff car flying the Divisional Commander's pennon has just stopped by the road,' Breeze said. 'It must be a snap inspection by the General. Rowland says get all the men cleaning weapons or otherwise usefully occupied forthwith.'

He rushed off to warn Kedward. I set about generating activity in the barn. Some of the platoon were at work removing mud from their equipment. Those not so obviously engaged on a useful task were found other commendable occupations. All was in order within a few minutes. This was not a moment too soon. There was the sound of a party of people approaching the barn. I looked out, and saw the General, his ADC and Gwatkin slopping through the mud of the farmyard.

'They're coming, Sergeant Pendry.'

They entered the barn. Sergeant Pendry called those assembled to attention. It was at once obvious that General Liddament was not in the best of tempers. He was a serious looking man, young for his rank, cleanshaven, with the air of a scholar rather than a soldier. His recent taking over of the Division's command was already to be noticed in small matters of routine. Though regarded by regular soldiers as something of a military pedant – so Maelgwyn-Jones had told Gwatkin – General Liddament was said to be an officer with ideas of his own. Possibly in order to counteract this reputation for an excessive precision in approach to his duties, an imperfection of which he was probably aware and hoped to correct, the General allowed himself certain informalities of dress and turn-out. For example, he carried a long stick, like the wand of a verger in a cathedral, and wore a black-and-brown check scarf thrown carelessly about his neck. A hunting horn was thrust between the buttons of his battle-dress blouse. Maelgwyn-Jones also reported that two small dogs on a lead sometimes accompanied General Liddament, causing great disturbance when they squabbled with each other. Today must have been too serious an occasion for these animals to be with him. The presence of dogs would have increased his air of being a shepherd or huntsman, timeless in conception, depicted in the idealized pastoral scene of some engraving. However, General Liddament's manner of speaking had none of this mild, bucolic tone.

'Tell them to carry on,' he said, pointing his long stick at me. 'What's the name of this officer?'

'Second-lieutenant Jenkins, sir,' said Gwatkin, who was under great strain.

'How long have you been with this unit, Jenkins?'

I told the General, who nodded. He asked some further questions. Then he turned away, as if he had lost all interest in me, all interest in human beings at all, and began rummaging furiously about the place with his stick. After exploring the corners of the barn, he set about poking at the roof.

'Have your men been dry here?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, sir.'

'There is a leak in the thatch here.'

'There is a leak in that corner, sir, but the men slept the other end.'

The General, deep in thought, continued his prodding for some seconds without visible effect. Then, as he put renewed energy into the thrusts of his stick, which penetrated far into the roofing, a large piece of under-thatch all at once descended from above, narrowly missing General Liddament himself, completely overwhelming his ADC with debris of dust, twigs and loam. At that, the General abandoned his activities, as if at last satisfied. Neither he nor anyone else made any comment, nor was any amusement expressed. The ADC, a pink-faced young man, blushed hotly and set about cleaning himself up. The General turned to me again.

'What did your men have for breakfast, Jenkins?'

'Liver, sir.'

I was impressed by his retention of my name.

'What else?'

'Jam, sir.'

'What else?'

'Bread, sir – and margarine.'

'Porridge?'

'No, sir.'

'Why not?'

'No issue, sir.'

The General turned savagely on Gwatkin, who had fallen into a kind of trance, but now started agonisingly to life again.

'No porridge?'

'No porridge, sir.'

General Liddament pondered this assertion for some seconds in resentful silence. He seemed to be considering porridge in all its aspects, bad as well as good. At last he came out with an unequivocal moral judgment.

'There ought to be porridge,' he said.

He glared round at the platoon, hard at work with their polishing, oiling, pulling-through, whatever they were doing. Suddenly he pointed his stick at Williams, W. H., the platoon runner.

'Would you have liked porridge?'

Williams, W.H., came to attention. As I have said, Williams, W.H., was good on his feet and sang well. Otherwise, he was not particularly bright.

'No, sir,' he said instantly, as if that must be the right answer.

The General was taken aback. It would not be too much to say he was absolutely staggered.

'Why not?'

General Liddament spoke sharply, but seriously, as if some excuse like religious scruple about eating porridge would certainly be accepted as valid.

'Don't like it, sir.'

'You don't like porridge?'

'No, sir.'

'Then you're a foolish fellow – a very foolish fellow.'

After saying that, the General stood in silence, as if in great distress of mind, holding his long staff at arm's length from him, while he ground it deep into the earthy surface of the barnhouse floor. He appeared to be trying to contemplate as objectively as possible the concept of being so totally excluded from the human family as to dislike porridge. His physical attitude suggested a holy man doing penance vicariously for the sin of those in his spiritual care. All at once he turned to the man next to Williams, W. H., who happened to be Sayce.

'Do *you* like porridge?' he almost shouted.

Sayce's face, obstinate, dishonest, covered with pockmarks showed determination to make trouble if possible, at the same time uncertainty as how best to achieve that object. For about half a minute Sayce turned over in his mind the pros and cons of porridge eating, just as he might reflect on the particular excuse most effective in extenuation of a dirty rifle barrel. Then he spoke.

'Well, sir—' he began.

General Liddament abandoned Sayce immediately for Jones, D.

'—and you?'

'No, sir,' said Jones, D., also speaking with absolute assurance that a negative answer was expected of him.

'—and you?'

'No, sir,' said Rees.

Moving the long stick with feverish speed, as if he were smelling out witches, the General pointed successively at Davies, J., Davies, E., Ellis, Clements, Williams, G.

No one had time to answer. There was a long pause at the end of the line. Corporal Gwylt stood there. He had been supervising the cleaning of the bren. General Liddament, whose features had taken on an expression of resignation, stood now leaning forward, resting his chin on the top of the stick, his head looking like a strange, rather malignant totem at the apex of a pole. He fixed his eyes on Gwylt's cap badge, as if ruminating on the history of the Regiment symbolized in the emblems of its design.

'And you, Corporal,' he asked, this time quite quietly. 'Do you like porridge?'

An enormous smile spread over Corporal Gwylt's face.

'Oh, yes, yes, sir,' he said, 'I do like porridge. I did just wish we had had porridge this morning.'

Slowly General Liddament straightened himself. He raised the stick so that its sharp metal point almost touched the face of Corporal Gwylt.

'Look,' he said, 'look, all of you. He may not be the biggest man in the Division, but he is a sturdy fellow, a good type. There is a man who eats porridge. Some of you would do well to follow his example.'

With these words, the Divisional Commander strode out of the barn. He was followed by Gwatkin and the ADC, the last still covered from head to foot with thatch. They picked their way through the mud towards the General's car. A minute later, the pennon disappeared from sight. The inspection was over.

'The General is a funny-looking chap,' said Breeze afterwards. 'But there's not much he misses. He asked where the latrines were constructed. When I showed him, he told me dig them downwind next time.'

'Just the same with me,' said Kedward. 'He made some of the platoon turn up the soles of their boots to see if they wanted mending. I was glad I had checked them last week.'

We returned from the exercise to find Germany had invaded Norway and Denmark.

'The war's begining now,' said Gwatkin. 'It won't be long before we're in it.'

His depression about failing to provide 'support' in the field was to some extent mitigated by the Company tying for first place in a practice march across country. In fact, at the time when Sergeant Pendry returned from his leave, Gwatkin certainly felt his prestige as a Company Commander in the ascendant. Pendry on the other hand – who had left for home almost immediately after the termination of the thirty-six-hour exercise – came back looking almost as gloomy as before. He returned, however, far more capable of carrying out his duties. No one knew how, if at all, he had settled his domestic troubles. I had never seen a man so greatly changed in the course of a few weeks. From being broad and heavily built, Pendry had become thin and haggard, his formerly glittering blue eyes sunken and glassy. All the same, he could be relied upon once more as Platoon Sergeant. His energy was renewed, though now all the cheerfulness that had once made him such a good NCO was gone. There was no more lateness on parade or forgetting of orders: there was also no more good-natured bustling along of the platoon. Pendry nowadays lost his temper easily, was morose when things went wrong. In spite of this change, there was little to complain of in his work. I told Gwatkin of this improvement.

'I expect Pendry put his foot down,' Gwatkin said. 'It's the only way with women. There should be no more difficulty with him now.'

I felt less certain. However, Pendry's troubles were forgotten. There were other things to think about. He simply settled down as a different sort of person. That happened long before the incident at the road-blocks, by which time everyone was used to Pendry in his new character.

'When Cadwallader goes, which he'll have to, sooner or later,' Gwatkin said, 'Pendry will have to be considered for CSM.'

The road-blocks were concrete pill-boxes constructed throughout the Command to impede an enemy, should the Germans decide to invade this island in the first instance. In addition to normal guard routines, road-blocks were manned after dark, the Orderly Officer inspecting them in turn throughout the night. This inspection continued, until dawn, when there was time for him to have a couple of hours sleep before coming on parade. Breeze had been Orderly Officer that day: Sergant Pendry, NCO in charge of road-blocks. By one of the anomalies of Battalion arrangements, Pendry had been on quarter-guard, followed by a Brigade night exercise, so that 'road-blocks' made his third night running with little or no sleep. It was bad luck, but for some reason – probably chronic shortage of sergeants – there was no avoiding this situation. I spoke a word of condolence on the subject.

'Do not worry, sir,' Pendry said. 'I do not seem to want much sleep now, it is.'

That was a surprising answer. In the army, sleep is prized more than anything else; beyond food, beyond even tea. I decided to speak again to Gwatkin about Pendry, find out whether, as Company Commander, he thought all was well. I felt guilty about having allowed Pendry's situation to slip from my mind. He might be on the verge of a breakdown. Disregard for sleep certainly suggested something of the sort. Trouble could be avoided by looking into matters. However, such precautions, even if they had proved effective, were planned too late in the day. The rest of the story came out at the Court of Inquiry. Its main outlines were fairly clear. Breeze had made his inspection of the pill-box where Pendry was on duty, found all correct, moved on in the Orderly Officer's truck to the next post. About ten minutes after Breeze's departure, the sentry on duty in the pill-box noticed suspicious movements by some tumbledown sheds and fences further up the road. That is, the sentry thought he saw suspicious movements. This may have been his imagination. The Deafy Morgan affair had shown the possibility of hostility from other than German sources. What was going on in the shadows might indicate preparations for some similar aggression. Sergeant Pendry said he would investigate these activities himself. His rifle was loaded. He approached the sheds, where he disappeared from sight. Nothing was seen in that direction for some minutes; then a dog ran across the road. This dog, it was said afterwards, could have been the cause of the original disturbance. Sergeant Pendry could still not be seen. Then there was the echo of a shot; some said two shots. Pendry did not return. After a while, two men from the pill-box went to look for him. His body was found in a pit or ditch among the shacks. Pendry was dead. His rifle had been fired. It was never cleared up for certain whether an assailant caused his death; whether, in tripping and falling into the pit, his own weapon killed him; whether, alone in that dark gloomy place, oppressed with misery, strung up with lack of sleep, Pendry decided to put an end to himself.

'He always meant to do it,' Breeze said.

'It was murder,' said Gwatkin, 'Pendry's the first. There'll be others in due course.'

The Court of Inquiry expressed the opinion that Pendry would have acted more correctly in taking a man with him to conduct the investigation. It was doubtful, too, whether he should have loaded his rifle without direct order from an officer. In this respect, standing instructions for road-block NCOs showed a certain ambiguity. The whole question of ammunition supervision in relation to road-block guards was re-examined, the system later overhauled. Breeze had a trying time while the Court was taking evidence. He was exonerated from all blame, but when opportunity arose, he volunteered for service with one of the anti-tank companies which were being organized on a Divisional basis. Breeze understandably wanted to get away from the Battalion and disagreeable associations. Perhaps he wanted to get away from Gwatkin too. Gwatkin himself, just as he had blamed Bithel for the Deafy Morgan affair, was unwilling to accept the findings of the Court of Inquiry in its complete clearing of Breeze.

'Yanto was just as responsible for Sergeant Pendry's death as if he had shot him down from the German trenches,' Gwatkin said.

'What could Yanto have done?'

'Yanto knew, as we all did, that Pendry had talked of such a thing.'

'I never knew, and Pendry was my own Platoon-Sergeant.'

'CSM Cadwallader knows more than he will say.'

'What does the Sergeant-Major think?'

'He just spoke about Pendry once or twice,' said Gwatkin moodily. 'It's only now I see what he meant. I blame myself too. I should have foreseen it.'

This was another of Gwatkin's ritual sufferings for the ills of the Battalion. Maelgwyn-Jones took a more robust, more objective view, when I went to see him about arrangements for Pendry's funeral.

'These things happen from time to time,' he said. 'It's just the army. Surprising there aren't more cases. Here's the bumph about the firing party to give Rowland.'

'Almost every man in the Company volunteered for it.'

'They love this sort of thing,' said Maelgwyn-Jones. 'By the way, you're going to Aldershot on a course next week. Tell Rowland that too.'

'What sort of a course?'

'General training.'

I remarked to Gwatkin, when we were turning in that night, how the men had almost fought to be included in the firing party.

'Nothing brings a company together like death,' he said sombrely. 'It looks as though there might be one in my family too. My wife's father isn't at all well.'

'What does he do?'

'In a bank, like the rest of us,' said Gwatkin.

He had been thoroughly upset by the Pendry incident. Over the partition, in the store, Lance-Corporal Gittins was still awake. When last seen, he had been sorting huge piles of Army Form 'ten-ninety-eight', and was probably still thus engaged. He, too, seemed preoccupied with thoughts of mortality, for, while he sorted, he sang quietly to himself:

> 'When I tread the verge of Jordan,
> Bid my anxious fears subside,
> Death of Death and hell's destruction,
> Land me safe on Canaan's side:
> Songs of praises,
> Songs of praises
> I will ever give to thee . . .'

3

THE TRAIN, LONG, GRIMY, CLOSELY PACKED, subject to many delays *en route*, pushed south towards London. Within the carriage cold fug stiflingly prevailed, dimmed bulbs, just luminous, like phosphorescent molluscs in the eddying backwaters of an aquarium, hovering above photographic views of Blackpool and Morecambe Bay: one of those interiors endemic to wartime. At a halt in the Midlands, night without still dark as the pit, the Lancashire Fusilier next to me, who had remarked earlier he was going on leave in this neighbourhood, at once guessed the name of the totally blacked-out station, collected his kit and quitted the compartment hurriedly. His departure was welcome, even the more crowded seat now enjoying improved legroom. The grey-moustached captain, whose leathery skin and several medal ribbons suggested a quartermaster, eased himself nearer to where I occupied a corner seat, while he grunted irritably under his breath, transferring from one pocket to another thick sheaves of indents classified into packets secured by rubber bands. Additional space offered hope of less fitful sleep, but, when the engine was getting up steam again, the carriage door slid open. A figure wearing uniform looked in.

'Any room?'

There was no definite denial of the existence of a spare place, but the reception could not be called welcoming. The light grudgingly conceded by the fishy globules flickering in the shallows was too slight to distinguish more than a tall man wearing a British Warm, the shoulder straps of which displayed no badges of rank. The voice was authoritative, precise, rather musical, a voice to be associated with more agreeable, even more frivolous circumstances than those now on offer. One might even have heard it against the thrumming of a band a thousand years before. If so, the occasion was long forgotten. While he shook himself out of his overcoat, the new passenger made a certain amount of disturbance before he settled down, among other things causing the quartermaster to move his kit a few necessary inches along the rack, where it was certainly taking up more than a fair share of room. The quartermaster made some demur at this. His reluctance was confronted with absolute firmness. The man in the British Warm had his way in the end. The kit was moved. Having disposed of his own baggage, he took the place next to me.

'Last seat on the train,' he said.

He laughed; then apparently passed into sleep. We rumbled on for hours through the night. I slept too, beset with disturbing dreams of administrative anxieties. The quartermaster left his seat at five, returning after an age away, still muttering and grumbling to himself. Morning came, a sad, pale light gently penetrating the curtains. Some hidden agency extinguished the blue lamps. It grew warmer. People began to stretch, blow noses, clear throats, light cigarettes, move along the corridor to shave or relieve themselves. I examined the other occupants of the carriage. Except for the middle-aged captain, all had one pip, including the new arrival next to me. I took a look at him while he was still asleep. His face was thin, rather distinguished, with a hook nose and fairish hair. The collar badges were 'Fortnum & Mason' General Service. The rest of the compartment was filled by two officers of the Royal Corps of Signals, a Gunner, a Green Howard (Ted Jeavons's first regiment in the previous war, I remembered) and a Durham Light Infantryman. The thin man next to me began to wake up, rubbing his eyes and gently groaning.

'I think I shall wait till London for a shave,' he said.

'Me too.'

'No point in making a fetish of elegance.'

'None.'

We both dozed again. When it was light enough to read, he took a book from his pocket. I saw it was in French, but could not distinguish the title. Again, his manner struck me as familiar; again, I could not place him.

'Is there a breakfast car on this train?' asked the Green Howard.

'God, no,' said the Durham Light Infantryman. 'Where do you think you are – the Ritz?'

One of the Signals said there was hope of a cup of tea, possibly food in some form, at the next stop, a junction where the train was alleged to remain for ten minutes or more. This turned out to be true. On arrival at this station, in a concerted move from the carriage, I found myself walking along the platform with the man in General Service badges. We entered the buffet together.

'Sitting up all night catches one across the back,' he said.

'It certainly does.'

'I once sat up from Prague to the Hook and swore I'd never do it again. I little knew one was in for a lifetime of journeys of that sort.'

'Budapest to Vienna by Danube can be gruelling at night too,' I said, not wishing to seem unused to continental discomforts. 'Do you think we are in a very strategic position for getting cups of tea?'

'Perhaps not. Let's try the far end of the counter. One might engage the attention of the lady on the second urn.'

'Also stand a chance of buying one of those faded, but still beautiful, sausage rolls, before they are all consumed by Other Ranks.'

We changed our position with hopeful effect.

'Talking of Vienna,' he said, 'did you ever have the extraordinary experience of entering that gallery in the Kunsthistorisches Museum with the screen across the end of it? On the other side of the screen, quite unexpectedly, you find those four staggering Bruegels.'

'The *Hunters in the Snow* is almost my favourite picture.'

'I am also very fond of the *Two Monkeys* in the Kaiser Friedrich in Berlin. I've just been sharing a room with a man in the Essex Regiment who looked exactly like the ape on the left, the same shrewd expression. I say, we're not making much headway with the tea.'

There were further struggles at the counter, eventually successful. The reward was a sausage roll apiece.

'Should we return to the train now? I don't feel absolutely confident about that corner seat.'

'In that case I shall take this sausage roll with me.'

Back in the carriage, the quartermaster went to sleep again; so did the two Signals and the Gunner. Both the Durham Light Infantryman and the Green Howard brought out button-sticks, tins of polish, cloths, brushes. Taking off their tunics, they set to work energetically shining themselves up, while they discussed allowances.

'Haven't we met before somewhere?' I asked.

'My name is Pennistone – David Pennistone.'

I knew no one called that. I told him my own name, but we did not establish a connexion sufficiently firm to suggest a previous encounter. Pennistone said he liked Moreland's music, but did not know Moreland personally.

'Are you going on leave?'

'To a course – and you?'

'I've just come from a course,' he said. 'I'm on leave until required.'

'That sounds all right.'

'I'm an odd kind of soldier in any case. Certain specific qualifications are my only excuse. It will be rather nice to be on one's own for a week or two. I'm trying to get something finished. A case of earn while you learn.'

'What sort of thing?'

'Oh, something awfully boring about Descartes. Really not worth discussing. *Cogito ergo sum*, and all that. I feel quite ashamed about it. By the way, have you ever read this work? I thought one might profit by it in one's new career.'

He held out to me the book he had been reading. I took it from his hand and read the title on the spine: *Servitude et Grandeur Militaire: Alfred de Vigny.*

'I thought Vigny was just a poet – *Dieu! que le son du Cor est triste au fond des bois! . . .*'

'He also spent fourteen years of his life as a regular soldier. He ended as a captain, so there is hope for all of us.'

'In the Napoleonic wars?'

'Too young. Vigny never saw action. Only the most irksome sort of garrison duty, spiced with a little civil disturbance – having to stand quietly in the ranks while demonstrators threw bricks. That kind of thing.'

'I see.'

'In some ways the best viewpoint for investigating army life. Action might have confused the issue by proving too exciting. Action is, after all, exciting rather than interesting. Anyway, this book says what Vigny thought about soldiering.'

'What were his conclusions?'

'That the soldier is a dedicated person, a sort of monk of war. Of course he was speaking of the professional armies of his day. However, Vigny saw that in due course the armed forces of every country would be identified with the nation, as in the armies of antiquity.'

'When the bombing begins here, clearly civilians will play as dangerous a role as soldiers, if not more dangerous.'

'Of course. Even so, Vigny would say those in uniform have made the greater sacrifice by losing the man in the soldier – what he calls the warrior's abnegation, his renunciation of thought and action. Vigny says a soldier's crown is a crown of thorns, amongst its spikes none more painful than passive obedience.'

'True enough.'

'He sees the role of authority as essentially artificial, the army a way of life in which there is as little room for uncontrolled fervour as for sullen indifference. The impetuous volunteer has as much to learn as the unwilling conscript.'

I thought of Gwatkin and his keenness; of Sayce, and his recalcitrance. There was something to be said for this view of the army. By this time, Pennistone and I were the only ones awake in the compartment. The button cleaners had abandoned their paraphernalia, resumed their tunics and nodded off like the rest. The quartermaster began to snore. He did not look particularly saintly, nor even dedicated, though one never could tell. Probably Vigny knew what he was talking about after fourteen years of it.

'All the same,' I said, 'it's a misapprehension to suppose, as most people do, that the army is inherently different from all other communities. The hierarchy and discipline give an outward illusion of difference, but there are personalities of every sort in the army, as much as out of it. On the whole, the man who is successful in civilian life, all things being equal, is successful in the army.'

'Certainly – and there can be weak-willed generals and strong-willed privates.'

'Look, for example, at the way you yourself compelled my neighbour to move his kit last night.'

Pennistone laughed.

'One can just imagine Vigny romanticising that fat sod,' he said, 'but that is by the way. Probably Vigny, while emphasising that we are back with the citizen army of classical times which he himself envisaged, would agree with what you say. He was certainly aware that nothing is absolute in the army – least of all obeying orders. Take my own case. I was instructed to wait until this morning for a train, as there had been local complaints of army personnel overcrowding the railways over weekends to the detriment of civilian travel facilities. I made careful enquiries, found chances of retribution remote and started the night before, thus saving a day of my journey.'

'In other words, the individual still counts, even in the army.'

'Although consigned to circumstances in which, theoretically, no individuality – though much will-power – exists.'

'What would Vigny have thought of your disobeying that order?'

'I could have pleaded that the army was not my chosen profession, that my ill-conduct was a revulsion from uniform, drum, drill, the ritual of the parade ground, the act of an unworthy, amateur neophyte of war.'

We both went to sleep after that. When the train reached London, I said goodbye to Pennistone, who was making his way to the country and his home, there to stay until recalled to duty.

'Perhaps we'll meet again.'

'Let's decide to anyway,' he said. 'As we've agreed, these things are largely a matter of will.'

He waved, and disappeared into the crowds of the railway station. Later in the morning, while attending to the many odd jobs to be done during my few hours in London, I was struck by a thought as to where I might have seen Pennistone before. Was it at Mrs Andriadis's party in Hill Street ten or twelve years ago? His identity was revealed. He was the young man with the orchid in his buttonhole with whom I had struck up a conversation in the small hours. This seemed our characteristic relationship. Stringham had taken me to the party, Pennistone informed me that the house itself belonged to the Duports. Pennistone had told me, too, that Bob Duport had married Peter Templer's sister, Jean. It was Pennistone, that same evening – when all was confusion owing to Milly Andriadis's row with Stringham – whom she had pushed into an armchair when he had tried to tell her an anecdote about Prince Theodoric and the Prince of Wales. By then Pennistone was rather tight. It all seemed centuries ago: the Prince of Wales now Duke of Windsor, Prince Theodoric, buttress of pro-Allied sentiment in a country threatened by German invasion, Pennistone and myself second-lieutenants in our middle thirties. I wondered what had happened to Stringham, Mrs Andriadis and the rest. However, there was no time to ponder long about all that. Other matters required attention. I was glad – overjoyed – to be back in England even for a month or so. There would be weekend leaves from the course, when it should be possible to get as far as my sister-in-law Frederica Budd's house, where Isobel was staying until the child was born. The London streets, empty of traffic, looked incredibly bright and sophisticated, the tarts in Piccadilly dazzling nymphs. This was before the blitz. I knew how Persephone must have felt on the first day of her annual release from the underworld. An RAF officer of unconventional appearance advancing up the street turned out to be Barnby. He recognised me at the same moment.

'I thought you were a war artist.'

'I was for a time,' he said. 'Then I got sick of it and took a job doing camouflage for this outfit.'

'Disguising aerodromes as Tudor cottages?'

'That sort of thing.'

'What's it like?'

'Not bad. If I'm not able to paint in the way I want, I'd as soon do this as anything else.'

'I thought war artists were allowed to paint whatever they wanted.'

'They are in a way,' said Barnby, 'I don't know. I prefer this for some reason, while there's a war on. They let me go on an occasional operational flight.'

I felt a pang. Barnby was a few years older than myself. I had nothing so lively to report. He looked rather odd in his uniform, thick, square, almost as if he were still wearing the blue overalls in which he was accustomed to paint.

'Where are you, Nick?' he asked.

I gave him some account of my life.

'It doesn't sound very exciting.'

'It isn't.'

'I've got a wonderful new girl,' he said.

I thought how, war or peace, nothing ever really changes in such aspects.

'How long are you in London?' he said. 'I'd like to tell you about her. She's got one extraordinary trait. It would amuse you to hear about it. Can't we dine together tonight?'

'I've got to report to Aldershot this afternoon. I've been sent there on a course. Are you stationed in London?'

'Up for the night only. I have to see a man in the Air Ministry about some special camouflage equipment. How's Isobel?'

'Having a baby soon.'

'Give her my love. What happened to the rest of the Tolland family?'

'George is in France with a Guards battalion. He was on the Regular Reserve, of course, now a captain. Robert, always a mysterious figure, is a lance-corporal in Field Security, believed to be on his way to getting a commission. Hugo doesn't want to be an officer. He prefers to stay where he is as a gunner on the South Coast – bombardier now, I believe. He says you meet such awful types in the Officers' Mess.'

'What about those chaps Isobel's sisters married?'

'Roddy Cutts – as an MP – had no difficulty about getting into something. His own county Yeomanry, I think. I don't know his rank, probably colonel by now. Susan is with him. Chips Lovell has joined the Marines.'

'That's an unexpected arm. Is Priscilla with him?'

'So far as I know.'

We spoke of other matters, then parted. Talking to Barnby increased the feeling that I had been released from prison, at the same time inducing a new sensation, that prison life was all I was fit for. Barnby's conversation, everything round about, seemed hopelessly unreal. There was boundless relief in being free, even briefly free, from the eternal presence of Gwatkin, Kedward, Cadwallader, Gwylt and the rest of them; not to have to worry whether the platoon was better occupied digging themselves in or attacking a hill; whether Davies, G., should have a stripe or Davies, L., lose one; yet, by comparison, the shapes of Barnby and Pennistone were little more than figments of the imagination, shadows flickering on the slides of an old-fashioned magic-lantern. I had scarcely arrived in London, in any case, before it was time to leave for Aldershot. In the train on the way there, I reflected on the ideas Pennistone had put forward: the 'occasional operational flights' of Barnby. How would one feel on such aerial voyages? It might be like Dai and Shoni in their balloon. In the army, as up to now experienced, danger, although it might in due course make appearance, at present skulked out of sight in the background; the foreground for ever cluttered with those moral obligations outlined by Vigny. I envied Pennistone, who could turn from war to Descartes, and back again, without perceptible effort. I knew myself incapable of writing a line of a novel – by then I had written three or four – however long released from duty. Whatever inner processes are required for writing novels, so far as I myself was concerned, war now utterly inhibited. That was one of the many disagreeable aspects of war. It was not only physically inescapable, but morally inescapable too. Why did one envy Barnby his operational flights? That was an absorbing question. Certainly not because one wanted to be killed, nor yet because the qualities of those who excel in violent action were the qualities to which one had any claim. For that matter, such qualities were not specially Barnby's. There was perhaps the point. Yet it was absurd to regard war as a kind of competition of just that sort between individuals. If that was the aim in war, why not in peace? No doubt there were plenty of individuals who felt that sort of emulation in peacetime too, but their preoccupations were not one's own. Looked at calmly, war created a situation in which the individual – if he wished to be on the winning side – was of importance only in so much as he contributed to the requirements of the machine, not according to the picturesque figure he cut in the eyes of himself and others. It was no more reasonable, if you were not that sort of person, to aspire to lead a cavalry charge, than, without financial gifts, to dream of cornering the pepper market; without scientific training, split the atom. All the same, as Pennistone had said, these things are largely a matter of the will. I thought of Dr Trelawney, the magician, the night Duport and I had helped him to bed after his asthma attack, when he had quoted as all that was necessary: 'To know, to dare, to will, to be silent.' Armed with those emblems of strength, one might, however out of character, lead a cavalry charge, perhaps even corner the pepper market and split the atom too. Anyway, I thought, it would be a dull world if no one ever had dreams of glory. Moreland was fond of quoting Nietzsche's opinion that there is no action without illusion. Arrival at Aldershot brought an end to these reflections. Most of the train's passengers turned out to be officers on their way to the same course as myself. After reporting to the Orderly Room, we were shown the lines where we were to sleep, a row of small redbrick houses built round a sort of square. Their interiors were uninviting.

'Former married quarters,' said the gloomy C.3 lance-corporal guiding my group. 'Condemned in 1914, don't half wonder.'

I did not wonder either. 1914 was, in fact, the year when, as a child, I had last set eyes on these weary red cantonments, my father's regiment stationed at a hutted camp between here and Stonehurst, the remote and haunted bungalow where my parents lived at that time. I remembered how the Battalion, polished and blancoed, in scarlet and spiked helmets, had marched into Aldershot for some ceremonial parade, drums beating, colours cased, down dusty summer roads. Afterwards, my father had complained of a sore heel caused by the rub of his wellington boot, an abrasion scarcely cured before it was time to go to war. That war, too, had been no doubt the reason why these ramshackle married quarters had never been demolished and replaced. When peace came, there were other matters to think about. Here we were accommodated on the ground floor, a back and front room. Of the five others who were to share this billet, four – two from the Loyals, two from the Manchesters –

were in their late twenties. They did their unpacking and went off to find the Mess. The remaining subaltern, from a Midland regiment, was much younger. He was short and square, with dark skin, grey eyes and very fair curly hair.

'Those Lancashire lads in here with us are a dumb crowd,' he remarked to me.

'What makes you think so?'

'Do you know they thought I talked so broad I must come from Burton-on-Trent,' he said.

He spoke as if he had been mistaken for a Chinese or Ethiopian. There was something of Kedward about him; something, too, which I could not define, of my brother-in-law, Chips Lovell. He did not have a smudgy moustache like Kedward's, and his personality was more forceful, more attractive too.

'We're going to be right cooped up in here,' he said. 'Would you be satisfied if I took over this area of floor space, and left you as far as the wall?'

'Perfectly.'

'My name is Stevens,' he said, 'Odo Stevens.'

I told him my own name. He spoke with a North Country or Midland intonation, not unlike that Quiggin used to assume in his earlier days, when, for social or literary reasons, he chose to emphasize his provincial origins and unvarnished, forthright nature. Indeed, I could see nothing inherently absurd in the mistake the 'Lancashire lads' had made in supposing Stevens a native of Burton-on-Trent. However, I laughed and agreed it was a ludicrous error. I was flattered that he considered me a person to take into his confidence on the subject; glad, too, that I was housed next to someone who appeared agreeable. In the army, the comparative assurance of your own unit, whatever its failings, is at once dissipated by changed circumstances, which threaten fresh conflicts and induce that terrible, recurrent army dejection, the sensation that no one cares a halfpenny whether you live or die.

'Where *do* you come from?'

'Brum, of course.'

'Birmingham?'

'What do you think,' he said, as if it were almost insulting to suppose the matter in the smallest doubt. 'Can't you tell the way I say it? But I've managed to keep out of my home town for quite a while, thank God.'

'Don't you like it there?'

'Finest city in the world,' he said, laughing again, 'but something livelier suits me. As a matter of fact, I was on the continent for the best part of six months before I joined the army.'

'Whereabouts?'

'Holland, Belgium. Even got as far afield as Austria.'

'Doing what?'

'There was an exchange of apprentices for learning languages. I pick up languages pretty easily for some reason. They were beginning to think I'd better come home and do some work just at the moment war broke out.'

'What's your job?'

'Imitation jewellery.'

'You sell it?'

'My pa's in a firm that makes it. Got me into it too. A business with a lot of foreign connexions. That's how I fixed up getting abroad.'

'Sounds all right.'

'Not bad, as jobs go, but I don't want to spend a lifetime at it. That's why I wasn't sorry to make a change. Shall we push along to the Mess?'

We sat next to each other at dinner that night. Stevens asked me what I did for a living.

'You're lucky to have a writing job,' he said, 'I've tried writing myself. Sometimes think I might take it up, even though peddling costume jewellery is a good trade for putting yourself over with the girls.'

'What sort of writing?'

'Spot of journalism in the local paper – "Spring comes to the Black Country" – "Sunset on Armistice Day" – that sort of thing. I knock it off easily, just as I can pick up languages.'

I saw Stevens would go far, if he did not get killed. He was aware of his own taste for self-applause and prepared to laugh at it. The journalistic streak was perhaps what recalled Chips Lovell, whom he did not resemble physically.

'Did you volunteer for the Independent Companies?' he asked.

'I didn't think I'd be much good at them.'

The Independent Companies – later called Commandos – were small guerilla units, copiously officered. They had been employed with some success in Norway. Raising them had skimmed off the best young officers from many battalions, so that they were not popular with some Commanding Officers for that reason.

'I was in trouble with my CO the time they were recruiting them,' said Stevens. 'He bitched up my application. It was really because he thought me useful to him where I was. All the same, I'll get away into something. My unit are a lot of louts. They're not going to prevent me from having what fun the army has to offer.'

Here were dreams of military glory very different from Gwatkin's. After all this talk, it was time to go to bed. The following morning there was drill on the square. We were squadded by a stagey cluster of glengarry-capped staff-sergeants left over from the Matabele campaign, with Harry Lauder accents and eyes like poached eggs. Amongst a couple of hundred students on the course, there was hope of an acquaintance, but no familiar face showed in the Mess the previous night. However, slow-marching across the asphalt I recognised Jimmy Brent in another squad moving at right-angles to our own, a tallish, fat, bespectacled figure, forgotten since Peter Templer had brought him to see Stringham and myself when we were undergraduates. Brent looked much the same. I had not greatly liked him at the time. Nothing heard about him since caused me, in a general way, to want to see more of him. Here, however, any face from the past was welcome, especially so veteran a relic as Brent. After the parade was dismissed, I tackled him.

'We met years ago, when you came over in Peter Templer's second-hand Vauxhall, and he drove us all into the ditch.'

I told him my name. Brent clearly did not recognise me. There was little or no reason why he should. However, he remembered the circumstances of Templer's car accident, and seemed pleased to find someone on the course who had known him in the outside world.

'There were some girls in the car, weren't there,' he said, his face lighting up at that happy memory, 'and Bob Duport too. I knew Peter took us to see a couple of friends he'd been at school with, but I wouldn't be able to place them at this distance of time. So you were one of them? What a memory you've got. Well, it's nice to find a pal in this god-forsaken spot.'

'Do you ever see Peter now? I'd like to hear what's happened to him.'

'Peter's all right,' said Brent, speaking rather cautiously, 'wise enough not to have mixed himself up with the army like you and me. Got some Government advisory job. Financial side. I think Sir Magnus Donners had a hand – Donners hasn't got office yet, I'm surprised to see – Peter always did a spot of prudent sucking-up in that direction.

Peter knows which side his bread is buttered. He's been quite useful to Donners on more than one occasion.'

'I met Peter once there – at Stourwater, I mean.'

'You know Donners too, do you. I've done a little business with him myself. I'm an oil man, you know. I was in the South American office before the war. Did you ever meet Peter's sister, Jean? I used to see quite a bit of her there.'

'I knew her ages ago.'

'She married Bob Duport,' said Brent, 'who was with us on the famous occasion when the Vauxhall heeled over.'

There was a perverse inner pleasure in knowing that Brent had had a love affair with Jean Duport, which he could scarcely guess had been described to me by her own husband. Even though I had once loved her myself – to that extent the thought was painful, however long past – there was an odd sense of power in possessing this secret information.

'I ran into Duport just before war broke out. I never knew him well. I gather they are divorced now.'

'Quite right,' said Brent.

He did not allow the smallest suggestion of personal interest to colour the tone of his voice.

'I heard Bob was in some business mess,' he said. 'Chromite, was it? He got across that fellow Widmerpool, another of Donners's henchmen. Widmerpool is an able fellow, not a man to offend. Bob managed to rub him up the wrong way. Somebody said Bob was connected with the Board of Trade now. Don't know whether that is true. The Board of Trade wanted me to stay in Latin America, as a matter of fact.'

'You'd have had a safe billet there.'

'Glad to leave the place as it happened, though I was doing pretty well.'

'How do you find yourself here?'

'Managed to get into this mob through the good offices of our Military Attaché where I was. His own regiment. Never heard of them before.'

I supposed that Brent had been relieved to find this opportunity of moving to another continent after Jean had abandoned him. That disappointment, too, might explain his decision to join the army as a change of occupation. He was several years older than myself, in fact entering an age group to be reasonably considered beyond the range of unfriendly criticism for remaining out of uniform; especially if, as he suggested, his work in South America was officially regarded as of some national importance. I remembered Duport's story clearly now. After reconciliation with Jean, they had sailed for South America. Brent had sailed with them. At that time Jean's affair with Brent had apparently been in full swing. Indeed, from what Duport said, there was every reason to suppose that affair had begun before she told me of her own decision to return to her husband. So far as that went, Jean had deceived me as much as she had deceived Duport. Fortunately Brent was unaware of that.

'How do you like the army?'

'Bloody awful,' he said, 'but I'd rather be in than out.'

'Me, too.'

The remaining students of the course were an unexceptional crowd, most of the usual army types represented. We drilled on the square, listened to lectures about the German army, erected barbed wire entanglements, drove 3-ton lorries, map read. One evening, preceding a night exercise in which one half of the course was arrayed in battle against the other half, Stevens showed a different side of himself. The force in which we were both included lay on the ground in a large semi-circle, waiting for the operation to begin. The place was a clearing among the pine woods of heathery, Stonehurst-like country. Stevens and I were on the extreme right flank of the semi-circle. On the extreme left, exactly opposite us, whoever was disposed there continually threw handfuls of gravel across the area between, which landed chiefly on Stevens and myself.

'It must be Croxton,' Stevens said.

Croxton was a muscular neurotic of a kind, fairly common, who cannot stop talking or creating a noise. He sang or ragged joylessly all the time, without possessing any of those inner qualities – like Corporal Gwylt's, for example – required for making such behaviour acceptable to others. He was always starting a row, playing tricks, causing trouble. There could be little doubt that Croxton was responsible for the hail of small stones that continued to spatter over us. The moon had disappeared behind clouds, rain threatening. There seemed no prospect of the exercise beginning.

'I think I'll deal with this,' Stevens said.

He crawled back into the cover of the trees behind us, disappearing in darkness. Some minutes elapsed. Then I heard a sudden exclamation from the direction of the gravel thrower. It was a cry of pain. More time went by. Then Stevens returned.

'It was Croxton,' he said.

'What did you do?'

'Gave him a couple in the ribs with my rifle butt.'

'What did he think about that?'

'He didn't seem to like it.'

'Did he put up any fight?'

'Not much. He's gasping a bit now.'

The following day, during a lecture on the German Division, I saw Croxton, who was sitting a few rows in front, rub his back more than once. Stevens had evidently struck fairly hard. This incident showed he could be disagreeable, if so disposed. He also possessed the gift of isolating himself from his surroundings. These lectures on the

German army admittedly lacked light relief – after listening to many of them, I have preserved only the ornamental detail that the German Reconnaissance Corps carried a sabre squadron on its establishment – and one easily dozed through the lecturer's dronings. On the other hand, to remain, as Stevens could, slumbering like a child, upright on a hard wooden chair, while everyone else was clattering from the lecture room, suggested considerable powers of self-seclusion. Another source of preservation to Stevens – unlike Gwatkin – was an imperviousness to harsh words. He and I had been digging a weapon pit together one afternoon without much success. An instructor came up to grumble at our efforts.

'That's not a damned bit of use,' he said. 'Wouldn't give protection to a cat.'

'We've just reached a surface of rock, sir,' said Stevens, 'but I think I can say we've demonstrated the dignity of labour.'

The instructor sniggered and moved on, without examining the soil. Not everyone liked this self-confident manner of Stevens. Among those who disapproved was Brent.

'That young fellow will get sent back to his unit,' Brent said. 'Mark my words. He's too big for his boots.'

When the whole course was divided into syndicates of three for the purposes of a 'tactical exercise without troops', Brent and I managed to be included in the same trio. To act with an acquaintance on such occasions is an advantage, but it was at the price of having Macfaddean as the third partner. However, although Macfaddean, a schoolmaster in civilian life, was feverishly anxious to make a good impression on the Directing Staff, this also meant that he was prepared to do most of the work. In his middle to late thirties, Macfaddean would always volunteer for a 'demonstration', no matter how uncomfortable the prospect of crawling for miles through mud, for instance, or exemplifying the difficulty of penetrating dannert wire. When the task was written work, Macfaddean would pile up mountains of paper, or laboriously summarize, whichever method he judged best set him apart from the other students. He was so tireless in his energies that towards the end of the day, when we had all agreed on the situation report to be presented and there was some time to spare, Macfaddean could not bear these minutes to be wasted.

'Look here, laddies,' he said, 'why don't we go back into the woods and produce an alternative version? I'm not happy, for instance, about concentration areas. It would look good if we handed in two plans for the commander to choose from, both first-rate.'

There could be no doubt that the anonymity of the syndicate system irked Macfaddean. He felt that if another report were made, the second one might be fairly attributed to his own unaided afforts, a matter that could be made clear when the time came. That was plain enough to both Brent and myself. We told Macfaddean that, for our part, we were going to adhere to the plan already agreed upon; if he wished to make another one, that was up to him.

'Off you go, Mac, if you want to,' said Brent. 'We'll wait for you here. I've done enough for today.'

When Macfaddean was gone, we found a place to lie under some withered trees, blasted, no doubt, to their crumbling state by frequent military experiment. We were operating over the dismal tundra of Laffan's Plain, battlefield of a million mock engagements. The sky above was filled with low-flying aircraft, of outlandish colour and design, camouflaged perhaps by Barnby in a playful mood. Lumbering army reconnaissance planes buzzed placidly backwards and forwards through grey puffs of cloud, ancient machines garnered in from goodness knows what forgotten repository of written-off Governmental stores, now sent aloft again to meet a desperate situation. The heavens looked like one of those pictures of an imagined Future to be found in old-fashioned magazines for boys. Brent rolled over on his back and watched this rococo aerial pageant.

'You know Bob Duport is not a chap like you and me,' he said suddenly.

He spoke as if he had given much thought to Duport's character; as if, too, my own presence allowed him at last to reach certain serious conclusions on that subject. Regarded by Templer, and Duport himself, as something of a butt – certainly a butt where women were concerned – Brent possessed a curious resilience in everyday life, which his exterior did not reveal. This was noticeable on the course, where, unlike Macfaddean, he was adept at avoiding work that might carry with it the risk of blame.

'What about Duport?'

'Bob's *really* intelligent,' said Brent earnestly. 'No intention of minimising your qualifications in that line, or even my own, but Bob's a real wonder-boy.'

'Never knew him well enough to penetrate that far.'

'Terrific gifts.'

'Tell me more about him.'

'Bob can do anything he turns his hand to. Wizard at business. Pick up any job in five minutes. If he were on this course, he'd be the star-turn. Then, girls. They simply lie down in front of him.'

'I see.'

'But he's not just interested in business and women.'

'What else?'

'You wouldn't believe what he knows about art and all that.'

'He never gave the impression of being that sort.'

'You've got to know him well before he lets on. Have to keep your eyes open. Did you ever go to that house the Duports had in Hill Street?'

'Years ago, when they'd let it to someone else. I was taken to a party there.'

'That place was marvellously done up,' said Brent. 'Absolute perfection in my humble opinion. Bob's got taste. That's what I mean. All the same, he isn't one of those who go round gushing about art. He keeps it to himself.'

I did not immediately grasp the point of this great build-up of Duport. It certainly shed a new light on him. I did not disbelieve the picture. On the contrary, in its illumination, many things became plainer. Duport's professional brutality of manner, thus interpreted in Brent's rough and ready style, might indeed conceal behind its facade sensibilities he was unwilling to reveal to the world at large. There was nothing unreasonable about that supposition. It might to some extent explain Duport's relationship with Jean, even if Brent's own connexion with her were thereby made less easy to understand. I thought of the views of my recent travelling companion, Pennistone, so plainly expressed at Mrs Andriadis's party:

'. . . these appalling Italianate fittings – and the pictures – my God, the pictures . . .'

However, such things were a matter of opinion. The point at issue was Duport's character: was he, in principle, regardless of personal idiosyncrasy, what Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson used to call a 'man of taste'? It was an interesting question. Jean herself had always been rather apologetic about that side of her married life, so that presumably Brent was right: Duport, rather than Jean, had been responsible for the Hill Street decorations and pictures. This was a new angle on Duport. I saw there were important sides of him I had missed.

'When you last met Bob,' said Brent, using the tone of one about to make a confidence, 'did he mention my name to you?'

'He said you and he had been in South America together.'

'Did he add anything about me and Jean?'

'He did, as a matter of fact. I gather there was an involved situation.'

Brent laughed.

'There was,' he said. 'I thought Bob would go round shooting his mouth off. Just like him. It's Bob's one weakness. He can't hold his tongue.'

He sighed, as if Duport's heartless chatter about his own matrimonial situation had aroused in Brent himself a despair for human nature. He gave the impression that he thought it too bad of Duport. I was reminded of Barnby, exasperated at some woman's behaviour, saying: 'It's enough to stop you ever committing adultery again.' The deafening vibrations of an insect-like Lysander just above us, which seemed unable to decide whether or not to make a landing, put a stop to conversation for a minute or two. When it sheered off, Brent spoke once more.

'You said you knew Jean, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

'Wonderful girl in her way.'

'Very nice to look at.'

'For a while we were lovers,' said Brent.

He spoke in that reminiscent, unctuous voice men use when they tell you that sort of thing more to savour an enjoyable past situation, than to impart information which might be of interest. It must have been already clear to him that Duport had already revealed that fact.

'Oh, yes.'

'Bob said that?'

'He put it more bluntly.'

Brent laughed again, very good-naturedly. The way he set about telling the story emphasised his least tolerable side. I tried to feel objective about the whole matter by recalling one of Moreland's favourite themes, the attraction exercised over women by men to whom they can safely feel complete superiority.

'Are you hideous, stunted, mentally arrested, sexually maladjusted, marked with warts, gross in manner, with a cleft palate and an evil smell?' Moreland used to say. 'Then, oh boy, there's a treat ahead of you. You're all set for a promising career as a lover. There's an absolutely ravishing girl round the corner who'll find you irresistible. In fact her knickers are bursting into flame at this very moment at the mere thought of you.'

'But your description does not fit in with most of the lady-killers one knows. I should have thought they tended to be decidedly good-looking, as often as not, together with a lot of other useful qualities as well.'

'What about Henri Quatre?'

'What about him?'

'He was impotent and he stank. It's in the histories. Yet he is remembered as one of the great lovers of all time.'

'He was a king – and a good talker at that. Besides, we don't know him personally, so it's hard to argue about him.'

'Think of some of the ones we do know.'

'But it would be an awful world if no one but an Adonis, who was also an intellectual paragon and an international athlete, had a chance. It always seems to me, on the contrary, that women's often expressed statement, that male good looks don't interest them, is quite untrue. All things being equal, the man who looks like a tailor's dummy stands a better chance than the man who doesn't.'

'All things never are equal,' said Moreland, always impossible to shake in his theories, 'though I agree that to be no intellectual strain is an advantage where the opposite sex is concerned. But you look into the matter. Remember Bottom and Titania. The Bard knew.'

Brent, so far as he had been a success with Jean, seemed to strengthen Moreland's argument. I wondered whether I wanted to hear more. The Jean business was long over, but even when you have ceased to love someone, that does not necessarily bring an indifference to a past shared together. Besides, though love may die, vanity lives on timelessly. I knew that I must be prepared to hear things I should not like. Yet, although where unfaithfulness reigns, ignorance may be preferable to knowledge, at the same time, once knowledge is brutally born, exactitude is preferable to uncertainty. To learn at what precise moment Jean had decided to take on Brent, in preference to myself, would be more acceptable than to allow the imagination continually to range unhindered through boundless fields of disagreeable supposition. Even so, I half hoped Macfaddean would return, full of new ideas about terrain and lines of communication. However, the choice did not lie with me. The narrative rested in Brent's own hands. Whether I wanted to listen or not, he was determined to tell his story.

'You'd never guess,' he said apologetically, 'but Jean fell for me first.'

'Talk about girls lying down for Bob Duport.'

'Shall I tell you how it happened?'

'Go ahead.'

'Peter Templer asked me to dine with him to meet a couple called Taylor or Porter. He could never remember which. Peter subsequently went off with Mrs Taylor, whoever she was, but that was later. He also invited his sister, Jean, to the party, and a woman called Lady McReith. I didn't much take to the latter. We dined at the Carlton Grill.'

Brent paused. I remembered perfectly the occasion of which he spoke. One evening when we were out together, Jean had remarked she was dining with her brother the following night. The fact that the dinner party was to be at the Carlton Grill pinpointed the incident in my mind. I had noted at the time, without soreness, that Peter Templer, as a result of his exertions in the City, could afford to entertain at restaurants of that sort, while I frequented Foppa's and the Strasbourg. It was one of several differences that had taken shape between us. I remembered thinking that. Then the whole matter had passed from my mind until Jean and I next met, when she had made rather a point of emphasising what a boring evening she had had to endure with her brother and his friends. In fact the party at the Carlton Grill appeared to have been so tedious she could not keep off the subject.

'Who was there?'

'Two businessmen you'd never have heard of, one of them married to a very pretty, silly girl, whom Peter obviously has his eye on. Then there was a rather older woman I've met before, who might be a lesbian.'

'What was she called?'

'You wouldn't know her either.'

'What made you think she was a lesbian?'

'Something about her.'

Jean knew perfectly well I had met Lady McReith when, as a boy, I had stayed at the Templers' house. Even had she forgotten that fact, Lady McReith was an old friend of the Templer family, especially of Jean's sister, Babs. It was absurd to speak of her in that distant way. By that time, too, Jean must have made up her mind whether or not Gwen McReith was a lesbian. All this mystification was impossible to ascribe to any rational form of behaviour. Possibly the emphasis on an unknown lesbian was to distract attention from the unmarried businessman – Brent. Jean wanted to talk about the party simply because Brent had had interested her, yet instinct told her this fact must be concealed. It was rather surprising that she had never before met Brent with her brother. Certainly, if she had named him, I should have had no suspicion of what was to follow. If that were the reason – a desire to talk about the party, but at the same time not to mention Brent by name – she could have stated quite simply that Lady McReith was present, gossiped in a straightforward way about Lady McReith's past, present and future. In short, this utterly unnecessary, irrational lie was a kind of veiled attack on our own relationship, a deliberate deceiving of me for no logical reason, except that, by telling a lie of that kind, truth was suddenly undermined between us; thus even though I was unaware of it, moving us inexorably apart. It was a preliminary thrust that must have satisfied some strange inner urge.

'Poor Peter,' Jean had said, 'he really sees the most dreary people. One of the men at dinner had never heard of Chaliapin.'

That musical ignoramus was no doubt Brent too. I made up my mind to confirm later his inexperience of opera, even if it meant singing the 'Song of the Volga Boatmen' to him to prove that point. At the moment, however, I did no more than ask for his own version of the dinner party at the Carlton Grill.

'Well, I thought Mrs Duport an attractive piece,' Brent said, 'but I'd never have dreamt of carrying things further, if she hadn't rung me up the next day. You see, it was obvious Peter had just given the dinner because he wanted to talk to the other lady – the one he ran away with. The rest of us had been got there for that sole purpose. Peter's an old friend of mine, so I just did the polite as required, chatted about this and that. Talked business mostly, which Mrs Duport seemed to find interesting.'

'What did she say when she rang up?'

'Asked my opinion about Amparos.'

'Who is Amparos?'

'An oil share.'

'Just that?'

'We talked for a while on the phone. Then she suggested I should give her lunch and discuss oil investments. She knows something about the market. I could tell at once. In her blood, I suppose.'

'And you gave her lunch?'

'I couldn't that week,' said Brent, 'too full of business. But I did the following week. That was how it all started. Extraordinary how things always happen at the same time. That was just the moment when the question opened up of my transfer to the South American office.'

I saw the whole affair now. From the day of that luncheon with Brent, Jean had begun to speak with ever-increasing seriousness of joining up again with her husband; chiefly, she said, for the sake of their child. That seemed reasonable enough. Duport might have behaved badly; that did not mean I never suffered any sensations of guilt.

'How did it end?'

Brent pulled up a large tuft of grass and threw it from him.

'Rather hard to answer that one,' he said.

He spoke as if the conclusion of this relationship with Jean required much further reflection than he had at present been able to allow the subject.

'The fact is,' he said, 'I liked Jean all right, and naturally I was pretty flattered that she preferred me to a chap like Bob. All the same, I always felt what you might call uneasy with her, know what I mean. You must have come across that with girls. Feel they're a bit too good for you. Jean was too superior a wench for a chap of my simple tastes. That was what it came to. Talked all sorts of stuff I couldn't follow. Did you ever go to that coloured night-club called the Old Plantation?'

'Never, but I know it by name.'

'A little coloured girl sold cigarettes there. She was more in my line, though it cost me a small fortune to get her.'

'So the thing with Jean Duport just petered out?'

'With a good deal of grumbling on her side, believe me, before it did. I think she'd have run away with me if I'd asked her. Didn't quite see my way to oblige in that respect. Then one day she told me she didn't want to see me again. As a matter of fact we hadn't met for quite a time when she said that.'

'Why not?'

'Don't know. Suppose I hadn't done much about it. There'd been some trouble at one of our places up the river. Production dropped from forty or fifty, to twenty-five barrels a day. I had to go along there and take a look at things. That was one of the reasons why she hadn't heard from me for some time.'

'Fact was you were tired of it.'

'Jean seemed to think so, the way she carried on. She was bloody rude when we parted. Anyway, she had the consolation of feeling she broke it off herself. Women like that.'

So it appeared, after all, the love affair had been brought to an end by Brent's apathy, rather than Jean's fickleness. Even Duport had not known that. He had supposed Brent to have been, in his own words, 'ditched'. It had certainly never occurred to Duport, as a husband, that Brent, his own despised hanger-on, had actually been pursued by Jean, had himself done the 'ditching'. I, too, had little cause for self-congratulation, if it came to that.

'How did Duport find out about yourself and his wife?'

'Through their dear little daughter.'

'Good God – Polly? I suppose she must be twelve or thirteen by now.'

'Quite that,' said Brent. 'Fancy you're remembering. I expect Bob spoke of her when you saw him. He's mad about that kid. Not surprising. She's a very pretty little girl. Will need keeping an eye on soon – perhaps even now.'

'Did Bob find out while it was still going on?'

'Just before the end. Polly let out something about a meeting between Jean and me. Bob remarked that if it had been anyone else he'd have been suspicious. Then Jean flew off the handle and told him everything. Bob couldn't believe it at first. Didn't think I was up to it. He always regarded me as an absolute flop where women were concerned. It was quite a blow to him in a way. To his pride, I mean.'

In this scene between the Duports, I saw a parallel to the occasion when I had myself made a slighting remark about Jimmy Stripling, and Jean, immediately furious, had told me of her former affair with him. The pattern was, as ever, endlessly repeated. There was something to be admired in Brent's lack of vanity in so absolutely accepting Duport's low estimate of his own attractions, even after causing Duport's wife to fall in love with him. Whatever other reason Brent might have had for embarking on the matter, a cheap desire to score off Jean's husband had played no part whatever. That was certain. Duport, cuckolded or no, remained Brent's ideal of manhood.

'I think it's just as well Bob finally got rid of her,' Brent said. 'Now he'll probably find a wife who suits him better. Work Jean out of his system. Anyway he'll have a freer hand to live the sort of life he likes.'

The tramp of men and sound of singing interrupted us. A detachment of Sappers were marching by, chanting their song, voices harsh and tuneless after those of my own Regiment:

'You make fast, I make fast, make fast the dinghy,
Make fast the dinghy, make fast the dinghy,
You make fast, I make fast, make fast the dinghy,
Make fast the dinghy pontoon.
For we're marching on to Laffan's Plain,
To Laffan's Plain, to Laffan's Plain,
Yes we're marching on to Laffan's Plain,
Where they don't know mud from shit . . .'

The powerful rhythms, primitive, incantatory, hypnotic, seemed not only the battle hymn of warring tribes, but also a refrain with obscure bearing on what Brent had just told me, a general lament for the emotional conflict of men and women. The Sappers disappeared over the horizon, their song dying away with them. From the other direction, Macfaddean approached at the double. He was breathless when he arrived beside us.

'Sorry to keep you laddies waiting,' he said, still panting, 'but I've found a wizard alternative concentration area. Here, look at the map. We won't revise our earlier plan, just show up this as a second choice. It means doing the odd spot of collating. Give me the coloured pencils. Now, take down these map references. Look sharp, old man.'

Meanwhile, the problem of how best to reach Frederica's house when leave was granted remained an unsolved one. I asked Stevens whether he were going to spend the weekend in Birmingham.

'Much too far,' he said, 'I'm getting an aunt and uncle to put me up. It won't be very exciting, but it's somewhere to go.'

He named a country town not many miles from Frederica's village.

'That's the part of the world I'm trying to reach myself. It's not going to be too easy to get there and back in a weekend. Trains are rotten.'

'Trains are hopeless,' said Stevens. 'You'll spend the whole bloody time going backwards and forwards. Look here, I've got a broken-down old car I bought with the proceeds of my writing activities. It cost a tenner, but it should get us there and back. I can put my hand on some black market petrol too. Where exactly do you want to go?'

I named the place.

'I've heard of it,' said Stevens. 'My uncle is an estate agent in those parts. I've probably heard him talk of some house he's done a deal with in the neighbourhood – your sister-in-law's perhaps. I can drop you there easily, if you like. Then pick you up on Sunday night, when we're due back here.'

So it was arranged. The day came. Stevens's car, a Morris two-seater, started all right. We set off. It was invigorating to leave Aldershot. We drove along, while Stevens talked about his family, his girls, his ambitions. I heard how his mother was the daughter of a detective-inspector who had had to leave the force on account of drink; why he thought his sister's husband, a master in a secondary school, was rather too keen on the boys; what a relief it had been when he had heard, just before taking leave of his unit for the Aldershot course, that he had not got a local girl in the family way. Such confidences are rare in the army. Narcissistic, Stevens was at the same time – if the distinction can be made – not narrowly egotistical. He was interested in everything round him, even though everything must eventually lead back to himself. He asked about Isobel. It is hard to describe your wife. Instead I tried to give some account of Frederica's household. He seemed to absorb it all pretty well.

'Good name, "Frederica",' he said, 'I was christened "Herbert", but a hieroglyphic like "Odo" was put on an envelope addressed to me when I was abroad, and I saw at once that was the thing to be called. I was getting fed up with being "Bert" as it was.'

Apart from the unexpected circumstance that Stevens and I should be driving across country together, the war seemed far away. Frederica had lived in her house, a former vicarage, for a year or two. A widow, she had moved to the country for her children's sake. Not large, the structure was splayed out and rambling, so that the building looked as if its owners had at some period taken the place to pieces, section by section, then put it together again, not always in correct proportions. A white gate led up a short drive with rose bushes on either side. The place had that same air of intense respectability Frederica's own personality conveyed. In spite of war conditions, there was no sign of untidiness about the garden, only an immediate sense of having entered a precinct where one must be on one's best behaviour. Stevens stopped in front of the porch. Before I could ring or knock, Frederica herself opened the door.

'I saw you coming up the drive,' she said.

She wore trousers. Her head was tied up in a handkerchief. I kissed her, and introduced Stevens.

'Do come in for a moment and have a drink,' she said. 'Or have you got to push on? I'm sure not at once.'

Frederica was not usually so cordial in manner to persons she did not already know; often, not particularly cordial to those she knew well. I had not seen her since the outbreak of war. The war must have shaken her up. That was the most obvious explanation of this new demeanour. The trousers and handkerchief were uncharacteristic. However, it was not so much style of dress that altered her, as something within herself. Robin Budd her husband had been killed in a fall from his horse nine or ten years before. By now not far from forty, she had never – so far as her own family knew –

considered remarriage, still less indulged in any casual love affair; although those rather deliberately formidable, armour-plated good looks of hers were of the sort to attract quite a lot of men. Her sister, Priscilla, had some story about Jack Udney, an elderly courtier whose wife had died not long before, getting rather tight at Ascot after a notable win, and proposing to Frederica while the Gold Cup was actually being run, but the allegation had never been substantiated. It was true Frederica had snapped out total disagreement once, when Isobel met Jack Udney somewhere and said she thought him a bore. In short, Frederica's most notable characteristic was what Molly Jeavons called her 'dreadful correctness'. Now, total war seemed slightly to have dislodged this approach to life. Frederica's reception of Stevens showed that. Stevens himself did not need further pressing to come in for a drink.

'Nothing I'd like better,' he said. 'It'll help me to face Aunt Doris's woes about shortages and ration cards. Half a sec, I'll back the car to a place where I'm not blocking your front door.'

He started up the car again.

'How's Isobel?'

'Pretty well,' said Frederica. 'She's resting. She'll be down in a moment. We're rather full here. Absolutely packed to the ceiling, as a matter of fact.'

'Who have you got?'

'Priscilla is here – with Caroline.'

'Who is Caroline?'

'Priscilla's daughter, our niece. You ought to know that.'

'Ah, yes, I'd forgotten her name.'

'Then Robert turned up unexpectedly on leave.'

'I'll be glad to see Robert.'

Frederica laughed.

'Robert has brought a lady with him.'

'No?'

'But *yes*. One of my own contemporaries, as a matter of fact, though I never knew her well.'

'What's she called?'

'She married an American, now deceased, and has the unusual name of Mrs Wisebite. She was *née* Stringham. I used to see her at dances.'

'Charles Stringham's sister, in fact.'

'Yes, you knew him, didn't you. I remember now. Well, Robert has brought her along. What do you think of that? Then the boys are home for the holidays – and there's someone else you know.'

'Who is that?'

'Wait and see.'

Frederica laughed shrilly again, almost hysterically. That was most unlike her. I could not make out what was happening. Usually calm to the point of iciness, rigidly controlled except when she quarrelled with her sister, Norah, Frederica seemed now half excited, half anxious about something. It could hardly be Robert's morals she was worrying about, although she took family matters very seriously, and the fact that Robert had a woman in tow was certainly a matter for curiosity. That Robert should be associated with Stringham's sister was of special interest to myself. I had never met this sister, who was called Flavia, though I had seen her years before at Stringham's wedding. Chips Lovell, our brother-in-law, Priscilla's husband, had always alleged that Robert had a taste for 'night-club hostesses old enough to be his mother'. Mrs Wisebite, though not a night-club hostess, was certainly appreciably older than Robert. By this time, after several changes of position, Stevens had parked the car to his own satisfaction. As he joined us, another possible explanation of Frederica's jumpiness suddenly occurred to me.

'Isobel hasn't had the baby yet without anyone telling me?'

'Oh, no, no, no.'

However, something about the way I asked the question must have indicated to Frederica herself that her manner struck me as unaccustomed. While we followed her through the hall, she spoke more quietly.

'It's only that I'm looking forward to your meeting an old friend, Nick,' she said.

Evidently Robert was not the point at issue. We entered a sitting-room full of people, including a lot of children. These younger persons became reduced, in due course, to four only; Frederica's two sons, Edward and Christopher, aged about ten and twelve respectively, together with a couple of quite little ones, who played with bricks on the floor. One of these latter was presumably Priscilla's daughter, Caroline. Priscilla herself, blonde and leggy, quite a beauty in her way, was also lying on the floor, helping to build a tower with the bricks. Her brother, Robert Tolland, wearing battle-dress, sat on the sofa beside a tall, good-looking woman of about forty. Robert had removed his gaiters, but still wore army boots. The woman was Flavia Wisebite. Not noticeably like her brother in feature, she had some of Stringham's air of liveliness weighed down with melancholy. In her, too, the melancholy predominated. There was something greyhound-like about her nose and mouth. These two, Robert and Mrs Wisebite, seemed to have arrived in the house only a very short time before Stevens and myself. Tall, angular, Robert wore Intelligence Corps shoulder titles, corporal's stripes on his arm. The army had increased his hungry, even rather wolfish appearance. He jumped up at once with his usual manner of conveying that the last person to enter the room was the one he most wanted to see, an engaging social gesture that often caused people to exaggerate Robert's personal interest in his fellow human beings, regarding whom, in fact, he was inclined to feel little concern.

'Nick,' he said, 'it's marvellous we should have struck just the moment when you've been able to get away for a weekend. I don't think you've ever met Flavia, but she knows all about you from her brother.'

I introduced Odo Stevens to them.

'How do you do, sir,' said Robert.

'Oh, blow the sir, chum,' said Stevens. 'You can keep that for when we're on duty. I'm rather thick with the lance-corporal in your racket who functions with my Battalion. I've borrowed his motor bike before now. Where are you stationed?'

'Mytchett,' said Robert, 'but I hope to move soon.'

'My God, so do I,' said Stevens. 'They train your I. Corps personnel at Mytchett, don't they?'

He seemed perfectly at ease in this rather odd gathering. Before I had time to say much to Mrs Wisebite, a middle-aged man rose from an armchair. He had a tanned face, deep blue eyes, a very neat grey moustache. The sweater worn over a pair of khaki trousers seemed very natural clothes for him, giving somehow the impression of horsy elegance. It was Dicky Umfraville. Frederica was right. His presence was certainly a surprise.

'You didn't expect to find me here, old boy, did you?' said Umfraville. 'You thought I could only draw breath in night-clubs, a purely nocturnal animal.'

I had to agree that night-clubs seemed the characteristic background for our past encounters. There had been two of these at least. Umfraville had turned up at Foppa's that night, ages before, when I had taken Jean Duport there to play Russian billiards; then, a year or two later, Ted Jeavons had brought me to the club Umfraville himself had been running, where Max Pilgrim had sung his songs, Heather Hopkins played the piano:

'Di, Di, in her collar and tie . . .'

I had not set eyes on Umfraville since that occasion, but he seemed determined that we were the oldest of friends. I tried to recall what I knew of him: service in the earlier war with the Foot Guards, I could not remember which; some considerable reputation as gentleman-rider; four wives. Like many men who have enjoyed a career of more than usual dissipation, he had come to look notably distinguished in middle years, figure slim, eyes bright, face brown with Kenya sun. This bronzed skin, well brushed greying hair emphasised the blue of his eyes, which glistened like Peter Templer's, as Sergeant Pendry's had done before his disasters. I could not recall whether or not Umfraville's moustache was an addition. If so, it scarcely altered him at all. His face, in repose, possessed that look of innate sadness which often marks the features of those habituated to the boundless unreliability of horses. I asked him how he was employed in the army.

'On the staff of London District, old boy.'

He spoke with an exaggerated dignity, squaring his chest and coming to attention. Frederica, who was handing round drinks, now joined us. Once more she began to laugh helplessly.

'Dicky's got a very grand job,' she said, 'haven't you?'

She slipped her arm through Umfraville's. This was unheard-of licence for Frederica, something to be regarded as indicating decay of all the moral and social standards she had defended so long.

'It's certainly one of the bigger stations,' Umfraville agreed modestly.

'Of course it is, darling.'

'And should lead to promotion,' he said.

'Without doubt.'

'Collecting the tickets perhaps.'

'Dicky is an RTO,' said Frederica.

She was quite unable to control her laughter, which seemed not so much attributable to the thought of Umfraville being a Railway Transport Officer, as to the sheer delight she took in him for himself.

'He's got a cosy little office at one of those North London stations,' she said. 'I can never remember which, but I've visited him there. I say, Dicky, we'd better tell Nick, hadn't we?'

'About us?'

'Yes.'

'The fact is,' said Umfraville speaking slowly and with gravity, 'the fact is Frederica and I are engaged.'

Isobel came through the door at that moment, so the impact of this unexpected piece of news was to some extent lessened by other considerations immediately presenting themselves. Then and there, no more was said than a few routine congratulations, with further gigglings from Frederica. Isobel looked pale, though pretty well. I had not seen her for months, it seemed years. We went off to a corner together.

'How have you been?'

'All right. There was a false alarm about ten days ago, but it didn't get far enough to inform you.'

'And you're feeling all right?'

'Most of the time – but rather longing for the little brute to appear.'

We talked for a while.

'Who is the character on the floor playing bricks with the children and Priscilla?'

'He's called Odo Stevens. He's on the course and brought me over in his car. Come and meet him.'

We went across the room. Stevens got to his feet and shook hands.

'Look here,' he said, 'I must go. Otherwise Aunt Doris will be upset something's happened to me.'

'Don't rush off, Mr Stevens,' said Priscilla, still prone on the carpet, 'hullo, Nick, I've only had a wave from you so far. How are you?'

Frederica joined us.

'Another drink,' she said.

'No, thank you, really,' said Stevens, 'I must be moving on.'

He turned to say goodbye to Priscilla.

'I say,' he said, 'you'll lose your brooch, if you're not careful.'

She looked down. The brooch hung from its pin. It was a little mandoline in silver-gilt, ornamented with musical symbols on either side, early Victorian keepsake in style, pretty, though of no special value. Priscilla used to wear it before she married Chips. I had always supposed it a present from Moreland in their days together, that the reason for the musical theme of its design. While she glanced down, the brooch fell to the ground. Stevens stooped to pick it up.

'The clasp is broken,' he said. 'Look, if I can take it with me now, I'll put it right in a couple of ticks. I can bring it back on Sunday night, when I turn up with the car.'

'But that would be wonderful,' she said. 'Do you know about brooches?'

'All about costume jewellery. In the business.'

'Oh, do tell me about it.'

'I must be off now,' he said. 'Some other time.'

He turned to me, and we checked the time he would bring the car for our return to Aldershot. Then Stevens said goodbye all round.

'I'll come to the door with you,' said Priscilla. 'I want to hear more about costume jewellery, my favourite subject.'

They went off together.

'What a nice young man,' said Frederica. 'He really made one feel as if one were his own age.'

'Take care,' said Umfraville. 'That's just what I was like when I was young.'

'But that's in his favour,' she said, 'surely it is.'

'Barely twenty,' said Umfraville, in reminiscence. 'Blind with enthusiasm. Fighting like a hero on Flanders fields.'

'Oh, rot,' said Frederica. 'You said you were nearly twenty-four when you went to the war.'

'Well, anyway, look at me now,' said Umfraville. 'A lot of good my patriotism did me, a broken-down old RTO.'

'Cheer up, my pet.'

'Ah,' said Umfraville, 'the heroes of yesterday, they're the *maquereaux* of tomorrow.'

'Well, you're my *maquereau* anyway,' said Frederica, 'so shut up and have another drink.'

Later, when we were alone together upstairs, Isobel gave a fuller account of herself. There was a lot to talk about. The doctor thought everything all right, the baby likely to arrive in a couple of weeks' time. There were, indeed, far more things to discuss than could be spoken of at once. They would have to come out gradually. Instead of dealing with myriad problems in a businesslike manner, settling all kind of points that had to be settled, making arrangements about the future – if it could be assumed there was to be a future – we talked of more immediate, more amusing matters.

'What do you think about Frederica?' Isobel asked.

'Not a bad idea.'

'I think so too.'

'When did she break the news?'

'Only yesterday, when he arrived on leave. I was a bit staggered when told. She's mad about him. I've never seen Frederica like that before. The boys get on well with him too, and seem to approve of the prospect.'

Frederica and Dicky Umfraville getting married was something to open up hitherto unexplored fields of possibility. The first thought, that the engagement was grotesque, bizarre, changed shape after a time, developing until one saw their association as one of those emotional hook-ups of the very near and the very far, which make human relationships easier to accept than to rationalize or disentangle. I remembered that if Frederica's husband, Robin Budd, had lived, his age would not have been far short of Umfraville's. I asked Isobel if the two of them had ever met.

'Just saw each other, I think. Rob looked a little like Dicky too.'

'Where did Frederica pick him up?'

'With Robert. Dicky Umfraville knew Flavia Wisebite in Kenya. Her father farms there – or did, he died the other day – but of course you know that.'

'Do you suppose Flavia and Dicky—'

'I shouldn't wonder. Anyway, it was an instantaneous click so far as Frederica was concerned.'

'Frederica is aware, I suppose, that the past is faintly murky.'

'One wife committed suicide, another married a jockey. Then there was the wife no one knows about – and finally Anne Stepney, who lasted scarcely more than a year, and is now, I hear, living with J. G. Quiggin.'

'That's as many as are recorded. But where did Robert contract Mrs Wisebite? That is even more extraordinary.'

'One never knows with Robert. Tell me about her. She is sister of your old school pal, Charles Stringham. What else?'

'Charles never saw much of her after they were grown up. She first married a notorious character called Flitton, who lost an arm in the war before this one. A great gambler, also a Kenya figure. Dicky must know him well. Flitton ran away with Baby Wentworth, but refused to marry her after the divorce. Flavia had a daughter by Flitton who must be eighteen or nineteen by now.'

'Flavia told me the late Mr Wisebite, her second husband, came from Minneapolis, and died of drink in Miami.'

'Is she sharing a room with Robert?'

'Not here. There isn't one to share. The beds are too narrow. But, in principle, they seem to be living together. How did you think Priscilla was looking?'

'All right. She was being a bit standoffish, except to Stevens. Who was the other child playing bricks? The Lovells have only Caroline, haven't they?'

'That's Barry.'

'Who is Barry?'

'A slip-up of Frederica's maid, Audrey. Audrey had to bring him along with her, owing to war circumstances. Barry comes in very useful as an escort for Caroline. You know how difficult it always is to find a spare man, especially in the country.'

'Does Barry's mother do the cooking?'

'No, Frederica. She found herself without a cook and no prospect of getting one. She's always been rather keen on cooking, you know. Now she could get a job in any but the very best houses.'

I had an idea, from the way she spoke, that all this talk about Barry, and Frederica's cooking, was, on Isobel's part, a means of temporarily evading the subject of Priscilla. I could tell, from the way she had mentioned her sister, that, for some reason, Priscilla was on Isobel's mind. She was worried about her.

'Any news of Chips?'

'Priscilla isn't very communicative. Where do Marines go? Is he on a ship? She seems to hold it against him that he hasn't been able to arrange for them to have a house or a flat somewhere. I don't think that's Chips's fault. It's all this bloody war. That's why Priscilla is here. She is very restless.'

'Is she having a baby too?'

'Not that I know of. Audrey is, though.'

'Audrey sounds a positive Messalina.'

'Not in appearance. She is a good-natured, dumpy little thing with spectacles.'

'A bit too good-natured, or her lenses need adjusting. Is it Barry's father again?'

'On the contrary, but we understand it may lead to marriage this time.'

'I suppose Frederica will be the next with a baby. What about Robert and Mrs Wisebite?'

'No doubt doing their best. Robert, by the way, is on embarkation leave. He's only spending some of it here. He arrived with Flavia just before you did.'

'Where is he going?'

'He doesn't know – or won't say for security reasons – but he thinks France.'

'How on earth has he managed that?'

'He decided to withdraw his name from those in for a commission, as there was otherwise no immediate hope of a posting overseas.'

'I see.'

'Hardly what one would expect of Robert,' Isobel said.

His own family regarded Robert as one of those quietly self-indulgent people who live rather secret lives because they find themselves thereby less burdened by having to think of others. No one knew much, for example, about his work in an export house dealing with the Far East. The general idea was that Robert was doing pretty well there, though not because he himself propagated any such picture. He would naturally be enigmatic about a situation such as that which involved him with Mrs Wisebite. It was fitting that he should find himself in Field Security. Enterprise must have been required to place himself there too. I wondered what the steps leading to the Intelligence Corps had been. At one moment he had contemplated the navy. No less interesting was this attempt on Robert's part to move closer to a theatre of war at the price of immediately postponing the chance of becoming an officer.

'The war seems to have altered some people out of recognition and made others more than ever like themselves,' said Isobel.

'Have you ever heard of someone called David Pennistone? He was a man in the army I talked to on a train. He said he was writing an article on Descartes.'

'Haven't I seen the name at the end of reviews?'

'That's what I thought. We didn't manage to find anyone we knew in common, but I believe I met him years ago for a minute or two at a party.'

'Didn't the Lovells talk about someone called Pennistone when they came back from Venice? I remember Chips explaining that he was no relation to the Huntercombes, because the name was spelt with a double-n. I have an idea Pennistone lives in Venice – some story of a *contessa*, beautiful but not very young. That's how I'm beginning to feel myself.'

'Anyway, it's nice to meet again, darling.'

'It's been a long time.'

'A bloody long time.'

'It certainly has.'

Later that weekend, when I found him pacing the lawn, Umfraville himself supplied some of the background wanting in his own story.

'Look here, old boy,' he said, when I joined him, 'how do you think you and the others are going to stand up to having me as a brother-in-law?'

'A splendid prospect.'

'Not everyone would think so,' he said. 'You know I must be insane to embrace matrimony again. Stark, staring mad. But not half as mad as Frederica to take me on. Do you realize she'll be my fifth? Something wrong with a man who keeps marrying like that. Must be. But I really couldn't resist Frederica. That prim look of hers. All the same, fancy her accepting me. You'd never expect it, would you. All that business of her emptying the royal slops. She'll have to give up that occupation of course. No good trying to be an Extra Woman of the Bedchamber with me in the offing. Not a bloody bit of use. You can just picture H.M. saying: "Why's that fellow turned up again? I remember him. He used to be a captain in my Brigade of Guards. I had to get rid of him. He's a no-gooder. What does he mean by showing his ugly face again at Buck House? I won't stand it. Off with his head." You agree, don't you?'

'I see what you mean.'

Umfraville stared at me with bloodshot eyes. When we had first met at Foppa's, I had wondered whether he was not a little mad. The way he spoke now, even though it made me laugh, created the same disquieting impression. He nodded his head, smiling to himself, still contemplating his own characteristics with absolute absorption. I suddenly saw that Umfraville had been quite right when he said he was like Odo Stevens. Here again was an almost perfect narcissism, joined in much the same manner to a great acuteness of observation and relish for life.

'You're going to have a professional cad for a brother-in-law, old boy,' he said, 'make no mistake about that. Just to show you I know what I'm talking about when I apply that label to myself, I'll confide a secret. I was the one who took our little friend Flavia's virginity in Kenya years ago. Still, if that were the worst thing that ever happened to poor Flavia, she wouldn't have had much to complain about. Fancy being married to Cosmo Flitton and Harrison F. Wisebite in one lifetime.'

'Isobel and I had already discussed whether you and Mrs Wisebite had ever been in bed together.'

'You had? That shows you're a discerning couple. She's a bright girl, your wife. Well, the answer is in the affirmative. You knew Flavia's brother Charles, didn't you?'

'I used to know him well. I haven't seen him for years.'

'Met Charles Stringham in Kenya too. Came out for a month or two when he was quite a boy. I liked him very much. Then he took to drink, like so many other good chaps. Flavia says he has recovered now, and is in the army. Charles used to talk a lot about that bastard, Buster Foxe, whom their mother married when she and Boffles Stringham parted company. Charles hated Buster's guts.'

'I haven't seen Commander Foxe for ages.'

'Neither have I, thank God, but I hear he's in the neighbourhood. At your brother-in-law, Lord Warminster's home, in fact. He'll soon be my brother-in-law, too. Then there'll be hell to pay.'

'But what on earth is Buster, a sailor, doing at Thrubworth? I thought it was a Corps Headquarters.'

'Thrubworth isn't an army set-up any longer. It's still requisitioned, but they turned the place into one of those frightfully secret inter-service organisations. Buster has dug himself in there.'

'Are they still letting Erry and Blanche inhabit their end of the house.'

'Don't object, so far as I hear.'

No very considerable adjustment had been necessary when Thrubworth had been taken over by the Government at the beginning of the war. Erridge, in any case, had been living in only a small part of the mansion (seventeenth-century brick, fronted in the eighteenth century with stone), his sister, Blanche, housekeeping for him. Although the place was only twenty or thirty miles from Frederica's village, there was little or no communication between Erridge and the rest of his family. Since the outbreak of war he had become, so Isobel told me, less occupied than formerly with the practical side of politics, increasingly devoting himself to books about the Anabaptists and revolutionary movements of the Middle Ages.

'Buster's a contemporary of mine,' said Umfraville, 'a son-of-a-bitch in the top class. I've never told you my life story, have I?'

'Not yet.'

'You'll hear it often enough when we become brothers-in-law,' he said, 'so I'll start by revealing only a little now.'

Once more I thought of Odo Stevens.

'My father bred horses for a living,' said Umfraville. 'It was a precarious vocation and his ways were improvident. However, he had the presence of mind to marry the daughter of a fairly well-to-do manufacturer of machinery for the production of elastic webbing. That allowed for a margin of unprofitable deals in bloodstock. If I hadn't learnt to ride as a boy, I don't know where I should have been. There was some crazy idea of turning me into a land-agent. Then the war came in 1914 and I got off on my own. Found my way into one of the newly formed Guards battalions. There had been terrific expansion and they didn't turn up their noses at me and many another like me. In fact some of my brother officers were heels such as you've never set eyes on. I never looked back after that. Not until I fell foul of Buster Foxe. If it hadn't been for Buster, I might have been major-general now, commanding London District, instead of counting myself lucky to be a humble member of its Movement Control staff.'

'You remained on after the war with a regular commission?'

'That was it,' said Umfraville. 'I expect you've heard of a French marshal called Lyautey. Pacified North Africa and all that. Do you know what Lyautey said was the first essential of an officer? Gaiety. That was what Lyautey thought, and he knew his business. His own ideas of gaiety may not have included the charms of the fair sex, but that's another matter. Well, how much gaiety do you find among most of the palsied crackpots you serve under? Precious little, you can take it from me. It was my intention to master a military career by taking a leaf out of Lyautey's book – not as regards neglecting the ladies, but in other respects. First of all it worked pretty well.'

'But what has Buster Foxe to do with Marshal Lyautey?'

'I'm coming to that,' said Umfraville. 'Ever heard of a girl called Dolly Braybrook?'

'No.'

'Dolly was my first wife. Absolute stunner. Daughter of a fellow who'd formerly commanded the Regiment. Bloody Braybrook, her father was universally termed throughout the army, and with reason. She wouldn't have me at first, and who should blame her. Asked her again and again. The answer was always no. Then one day she changed her mind, the way women do. That pertinacity of mine has gone now. All the same, its loss has confirmed my opinion that the older I get, the more attractive I am to women.'

'It certainly looks like it.'

'Formerly, there was all that business of "Not tonight, darling, because I don't love you enough", then "Not tonight, darling, because I love you too much" – Christ, I've been through the whole range of it. The nearest some women get to being faithful to their husband is making it unpleasant for their lover. However, that's by the way. The point is that Dolly married me in the end.'

'How long did it last?'

'A year or two. Happy as the day's long, at least I was. I'd been appointed adjutant too. Then Buster Foxe appeared on the horizon. He was stationed at Greenwich at the time – the Naval College. I used to play an occasional game of cards with him and other convivial souls when he came up west. What should happen but under my very nose Dolly fell in love with Buster.'

The exaggerated dramatic force employed by Umfraville in presenting his narrative made it hard to know what demeanour best to adopt in listening to the story. Tragedy might at any moment give way to farce, so that the listener had always to keep his wits about him. When I first met Umfraville I had noticed some resemblance to Buster Foxe, now revealed as that similarity companionship in early life confers on people.

'It was just the moment when the Battalion was moving from Buckingham Gate to Windsor,' Umfraville said. 'I had to go with them, of course, while Dolly stayed in London, until we could find somewhere to live. I went up to see her one day. Arrived home. The atmosphere was a shade chilly. The next thing was Dolly told me she wanted a divorce.'

'A complete surprise?'

'Old boy, you could have knocked me down with a swizzle-stick. Always the way, of course. Nothing I could say was any good. Dolly was set on marriage to Buster. In the end I agreed. There was no way out. I suppose I might have shot Buster through the head, if I'd got close enough to him, even though it is only the size of a nut. What the hell good would that have done? Besides, I'd have run quite a chance of swinging in this country. It's not like France, where they expect you to react strongly. So I settled down to do the gentlemanly thing, and provide evidence for Dolly to divorce me. I was quite well ahead with that when Buster found Amy Stringham, Flavia's mama, was just as anxious to marry him as Dolly was. Now it didn't take Buster long to work out that marriage to a lady with some very warm South African gold holdings, not to mention a life interest in her first husband Lord Warrington's estate, stud and country mansion, would be more profitable than a wife like Dolly, one of a large family without a halfpenny to bless herself with. Mrs Stringham was a few years older than Buster, it's true, but she was none the less a beauty. We all had to admit that.'

Umfraville paused.

'Next thing I heard,' he said, 'was that Dolly had taken an overdose of sleeping pills.'

'Divorce proceedings had started?'

'Not so far as that they couldn't have been put in reverse gear. I suppose Dolly thought it too late in the day to suggest return, though there's nothing I'd have liked better.'

'But why did that prevent you from Commanding London District?'

'That's a sensible question, old boy. The reason was this. I had to leave the service – abandon my gallant and glorious Regiment. I'll explain. You see I wasn't feeling too good after my poor wife Dolly decided to join the angels, and naturally I looked about for someone to console me. Found several, as a matter of fact. The one I liked best was a girl I met one night at the Cavendish called Joy Grant – at least that was her professional name, and a very suitable one too – so I thought I might as well marry her. Of course, there couldn't be any question of staying in the Regiment, if I married Joy. To begin with, I should have been hard put to it to name a brother officer who hadn't shared the same idyllic experiences as myself in that respect. I sent in my papers and made up my mind to up stumps and emigrate with my blushing bride. Thought I'd try Kenya, the great open spaces where men are men, as Charles Stringham used to say. Well, Joy and I had scarcely arrived in the hotel at Nairobi when it became abundantly clear we had made a mistake in becoming man and wife. We were already living what's called a cat-and-dog life. In short, it wasn't long before she went off with a fellow called Castlemallock, twice her age, who looked like an ostler suffering from a dose of clap.'

'The Corps School of Chemical Warfare is at a house called Castlemallock.'

'That's the family. They used to live there until they lost all their money a generation or two ago. Castlemallock himself, marquess or not, was a common little fellow, but what was much worse, so far as he himself was concerned, was the fact that he found he couldn't perform with Joy in Kenya. He thought it might have something to do with the climate, the altitude, so he took her back to England to see if he could make better going there, or at least consult a competent medical man about getting a shot of something to liven him up occasionally. However, he took too long to find the right specialist, and meanwhile Joy went off with Jo Breen, the jockey, the chap who was suspended one year at Cheltenham for pulling Middlemarch. They keep a pub together now in one of those little places in the Thames Valley, and overcharge you most infamously if you ever drop in for a talk about old times.'

Umfraville paused again. He took out a cigarette case and offered it to me.

'Now this business of wives departing was beginning to get me down,' he said. 'It seemed to be becoming a positive habit. This time, I thought, I'll be the one to do the cattle rustling, so I removed from him the wife of a District Commissioner. There was no end of trouble about that. When I previously found myself in that undignified position, I'd behaved like a gent. This fellow, the husband, didn't see things in that light at all. I found myself in a perfect roughhouse.'

He lit a cigarette and sighed.

'How did it end?'

'We got married,' he said, 'but she died of enteric six months later. You see I don't have much luck with wives. Then you were present yourself when I met little Anne Stepney at Foppa's. You know the end of the story. That was a crazy thing to do, to marry Anne, if ever there was. Anyway, it didn't last long. Least said, soonest mended. But now I've turned over a new leaf. Frederica is going to be my salvation. The model married couple. I'm going to find my way out of Movement Control, and once more set about becoming a general, just as I was before being framed by Buster. Frederica is going to make a first-class general's wife. Don't you agree? My God, I never dreamed I'd marry one of Hugo Warminster's daughters, and I don't expect he did either.'

By then, it was time for luncheon. I found myself sitting next to Flavia Wisebite. She had a quiet, rather sad manner, suggesting one of those reserved, well behaved, fairly peevish women, usually of determined character, often to be found as wives, or ex-wives, of notably dissipated men like Flitton or Wisebite. Their peevishness appears to derive not so much from a husband's ill behaviour, as to be a trait natural to them, which attracts men of that kind. Such was mere conjecture, since I knew little or nothing of Flavia's private life, except that Stringham had more than once implied that his sister's matrimonial troubles were largely of her own choosing. In that she would have been, after all, not unlike himself. I asked for news of her brother.

'Charles?' she said. 'He's in a branch of the army called the RAOC – Royal Army Ordnance Corps. I expect you know about it. According to Charles, they look after clothes and boots and blankets, all that sort of thing. Is it true?'

'Perfectly true. What rank?'

'Private.'

'I see.'

'And likely to remain so, he says.'

'He's – all right now?'

'Oh, yes,' she said. 'Hardly touches a drop. In fact, so cured he can even drink a glass of beer from time to time. That's a great step. I always said it was just nerves, not real addiction.'

Familiar herself with alcoholics, she took her brother's former state in a very matter-of-fact way; also his circumstances in the army, which did not sound very enviable. Stringham as a private in the RAOC required an effort of imagination even to picture.

'How does Charles like it?'

'Not much.'

'I'm not surprised.'

'He says it's rather hell, in fact, but he was bent on getting into something. For some reason, the RAOC were the only people who seemed to want him. I think Charles is having a more uncomfortable time than Robert. You rather enjoy the I. Corps, don't you, dear?'

'Enjoy is rather a strong word,' said Robert. 'Things might be worse at Mytchett. I always like prying into other people's business, and that's what Field Security is for.'

Flavia Wisebite's manner towards Robert was almost maternal. She was nearer in age to Robert than to Umfraville, but gave the impression, although so different an example of it, of belonging much more to Umfraville's generation. Both she and Umfraville might be said to represent forms of revolt, and nothing dates people more than the standards from which they have chosen to react. Robert and Flavia's love affair, if love affair it were, took a very different shape from Frederica's and Umfraville's. Robert and Flavia gave no impression that, for the moment at least, they were having the time of their lives. On the contrary, they seemed very subdued. By producing Flavia at his sister's house, Robert was at last to some extent showing his hand, emotionally speaking, something he had never done before. Perhaps he was in love. The pressures of war were forcing action on everyone. Were his efforts to get to France part of this will to action, or an attempt to escape? The last might also be true. The telephone bell rang as we were rising from table. Frederica went to answer it. She returned to the room.

'It's for you, Priscilla.'

'Who is it?'

'Nick's friend, Mr Stevens.'

'Oh, yes, of course,' said Priscilla. 'About the brooch.' She went rather pink.

'Priscilla's made a hit,' said Umfraville.

I asked Flavia whether she ever saw her mother's former secretary, Miss Weedon, who had married my parents' old acquaintance, General Conyers.

'Oh, Tuffy,' she said. 'She used to be my governess, you know. Yes, I visited her only the other day. It is all going very well. The General read aloud to us an article he had written about heightened bi-sexuality in relation to early religiosity. He is now much more interested in psychoanalysis than in his 'cello playing.'

'What does he think about the war?'

'He believed a German offensive would start any moment then, probably in several places at once.'

'In fact this Norwegian and Danish business was the beginning.'

'I suppose so.'

'It doesn't sound as if things are going too well,' Umfraville said, 'I think we've taken some knocks.'

Priscilla returned.

'It was about the brooch,' she said. 'Mr Stevens can't do it himself, as one of the stones has come out, but he has arranged for someone he knows to mend it. He just wanted to warn me that he wouldn't have it for me when he came to pick up Nick in the car.'

'I said he was a very polite young man,' remarked Frederica, giving her sister rather a cold look.

The rest of the weekend passed with the appalling rapidity of wartime leave, melting away so quickly that one seemed scarcely to have arrived before it was time to go. Dinner was a trifle gloomy on that account, conversation fragmentary, for the most part about the news that evening.

'I wonder whether this heavy bombing is a prelude to a move in France,' said Robert. 'What do you think, Dicky?'

'That will be the next thing.'

Towards the end of the meal, the telephone bell sounded.

'Do answer it, Nick,' said Frederica. 'You're nearest the door.'

She spoke from the kitchen, where she was making coffee. The telephone was installed in a lobby off the hall. I went out to it. A man's voice asked if he were speaking to Frederica's number.

'Yes.'

'Is Lance-Corporal Tolland there?'

'Who is speaking?'

He named some army unit. As I returned to the dining-room, a knocking came from the front door. I told Robert he was wanted on the telephone.

'Shall I answer the door, Frederica?'

'It's probably the vicar about a light showing,' she said. 'He's an air-raid warden and frightfully fussy. Bring him in, if it is. He might like a cup of coffee.'

However, a tall naval officer was on the step when I opened the door. He had just driven up in a car.

'This is Lady Frederica Budd's house?'

'Yes.'

'I must apologize for calling at this hour of the night, but I believe my step-daughter, Mrs Wisebite, is staying here.'

'She is.'

'There are some rather urgent business matters to talk over with her. I heard she was here for a day or two, and thought Lady Frederica would not mind if I dropped in for a moment. I am stationed in the neighbourhood – at her brother, Lord Warminster's house, as a matter of fact.'

'Come in. You're Commander Foxe, aren't you. I'm Nicholas Jenkins. We've met once or twice in the past.'

'Good God, of course we have,' said Buster. 'This is your sister-in-law's house?'

'Yes.'

'You were a friend of Charles's, weren't you. This is splendid.'

Commander Foxe did not sound as if he thought finding me at Frederica's was as splendid as all that, even though he seemed relieved that his arrival would be cushioned by an introduction. Another sponsor would certainly be preferable, since any old friend of Stringham's was bound to have heard many stories to his own discredit. However, Buster, although he had that chronic air some men possess of appearing to consider all other men potential rivals, put a reasonably good face on it. For my own part, I suddenly thought of what Dicky Umfraville had told me. He would hardly welcome this arrival. There was nothing to be done about that. I took Buster along to the sitting-room, where the rest of the party were now sitting. Buster had evidently planned a fairly dramatic entry.

'I really must apologize, Lady Frederica—' he began to say, as he came through the door.

Following him into the room, I saw at once something disagreeable had happened. Robert appeared to be the centre of attention. He had evidently just announced news consequent on his telephone call. Everyone looked disturbed. Flavia Wisebite seemed near tears. When she saw Commander Foxe, her distress turned to furious annoyance.

'Buster,' she said sharply, 'where on earth have you come from?'

She sounded very cross, so cross that for a moment she forgot how upset she was. Commander Foxe must have grasped that his arrival was not altogether welcome at the moment. He was plainly taken aback by that. Smiling uneasily, he glanced round the room, as if to recover himself by finding some friendly face. His eyes rested first on Dicky Umfraville. Umfraville held out his hand.

'Hullo, Buster,' he said, 'a long time since we met.'

When people really hate one another, the tension within them can sometimes make itself felt throughout a room, like atmospheric waves, first hot, then cold, wafted backwards and forwards, as if in an invisible process of air conditioning, creating a pervasive physical disturbance. Buster Foxe and Dicky Umfraville, between them, brought about that state. Their really overpowering mutual detestation dominated for a moment all other local agitations. The fact that neither party was going to come out in the open at this stage made the currents of nervous electricity generated by suppressed emotion even more powerful. At the same time, to anyone who did not know what horrors linked them together, they might have appeared a pair of old friends, met after an age apart. Their distinct, though imprecise, physical similarity increased this last impression. Before Buster could do more than make a gesture of acknowledgment in Umfraville's direction, Frederica came forward. Buster began once more to apologize, to explain he wanted only a brief word with Flavia, then be gone. Frederica listened to him.

'We're all in rather a stew here at the moment,' she said. 'My brother Robert has just heard his leave is cancelled. He has to go back as soon as possible.'

Buster was obviously put out at finding himself in the disadvantageous position of having to listen to someone else's troubles, when he had come with the express object of stating his own. It had to be admitted he looked immensely distinguished, more so even than Umfraville. I had never before seen Commander Foxe in naval uniform. It suited him. His iron-grey hair, of which he still possessed plenty, was kept short on a head almost preternaturally small, as Umfraville had pointed out. Good looks, formerly of a near film-star quality, had settled down in middle-age to an appearance at once solid and forcible, a bust of the better type of Roman senator. A DSC was among his medal ribbons. I thought of Umfraville's lament that the heroes of yesterday are the *maquereaux* of tomorrow. Something had undoubtedly vexed Commander Foxe a great deal. He attempted, without much success, to assume a sympathetic expression about the subject of Robert's leave cancellation. Clearly ignorant of any connexion between Flavia and Robert, he was at a loss to understand why Flavia was so disturbed. After her first outburst, she had forgotten about Buster again, and was gazing at Robert, her eyes full of tears.

'Surely you can take a train tomorrow,' she said. 'You don't have to leave tonight, darling. What trains are there, Frederica?'

'Not very good ones,' said Frederica. 'But they'll get you there sooner or later. Why don't you do that, Robert?'

'Aren't you taking the army too seriously, Robert?' said Umfraville. 'Having just sent you on leave, they can't expect you to go back at a moment's notice. Your unit doesn't know Nick is going back by car tonight. Even if you are a bit late, there's nothing the authorities can do to you, if they countermand their own orders in this way.'

'That's not the point,' said Robert.

This was the only time I had ever seen Robert fairly near to what might be called a state of excitement. He was knocking his closed fists together gently.

'If I don't get back before tomorrow night,' he said, 'I may miss the overseas draft. My name is only included in the list on sufferance anyway. If they've got an excuse, they'll remove it. That was the Orderly Room Sergeant on the line. He's rather a friend of mine, and was giving me warning about that. Of course he couldn't say it straight out, but he made his meaning quite clear to me. There are rows of other corporals they can send, if a party has been ordered to move forthwith. That's what it looks like. Besides, I don't want to have to make all my arrangements about packing and so on at the very last moment. That was why I thought your friend Stevens might be able to fit me into his car, Nick. You could then disgorge me somewhere in the neighbourhood of Mytchett. I could walk the last lap, if you landed me reasonably near.'

'It won't be very comfortable in the car, but I don't see why you shouldn't come with us.'

'When is Stevens arriving?'

'Any time now.'

'I'll go and get my things ready,' said Robert.

He went off upstairs. Flavia began to dab her eyes with a rolled-up handkerchief. Buster must have remembered he had met Priscilla before – at the party his wife had given for Moreland's symphony – and he filled in the time during this discussion about Robert's affairs by talking to her. That was also perhaps a method of avoiding Dicky Umfraville's eye. Buster was accompanying this conversation with a great display of middle-aged masculine charm. From time to time, he glanced in Flavia's direction to see if she were sufficiently calm to be tackled about whatever he hoped to speak. Now, Flavia, making an effort to recover herself, moved towards Buster of her own volition.

'What's happened?' she said. 'I was going to ring you up, but I've been dreadfully entangled with other things. Besides, I've only just arrived here. Now all this has upset everything.'

If Buster did not already know about Robert, that was not very enlightening, but he was probably sharp enough to have grasped the situation by this time.

'It's about your mother,' he said. 'It's all damned awkward. I thought the sooner you knew the better. There was a lot of difficulty in getting hold of your address. When I found by a lucky chance you were in the neighbourhood of Thrubworth, I decided to try and see you, in case I lost the opportunity for months.'

'But what is it?'

'Your mother is behaving in a very extraordinary way. There are serious money difficulties for one thing. They may affect you and Charles. Your settlements, I mean.'

'She's always quite reckless about money. You must have learnt that by now.'

'She has been unwise about all kind of matters. I had no idea what was going on.'

'Where is she now?'

'That's one of the points. She has closed both houses and gone to live in a workman's cottage to be near Norman.'

'Norman Chandler?'

'Of course.'

'But I thought Norman had joined the army.'

'He has. He has been sent to a camp in Essex. That's why your mother has gone there. What's more, she wants to divorce me.'

This news certainly surprised Flavia a lot.

'But—'

'I've nowhere to go,' said Buster, speaking with great bitterness. 'When I was last in London, I had to stay at my club. Now this news about a divorce is sprung on me. Your mother went off without a word. All kinds of arrangements have to be made about things. It is too bad.'

'But does she want to marry Norman?'

'How do I know what she wants to do?' said Buster. 'I'm the last person she ever considered. I think Norman, too, has behaved very badly to allow her to act in this way. I always liked Norman. I did not in the least mind his being what he is. I often told him so. I thought we were friends. Many men in my position would have objected to having someone like Norman about the house, doing the flowers and dancing attendance upon their wife. Norman pleased your mother. That was enough for me. What thanks do I get for being so tolerant? Your mother goes off to Essex with Norman, taking the keys with her, so that I can't even get at my own suits and shirts. On top of all that, I'm told I'm going to be divorced.'

At that point there was another loud knock on the front door. This must be Stevens. I went to let him in. Umfraville followed me into the hall.

'Look here,' he said, 'tell me quickly what's happened to Buster to upset him so.'

'Mrs Foxe had a friend called Norman Chandler – a little dancer she adored, who was always about her house. He was quite a good actor too. It looks as if she has got fed up at last and kicked Buster out.'

'Buster is going to get me into this secret set-up at Thrubworth. I've decided that.'

'How's it going to be managed?'

'I once took a monkey off Buster at poker. Apart from his other misdemeanours, I've never seen my money. I know where I can make things unpleasant, if Buster doesn't jump to it and get me fixed up. Boffles Stringham once said: "Mark my words, Dicky, the day will come when Amy will have to get rid of that damned polo-playing sailor." That day has come. There are some other reckonings for Buster to pay too.'

Another knock came on the door. Umfraville went back to the sitting-room. I admitted Stevens.

'I'm a bit late,' he said, 'we'll have to bustle back.'

'There's rather a commotion going on here. My brother-in-law, Robert Tolland, has just had his leave cancelled. He wants to get back to Mytchett tonight. Will it be all right if he comes with us? We pass near his unit and can drop him on the way.'

'Of course. If he doesn't mind having his balls crushed in the back of the car. Is he ready?'

'He's just gone off to pack. Then there's a naval officer making a scene with his step-daughter.'

'Bring 'em all on,' said Stevens. 'We oughtn't to delay too long. I'd just like to have word with that lady about her brooch.'

We went into the sitting-room. By that time things had quietened down. Buster, especially, had recovered his poise. He was now talking to Frederica, having presumably settled with Flavia whatever he had hoped to arrange. Flavia and Robert had retired to a sofa and were embracing. Stevens said a word of greeting to Frederica, then made at once for Priscilla. Frederica turned again to Buster.

'I'm glad to hear Erry is behaving himself,' she said.

'I agree we were all prepared to find your brother rather difficult,' said Buster, 'but on the contrary – anyway so far as I am personally concerned – he has done everything in his power to make my life agreeable. He has, if I may say so, the charm of all your family, though in a different manner to the rest of you.'

Umfraville interrupted them.

'Come and talk shop with me for a moment, Buster,' he said.

They went into a corner of the room together. Isobel and I went into another one. It was clearly time to get under way. If we did not set out without further delay, we should not be back by the required hour. Then Isobel went rather white.

'Look here,' she said, 'I'm sorry to have to call attention to myself at this moment, but I'm feeling awfully funny. I think perhaps I'd better go to my room – and Frederica or someone can ring up the doctor.'

That was the final touch. In a state of the utmost confusion and disquiet we left them at last, arriving in Aldershot just in time, having dropped Robert on the way.

'Not feeling much like going on the square tomorrow, are you?' said Stevens. 'Still it was the hell of a good weekend's leave. I had one of the local girls under a hedge.'

4

WHEN, DURING THOSE RARE, INTOXICATING moments of solitude, I used to sit in a window seat at Castlemallock, reading *Esmond*, or watching the sun go down over the immense brick rampart of the walled garden, the Byronic associations of the place made me think of *Don Juan*:

> I pass my evenings in long galleries solely,
> And that's the reason I'm so melancholy . . .

The long gallery at Castlemallock, uncarpeted, empty of furniture except for a few trestle tables and wooden chairs, had these built-in seats all along one side. Here one could be alone during the intervals between arrival and departure of Anti-Gas students, when Kedward and I would be Duty Officer on alternate days. That meant little more than remaining within the precincts of the castle in the evening, parading 'details' – usually a couple of hundred men – at Retreat, sleeping at night by the telephone. We were Gwatkin's only subalterns now, for this was the period of experiment, later abandoned as unsatisfactory, when one platoon in each company was led by a warrant-officer. If an Anti-Gas course were in progress, we slept alternate nights in the Company Office, in case there was a call from Battalion. I often undertook Kedward's tour of duty, as he liked to 'improve his eye', when training was over for the day, by exploring the neighbouring country with a view to marking down suitable sites for machine-gun nests and anti-tank emplacements. Lying in the window-seat, I would think how it felt to be a father, of the times during the latter part of the Aldershot course when I had been able to see Isobel and the child. She and the baby, a boy, were 'doing well', but there had been difficulty in visiting them, Stevens's car by then no longer available. Stevens, as Brent prophesied, had been 'Returned to Unit'.

'I shan't be seeing you lads after tomorrow,' he said one afternoon.

'Why not?'

'I've been RTU-ed.'

'Whatever for?'

'I cut one of those bloody lectures and got caught.'

'Sorry about this.'

'I don't give a damn,' he said. 'All I want is to get abroad. This may start me on the move. I'll bring it off sooner or later. Look here, give me your sister-in-law's address, so I can keep in touch with her about that brooch.'

There was a certain bravado about all this. To get in the army's black books is something always to be avoided; as a rule, no help to advancement in any direction. I gave Stevens the address of Frederica's house, so that he could send Priscilla back her brooch. We said goodbye.

'We'll meet again.'

'We will, indeed.'

The course ended without further incident of any note. On its last day, I had a word with Brent, before our ways, too, parted.

'Pleased we ran into each other,' he said. 'To tell the truth, I was glad to spill all that stuff about the Duports for some reason. Don't quite know why. You won't breathe a word, will you?'

'Of course not. Where are you off to now?'

'The ITC – for a posting.'

I sailed back across the water. Return, like the war news, was cheerless. The Battalion had been re-deployed further south, in a new area nearer the border, where companies were on detachment. Gwatkin's, as it turned out, was quartered at the Corps School of Chemical Warfare, the keeps, turrets and castellations of which also enclosed certain Ordnance stores of some importance, which came under Command. For these stores, Gwatkin's company provided security guards, also furnishing men, if required, for Anti-Gas demonstrations. When the Battalion operated as a unit, we operated with the rest, otherwise lived a life apart, occupied with our own training or the occasional demands of the School.

Isobel wrote that her aunt, Molly Jeavons – as a rule far from an authority on such matters – had lent her a book about Castlemallock, its original owner, a Lord Chief Justice (whose earldom had been raised to a marquisate for supporting the Union) having been a distant connexion of the Ardglass family. His heir – better known as Hercules Mallock, friend of d'Orsay and Lady Blessington – had sold the place to a rich linen manufacturer, who had pulled down the palladian mansion and built this neo-gothic castle. The second Lord Castelmallock died unmarried, at a great age, in Lisbon, leaving little or nothing to the great-nephew who inherited the title, father or grandfather of the Castlemallock who had run away with Dicky Umfraville's second wife. Like other houses of similar size throughout this region, Castlemallock, too large and inconvenient, had lain untenanted for twenty or thirty years before its requisitioning. The book also quoted Byron's letter (a fragment only, said to be of doubtful authenticity) written to Caroline Lamb who had visited the house when exiled from England by her family on his account. Isobel had copied this out for me:

'. . . even though the diversions of Castlemallock may exceed those of Lismore, I perceive you are ignorant of one matter – that he to whose *Labours* you appear not insensible was once known to your humble servant by the chaste waters of the Cam. Moderate, therefore, your talent for novel writing, My dear Caro, or at least spare me an account of his protestations of affection & recollect that your host's namesake preferred *Hylas* to the *Nymphs*. Learn, too, that the theme of assignations in romantick groves palls on a man with a cold & quinsy & a digestion that lately suffered the torment of supper at L^{d} Sleaford's . . .'

This glade in the park at Castlemallock was still known as 'Lady Caro's Dingle', and thought of a Byronic interlude here certainly added charm to grounds not greatly altered at the time of the rebuilding of the house. An air of thwarted passion could be well imagined to haunt these grass-grown paths, weedy lawns and ornamental pools, where moss-covered fountains no longer played. However, such memories were not in themselves sufficient to make the place an acceptable billet. At Castlemallock I knew despair. The proliferating responsibilities of an infantry officer, simple in themselves, yet, if properly carried out, formidable in their minutiae, impose a strain in wartime even on those to whom they are a lifelong professional habit; the excruciating boredom of exclusively male society is particularly irksome in areas at once remote from war, yet oppressed by war conditions. Like a million others, I missed my wife, wearied of the officers and men round me, grew to loathe a post wanting even the consolation that one was required to be brave. Castlemallock lacked the warmth of a regiment, gave none of the sense of belonging to an army that exists in any properly commanded unit or formation. Here was only cursing, quarrelling, complaining, inglorious officers of the instructional and administrative staff, Other Ranks – except for Gwatkin's company – of low medical category. Here, indeed, was the negation of Lyautey's ideal, though food enough for the military resignation of Vigny.

However, there was an undoubted aptness in this sham fortress, monument to a tasteless, half-baked romanticism, becoming now, in truth, a military stronghold, its stone walls and vaulted ceilings echoing at last to the clatter of arms and oaths of soldiery. It was as if its perpetrators had re-created the tedium, as well as the architecture of mediaeval times. At fourteenth-century Stourwater (which had once caused Isobel to recall the *Morte d'Arthur*), Sir Magnus Donners was far less a castellan than the Castlemallock commandant, a grey-faced Regular, recovering from appendicitis; Sir Magnus's guests certainly less like feudatories than the seedy Anti-Gas instructors, sloughed off at this golden opportunity by their regiments. The Ordnance officers, drab seneschals, fitted well into this gothic world, most of all Pinkus, Adjutant-Quartermaster, one of those misshapen dwarfs who peer from the battlements of Dolorous Garde, bent on doing disservice to whomsoever may cross the drawbridge. This impression – that one had slipped back into a nightmare of the Middle Ages – was not dispelled by the Castlemallock 'details' on parade. There were warm summer nights at Retreat when I could scarcely proceed between the ranks of these cohorts of gargoyles drawn up for inspection for fear of bursting into fits of uncontrollable demoniac laughter.

'Indeed, they are the maimed, the halt and the blind,' CSM Cadwallader remarked more than once.

In short, the atmosphere of Castlemallock told on the nerves of all ranks. Once, alone in the Company Office, a former pantry set in a labyrinth of stone passages at the back of the house, I heard a great clatter of boots and a frightful wailing like that of a very small child. I opened the door to see what was happening. A young soldier was standing there, red faced and burly, tears streaming down his cheeks, his hair dishevelled, his nose running. He looked at the end of his tether. I knew him by sight as one of the Mess waiters. He swayed there limply, as if he might fall down at any moment. A sergeant, also young, followed him quickly up the passage, and stood over him, if that could be said of an NCO half the private's size.

'What the hell is all this row?'

'He's always on at me,' said the private, sobbing convulsively.

The sergeant looked uncomfortable. They were neither of them Gwatkin's men.

'Come along,' he said.

'What's the trouble?'

'He's a defaulter, sir,' said the sergeant. 'Come along now, and finish that job.'

'I can't do it, my back hurts,' said the private, mopping his eyes with a clenched hand.

'Then you should report sick,' said the sergeant severely, 'see the MO. That's what you want to do, if your back hurts.'

'Seen him.'

'See him again then.'

'The Adjutant-Quartermaster said if I did any more malingering he'd give me more CB.'

The sergeant's face was almost as unhappy as the private's. He looked at me as if he thought I might be able to offer some brilliant solution to their problems. He was wrong about that. I saw no way out. Anyway, they were neither of them within my province.

'Well, go away, and don't make a disturbance outside here again.'

'Sorry, sir.'

The two of them went off quietly, but, as they reached the far end of the stone passage, I heard it all starting up again. They were not our men, of course, amongst whom such a scene would have been inconceivable, even when emotions were allowed full rein, which sometimes happened. In such circumstances the display would have taken a far less dismal form. This sort of incident lowered the spirits to an infinitely depressed level. Even though there might be less to do here than with the Battalion, no road-blocks to man, for example, there were also no amusements in the evening, beyond the grubby pubs of a small, down-at-heel town a mile or two away.

'There isn't a lot for the lads to do' said CSM Cadwallader.

He was watching, unsmilingly, a Red Indian war-dance a group of men were performing, led by Williams, I. G., whose eccentric strain probably accounted for his friendship with Lance-Corporal Gittins, the storeman. The dancers, with tent-peg mallets for tomahawks, were moving slowly round in a small circle, bowing their heads to the earth and up again, as they gradually increased the speed of their rotation. I thought what a pity that Bithel was not there to lead them in this dance.

'What about organising some football?'

'No other company there is to play, sir.'

'Does that matter?'

'Personnel of the School, C.3., they are.'

'But there are plenty of our own fellows. Can't they make up a game among themselves?'

'The boys wouldn't want that.'

'Why not?'

'Another company's what they like to beat.'

That was a good straightforward point of view, no pretence that games were anything but an outlet for power and aggression; no stuff about their being enjoyable as such. You played a game to demonstrate that you did it better than someone else. If it came to that, I thought, how few people do anything for its own sake, from making love to practising the arts.

'How do they amuse themselves when not doing Indian war-dances?'

'Some of the lads has found a girl.'

The Sergeant-Major smiled quietly to himself, as if he might have been of that number.

'Corporal Gwylt?'

'Indeed, sir, Corporal Gwylt may have a girl or two.'

Meanwhile, since my return from Aldershot, I was aware of a change that had taken place in Gwatkin, though precisely what had happened to him, I could not at first make out. He had been immensely gratified, so Kedward told me, to find himself more or less on his own as a junior commander, keenly jealous of this position in relation to the Castlemallock Commandant, always making difficulties with him when men were wanted for demonstrational purposes. On the other hand, Gwatkin had also developed a new vagueness, even bursts of apparent indolence. He would pass suddenly into a state close to amnesia, sitting at his table in the Company Office, holding in the palm of his hand, lettering uppermost, the rubber-stamp of the Company, as if it were an orb or other symbol of dominion, while he gazed out on to the cobbled yard, where outbuildings beyond had been transformed into barrack rooms. For several minutes at a time he would stare into space, scanning the roofs as if he could descry beyond the yard and stables vision of battle, cavalry thundering down, long columns of infantry advancing through the smoke, horse artillery bringing up the guns. At least, that was what I supposed. I thought Gwatkin had at last 'seen through' the army as he had formerly imagined it, was experiencing a casting out of devils within himself, the devils of his old military ideas. Gwatkin seemed himself to some extent aware of these visitations, because, so soon as they were passed, his 'regimental' manner would become more obtrusive than ever. On such occasions he would indulge in tussles with the Commandant, or embark on sudden explosions of energy and extend hours of training. However, side by side with exertions that insisted upon an ever-increased standard of efficiency, he became no less subject to these lethargic moods. He talked more freely, too, abandoning all pretence of being a 'man of few words', formerly one of his favourite roles. Again, these bursts of talkativeness alternated with states of the blackest, most silent gloom.

'Anything wrong with Rowland?' I asked Kedward.

'Not that I know of.'

'He doesn't seem quite himself.'

'All right, so far as I've heard.'

'Just struck me as a bit browned off.'

'Has he been on your tail?'

'Not specially.'

'I thought he'd been better tempered lately. But, my God, it's true he's always forgetting things. We nearly ran out of Acquittance Rolls last Pay Parade owing to Rowland having shoved a lot of indents the CQMS gave him into a drawer. Perhaps you're right, Nick, and he's not well.'

For some reason, the matter of the *Alarm* brought home to me these developments in Gwatkin. Command had issued one of their periodic warnings that all units and formations were to be on their guard against local terrorist action of the Deafy Morgan sort, which, encouraged by German successes in the field, had recently become more common. A concerted attack by subversive elements was thought likely to take shape within the next week or two in the Castlemallock area. Accordingly, every unit was instructed to devise its own local *Alarm* signal, in addition to the normal *Alert*. The *Alert* was, of course, based on the principle that German invasion had taken place south of the Border, where British troops would consequently move forthwith. For training purposes, these *Alerts* were usually issued in code by telephone or radio – in the case of Gwatkin's company, routine procedure being to march on the main body of the Battalion. For merely local troubles, however – to which the warning from Command referred – different action would be required, therefore a different warning given. At Castlemallock, for example, the Commandant decided that any such outbreak should be made known by blowing the *Alarm* on the bugle. All ranks were paraded to hear the *Alarm* sounded, so that its notes should at once be recognised, if need arose. Afterwards, Gwatkin, Kedward, CSM Cadwallader and I assembled in the Company Office to check arrangements. The question obviously arose of those men insufficiently musical to register in the head the sound they had just heard.

'All those bugle calls have words to them,' said Kedward. 'What are the ones for the *Alarm*?'

'That's it,' said Gwatkin, pleased at this opportunity to make practical use of military lore, *Cookhouse,* for instance:

Come to the cookhouse door, boys,
Come to the cookhouse door,
Officers' wives have puddings and pies,
Soldiers' wives have skilly.

How does the *Alarm* go, Sergeant-Major? That must have words too.'

It was the only time I ever saw CSM Cadwallader blush.

'Rather vulgar words they are, sir,' he said.

'Well, what are they?' said Gwatkin.

The Sergeant-Major seemed still for some reason unwilling to reveal the appropriate assonance.

'Think most of the Company know the call now, sir,' he said.

'That's not the point,' said Gwatkin. 'We can't take any risks. There may be even one man only who won't recognise it. He'll need the rhyme. What are the words?'

'Really want them, sir?'

'I've just said so,' said Gwatkin.

He was half irritated at the Sergeant-Major's prevarication, at the same time half losing interest. He had begun to look out of the window, his mind wandering in the manner I have described. CSM Cadwallader hesitated again. Then he pursed his lips and gave a vocalized version of the bugle blaring the *Alarm*:

'Sergeant-Major's-got-a-horn!
Sergeant-Major's-got-a-horn! . . .'

Kedward and I burst out laughing. I expected Gwatkin to do the same. He was normally capable of appreciating that sort of joke, especially as a laugh at CSM Cadwallader's expense was not a thing to be missed. However, Gwatkin seemed scarcely to have heard the words, certainly not taken in their import. At first I thought he had been put out by receiving so broadly comic an answer to his question, feeling perhaps his dignity was compromised. That would have been a possibility, though unlike Gwatkin, because he approved coarseness of phrase as being military, even though he might be touchy about his own importance. It was then I realized he had fallen into one of his trances in which all around was forgotten: the *Alarm*, the Sergeant-Major, Kedward, myself, the Battalion, the army, the war itself.

'Right, Sergeant-Major,' he said, speaking abruptly, as if he had just woken from a dream. 'See those words are promulgated throughout the Company. That's all. You can fall out.'

By this time it was summer and very hot. The Germans had invaded the Netherlands, Churchill become Prime Minister. I read in the papers that Sir Magnus Donners had been appointed to the ministerial post for which he had long been tipped. The Battalion was required to send men to reinforce one of the Regular Battalions in France. There was much grumbling at this, because we were supposed to be something more than a draft-finding unit. Gwatkin was particularly outraged by this order, and the loss of two or three good men from his company. Otherwise things went on much the same at Castlemallock, the great trees leafy in the park, all water dried up in the basins of the fountains. Then, one Saturday evening, Gwatkin suggested he and I should walk as far as the town and have a drink together. There was no Anti-Gas course in progress at that moment. Kedward was Duty Officer. As a rule, Gwatkin was rarely to be seen in the Mess after dinner. No one knew what he did with himself during those hours. It was possible that he retired to his room to study the *Field Service Pocket Book* or some other military manual. I never guessed he might make a practice of visiting the town. However, that was what his next remark seemed to suggest.

'I've found a new place – better than M'Coy's,' he said rather challengingly. 'The porter there is bloody marvellous. I've drunk it now several times. I'd like to have your opinion.'

I had once visited M'Coy's with Kedward. It was, in fact, the only pub I had entered since being stationed at Castlemallock. I found no difficulty in believing M'Coy's could be improved upon as a drinking resort, but it was hard to guess why Gwatkin's transference of custom from M'Coy's to this new place should be an important issue, as Gwatkin's manner seemed to suggest. In any case, it was unlike him to suggest an evening's drinking. I agreed to make the trip. It would have been unfriendly, rather impolitic, to have refused. A walk into the town would be a change. Besides, I was heartily sick of *Esmond*. When dinner was at an end, Gwatkin and I set off together. We tramped along the drive in silence. We had almost reached the road, when he made an unexpected remark.

'It won't be easy to go back to the Bank after all this,' he said.

'All what?'

'The army. The life we're leading.'

'Don't you like the Bank?'

As Kedward had explained at the outset, most of the Battalion's officers worked in banks. This was one of the aspects of the unit which gave a peculiar sense of uniformity, of existing almost within a family. Even though one was personally outside this sept, its homogeneous character in itself offered a certain cordiality, rather than the reverse, to an intruder. Until now, no one had given the impression he specially disliked that employment, over and above the manner in which most people grumble about their own job, whatever it is. Indeed, all seemed to belong to a caste, clearly defined, powerful on its home ground, almost a secret society, with perfect understanding between its members where outward things were concerned. The initiates might complain about specific drawbacks, but never in a way to imply hankering for another occupation. To hear absolute revolt expressed was new to me. Gwatkin seemed to relent a little when he spoke again.

'Oh, the bloody Bank's not that bad,' he said laughing, 'but it's a bit different being here. Something better to do than open jammed Home Safes and enter the contents in the Savings Bank Ledger.'

'What's a Home Safe, and why does it jam?'

'Kids' money-boxes.'

'Do the children jam them?'

'Parents, usually. Want a bit of ready. Try to break into the safe with a tin-opener. The bloody things arrive back at the office with the mechanism smashed to pieces. When the cashier gets in at last, he finds three pennies, a halfpenny and a tiddlywink.'

'Still, brens get jammed too. It's traditional for machine-guns – you know, the Gatling's jammed and the Colonel's dead. Somebody wrote a poem about it. One might do the same about a Home Safe and the manager.'

Gwatkin ignored such disenchantment.

'The bren's a soldier's job,' he said.

'What about Pay Parades and Kit Inspection? They're soldiers' jobs. It doesn't make them any more enjoyable.'

'Better than taking the Relief Till to Treorchy on a market day, doling out the money from a bag in old Mrs Jones-the-Milk's front parlour. What sort of life is that for a man?'

'You find the army more glamorous, Rowland?'

'Yes,' he said eagerly, 'glamorous. That's the word. Don't you feel you want to do more in life than sit in front of a row of ledgers all day long? I know I do.'

'Sitting at Castlemallock listening to the wireless announcing the German army is pushing towards the Channel ports isn't particularly inspiring either – especially after an hour with the CQMS trying to sort out the Company's sock situation, or searching for a pair of battle-dress trousers to fit Evans, J., who is such an abnormal shape.'

'No, Nick, but we'll be in it soon. We can't stay at Castlemallock for ever.'

'Why not?'

'Anyway, Castlemallock's not so bad.'

He seemed desperately anxious to prevent me from speaking hardly of Castlemallock.

'I agree the park is pretty. That is about the best you can say for it.'

'It's come to mean a lot to me,' Gwatkin said.

His voice was full of excitement. I had been quite wrong in supposing him disillusioned with the army. On the contrary, he was keener than ever. I could not understand why his enthusiasm had suddenly risen to such new heights. I did not for a moment, as we walked along, guess what the answer was going to be. By that time we had reached the pub judged by Gwatkin to be superior to M'Coy's. The façade, it had to be admitted, was remarkably similar to M'Coy's, though in a back alley, rather than the main street of the town. Otherwise, the place was the usual large cottage, the ground floor of which had been converted to the purposes of a tavern. I followed Gwatkin through the low door. The interior was dark, the smell uninviting. No one was about when we entered, but voices came from a room beyond the bar. Gwatkin tapped the counter with a coin.

'Maureen . . .' he called.

He used that same peculiar cooing note he employed when answering the telephone.

'Hull-ooe . . . hull-ooe . . .' he would say, when he spoke into the instrument. Somehow that manner of answering seemed quite inappropriate to the rest of his character.

'I wonder whether what we call politeness isn't just weakness,' he had once remarked.

This cooing certainly conveyed no impression of ruthless moral strength, neither on the telephone, nor at the counter of this pub. No one appeared. Gwatkin pronounced the name again.

'Maur-een . . . Maur-een . . .'

Still nothing happened. Then a girl came through the door leading to the back of the house. She was short and thick-set, with a pale face and lots of black hair. I thought her good-looking, with that suggestion of an animal, almost a touch of monstrosity, some men find very attractive. Barnby once remarked: 'The Victorians saw only refinement in women, it's their coarseness makes them irresistible to me.' Barnby would certainly have liked this girl.

'Why, it would be yourself again, Captain Gwatkin,' she said.

She smiled and put her hands on her hips. Her teeth were very indifferent, her eyes in deep, dark sockets, striking.

'Yes, Maureen.'

Gwatkin did not seem to know what to say next. He glanced in my direction, as if to seek encouragement. This speechlessness was unlike him. However, Maureen continued to talk herself.

'And with another military gentleman too,' she said. 'What'll ye be taking this evening now? Will it be porter, or is it a wee drop of whiskey this night, I'll be wondering, Captain?'

Gwatkin turned to me.

'Which, Nick?'

'Guinness.'

'That goes for me too,' he said. 'Two pints of porter, Maureen. I only drink whiskey when I'm feeling down. Tonight we're out for a good time, aren't we, Nick?'

He spoke in an oddly self-conscious manner. I had never seen him like this before. We seated ourselves at a small table by the wall. Maureen began to draw the stout. Gwatkin watched her fixedly, while she allowed the froth to settle, scraping its foam from the surface of the liquid with a saucer, then returning the glass under the tap to be refilled to the brim. When she brought the drinks across to us, she took a chair, refusing to have anything herself.

'And what would be the name of this officer?' she asked.

'Second-Lieutenant Jenkins,' said Gwatkin, 'he's one of the officers of my company.'

'Is he now. That would be grand and all.'

'We're good friends,' said Gwatkin soberly.

'Then why haven't ye brought him to see me before, Captain Gwatkin, I'll be asking ye?'

'Ah, Maureen, you see we work so hard,' said Gwatkin. 'We can't always be coming to see you, do you understand. That's just a treat for once in a while.'

'Get along with ye,' she said, smiling provocatively and showing discoloured teeth again, 'yourself's down here often enough, Captain Gwatkin.'

'Not as often as I'd like, Maureen.'

Gwatkin had now recovered from the embarrassment which seemed to have overcome him on first entering the pub. He was no longer tongue-tied. Indeed, his manner suggested he was, in fact, more at ease with women than men, the earlier constraint merely a momentary attack of nerves.

'And what would it be you're all so busy with now?' she asked. 'Is it drilling and all that? I expect so.'

'Drilling is some of it, Maureen,' said Gwatkin. 'But we have to practise all kind of other training too. Modern war is a very complicated matter, you must understand.'

This made her laugh again.

'I'd have ye know my great-uncle was in the Connaught Rangers,' she said, 'and a fine figure of a man he was, I can promise ye. Why, they say he was the best-looking young fellow of his day in all County Monaghan. And brave too.

Why, they say he killed a dozen Germans with his bayonet when they tried to capture him. The Germans didn't like to meet the Irish in the last war.'

'Well, it's a risk the Germans won't have to run in this one,' said Gwatkin, speaking more gruffly than might have been expected in the circumstances. 'Even here in the North there's no conscription, and you see plenty of young men out of uniform.'

'Why, ye wouldn't be taking all the young fellows away from us, would ye?' she asked, rolling her eyes. 'It's lonely we'd be if they all went to the war.'

'Maybe Hitler will decide the South is where he wants to land his invasion force,' said Gwatkin. 'Then where will all your young men be, I'd like to know.'

'Oh God,' she said, throwing up her hands. 'Don't say it of the old blackguard. Would he do such a thing? You think he truly may, Captain Gwatkin, do ye?'

'Shouldn't be surprised,' said Gwatkin.

'Do you come from the other side of the Border yourself?' I asked her.

'Why, sure I do,' she said smiling. 'And how were you guessing that, Lieutenant Jenkins?'

'I just had the idea.'

'Would it be my speech?' she said.

'Perhaps.'

She lowered her voice.

'Maybe, too, you thought I was different from these Ulster people,' she said, 'them that is so hard and fond of money and all.'

'That's it, I expect.'

'So you've guessed Maureen's home country, Nick,' said Gwatkin. 'I tell her we must treat her as a security risk and not go speaking any secrets in front of her, as she's a neutral.'

Maureen began to protest, but at that moment two young men in riding breeches and leggings came into the pub. She rose from the chair to serve them. Gwatkin fell into one of his silences. I thought he was probably reflecting how odd was the fact that Maureen seemed just as happy talking and laughing with a couple of local civilians, as with the dashing officer types he seemed to envisage ourselves. At least he stared at the young men, an unremarkable pair, as if there were something about them that interested him. Then it turned out Gwatkin's train of thought had returned to dissatisfaction with his own peacetime employment.

'Farmers, I suppose,' he said. 'My grandfather was a farmer. He didn't spend his time in a stuffy office.'

'Where did he farm?'

'Up by the Shropshire border.'

'And your father took to office life?'

'That was it. My dad's in insurance. His firm sent him to another part of the country.'

'Do you know that Shropshire border yourself?'

'We've been up there for a holiday. I expect you've heard of the great Lord Aberavon?'

'I have, as a matter of fact.'

'The farm was on his estate.'

I had never thought of Lord Aberavon (first and last of his peerage) as a figure likely to go down to posterity as 'great', though the designation might no doubt reasonably be applied by those living in the neighbourhood. His name was merely memorable to myself as deceased owner of Mr Deacon's *Boyhood of Cyrus,* the picture in the Walpole-Wilsons' hall, which always made me think of Barbara Goring when I had been in love with her in pre-historic times. Lord Aberavon had been Barbara Goring's grandfather; Eleanor Walpole-Wilson's grandfather too. I wondered what had happened to Barbara, whether her husband, Johnny Pardoe (who also owned a house in the country of which Gwatkin spoke) had been recalled to the army. Eleanor, lifelong friend of my sister-in-law, Norah Tolland, was now, like Norah herself, driving cars for some women's service. Gwatkin by his words had certainly conjured up the past. He looked at me rather uncomfortably, as if he could read my mind, and knew I felt suddenly carried back into an earlier time sequence. He also had the air of wanting to elaborate what he had said, yet feared he might displease, or, at least, not amuse me. He cleared his throat and took a gulp of stout.

'You remember Lord Aberavon's family name?' he asked.

'Why, now I come to think of it, wasn't it "Gwatkin"?'

'It was – same as mine. He was called Rowland too.'

He said that very seriously.

'I'd quite forgotten. Was he a relation?'

Gwatkin laughed apologetically.

'No, of course he wasn't,' he said.

'Well, he might have been.'

'What makes you think so?'

'You never know with names.'

'If so, it was miles distant,' said Gwatkin.

'That's what I mean.'

'I mean so distant, he wasn't a relation at all,' Gwatkin said. 'As a matter of fact my grandfather, the old farmer I was talking about, used to swear we were the same lot, if you went back far enough – right back, I mean.'

'Why not, indeed?'

I remembered reading one of Lord Aberavon's obituaries, which had spoken of the incalculable antiquity of his line, notwithstanding his own modest start in a Liverpool shipping firm. The details had appealed to me.

'Wasn't it a very old family?'

'So they say.'

'Going back to Vortigern – by one of his own daughters? I'm sure I read that.'

Gwatkin looked uncertain again, as if he felt the discussion had suddenly got out of hand, that there was something inadmissible about my turning out to know so much about Gwatkin origins. Perhaps he was justified in thinking that.

'Who was Vortigern?' he asked uneasily.

'A fifth-century British prince. You remember – he invited Hengist and Horsa. All that. They came to help him. Then he couldn't get rid of them.'

It was no good. Gwatkin looked utterly blank. Hengist and Horsa meant nothing to him; less, if anything, than Vortigern. He was unimpressed by the sinister splendour of the derivations indicated as potentially his own; indeed, totally uninterested in them. Thought of Lord Aberavon's business acumen kindled him more than any steep ascent in the genealogies of ancient Celtic Britain. His romanticism, though innate, was essentially limited – as often happens – by sheer lack of imagination. Vortigern, I saw, was better forgotten. I had deflected Gwatkin's flow of thought by ill-timed pedantry.

'I expect my grandfather made up most of the stuff,' he said. 'Just wanted to be thought related to a man of the same name who left three-quarters of a million.'

He now appeared to regret ever having let fall this confidence regarding his own family background, refusing to be drawn into further discussion about his relations, their history or the part of the country they came from. I thought how odd, how typical of our island – unlike the Continent or America in that respect – that Gwatkin should put forward this claim, possibly in its essentials reasonable enough, be at once attracted and repelled by its implications, yet show no wish to carry the discussion further. Was it surprising that, in such respects, foreigners should find us hard to understand? Odd, too, I felt obstinately, that the incestuous Vortigern should link Gwatkin with Barbara Goring and Eleanor Walpole-Wilson. Perhaps it all stemmed from that ill-judged negotiation with Hengist and Horsa. Anyway, it linked me, too, with Gwatkin in a strange way. We had some more stout. Maureen was now too deeply involved in local gossip with the young farmers, if farmers they were, to pay further attention to us. Their party had been increased by the addition of an older man of similar type, with reddish hair and the demeanour of a professional humorist. There was a good deal of laughter. We had to fetch our drinks from the counter ourselves. This seemed to depress Gwatkin still further. We talked rather drearily of the affairs of the Company. More customers came in, all apparently on the closest terms with Maureen. Gwatkin and I drank a fair amount of stout. Finally, it was time to return.

'Shall we go back to barracks?'

This designation of Castlemallock on Gwatkin's part added nothing to its charms. He turned towards the bar as we were leaving.

'Good night, Maureen.'

She was having too good a joke with the red-haired humorist to hear him.

'Good night, Maureen,' Gwatkin said again, rather louder.

She looked up, then came round to the front of the bar.

'Good night to you, Captain Gwatkin, and to you, Lieutenant Jenkins,' she said, 'and don't be so long in coming to see me again, the pair of ye, or it's vexed with you both I'd be.'

We waved farewell. Gwatkin did not open his mouth until we reached the outskirts of the town. Suddenly he took a deep breath. He seemed about to speak; then, as if he could not give sufficient weight to the words while we walked, he stopped and faced me.

'Isn't she marvellous?' he said.

'Who, Maureen?'

'Yes, of course.'

'She seemed a nice girl.'

'Is that all you thought, Nick?'

He spoke with real reproach.

'Why, yes. What about you? You've really taken a fancy to her, have you?'

'I think she's absolutely wonderful,' he said.

We had had, as I have said, a fair amount to drink – the first time since joining the unit I had drunk more than two or three half-pints of beer – but no more than to loosen the tongue, not sufficient to cause amorous hallucination. Gwatkin was obviously expressing what he really felt, not speaking in an exaggerated manner to indicate light desire. The reason of those afternoon trances, that daydreaming while he nursed the Company's rubber-stamp, were now all at once apparent, affection for Castlemallock also explained. Gwatkin was in love. All love affairs are different cases, yet, at the same time, each is the same case. Moreland used to say love was like sea-sickness. For a time everything round you heaved about and you felt you were going to die – then you staggered down the gangway to dry land, and a minute or two later could hardly remember what you had suffered, why you had been feeling so ghastly. Gwatkin was at the earlier stage.

'Have you done anything about it?'

'About what?'

'About Maureen.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, taken her out, something like that.'

'Oh, no.'

'Why not?'

'What would be the good?'

'I don't know. I should have thought it might be enjoyable, if you feel like that about her.'

'But I'd have to tell her I'm married.'

'Tell her by all means. Put your cards on the table.'

'But do you think she'd come?'

'I shouldn't wonder.'

'You mean – try and seduce her?'

'I suppose that was roughly the line indicated – in due course.'

He looked at me astonished. I felt a shade uncomfortable, rather like Mephistopheles unexpectedly receiving a hopelessly negative reaction from Faust. Such an incident in opera, I thought, might suggest a good basis for an *aria*.

'Some of the chaps you meet in the army never seem to have heard of women,' Odo Stevens had said. 'You never know in the Mess whether you're sitting next to a sex-maniac of nineteen or a middle-aged man who doesn't know the facts of life.'

In Gwatkin's case, I was surprised by such scruples, even though I now recalled his attitude towards the case of Sergeant Pendry. In general, the younger officers of the Battalion were, like Kedward, engaged, or, like Breeze, recently married. They might, like Pumphrey, talk in a free and easy manner, but it was their girl or their wife who clearly preoccupied them. In any case, there had been no time for girls for anyone, married or single, before we reached Castlemallock. Gwatkin was certainly used to the idea of Pumphrey trying to have a romp with any barmaid who might be available. He had never seemed to disapprove of that. I knew nothing of his married life, except what Kedward had told me, that Gwatkin had known his wife all their lives, had previously wanted to marry Breeze's sister.

'But I'm married,' Gwatkin said again.

He spoke rather desperately.

'I'm not insisting you should take Maureen out. I only asked if you had.'

'And Maureen isn't that sort of girl.'

'How do you know?'

He spoke angrily this time. Then he laughed, seeing, I suppose, that was a silly thing to say.

'You've only met Maureen for the first time, Nick. You don't realize at all what she's like. You think all that talk of hers means she's a bad girl. She isn't. I've often been alone with her in that bar. You'd be surprised. She's like a child.'

'Some children know a thing or two.'

Gwatkin did not even bother to consider that point of view.

'I don't know why I think her quite so wonderful,' he admitted, 'but I just do. It worries me that I think about her all the time. I've found myself forgetting things, matters of duty, I mean.'

'Do you go down there every night?'

'Whenever I can. I haven't been able to get away lately owing to one thing and another. All this security check, for instance.'

'Does she know this?'

'Know what?'

'Does Maureen know you're mad about her?'

'I don't think so,' he said.

He spoke the words very humbly, quite unlike his usual tone. Then he assumed a rough, official voice again.

'I thought it would be better if I told you about it all, Nick,' he said. 'I hoped the thing wouldn't go on inside me all the time so much, if I let it out to someone. Unless it stops a bit, I'm frightened I'll make a fool of myself in some way to do with commanding the Company. A girl like Maureen makes everything go out of your head.'

'Of course.'

'You know what I mean.'

'Yes.'

Gwatkin still did not seem entirely satisfied.

'You really think I ought to take her out?'

'That's what a lot of people would do – probably a lot of people are doing already.'

'Oh, no, I'm sure they're not, if you mean from the School of Chemical Warfare. I've never seen any of them there. It was quite a chance I went in myself. I was looking for a short cut. Maureen was standing by the door, and I asked her the way. Her parents own the pub. She's not just a barmaid.'

'Anyway, there's no harm in trying, barmaid or not.'

During the rest of the walk back to Castlemallock, Gwatkin did not refer again to the subject of Maureen. He talked of routine matters until we parted to our rooms.

'The Mess will be packed out again tomorrow night,' he said. 'Another Anti-Gas course starts next week. I suppose all that business will begin again of wanting to take my men away from me for their bloody demonstrations. Well, there it is.'

'Good night, Rowland.'

'Good night, Nick.'

I made for the stables, where I shared a groom's room with Kedward, rather like the sleeping quarters of Albert and Bracey at Stonehurst. As Duty Officer that night, Kedward would not be there and I should have the bedroom to myself, always rather a treat. I was aware now that it had been a mistake to drink so much stout. Tomorrow was Sunday, so there would be comparatively little to do. I thought how awful Bithel must feel on parade the mornings after his occasional bouts of drinking. Reflecting on people often portends their own appearance. So it was in the case of Bithel. He was among the students to arrive at the School the following week. We should, indeed, all have been prepared for Bithel to be sent on an Anti-Gas course. It was a way of getting rid of him, pending final banishment from the Battalion, which, as Gwatkin said, was bound to come sooner or later. I was sitting at one of the trestle tables of the Mess, addressing an envelope, when Bithel peered through the door. He was fingering his ragged moustache and smiling nervously. When he saw me, he made towards the table at once.

'Nice to meet again,' he said, speaking as usual as if he expected a rebuff. 'Haven't seen you since the Battalion moved.'

'How have you been?'

'Getting rockets, as usual,' he said.

'Maelgwyn-Jones?'

'That fellow's got a positive down on me,' Bithel said, 'but I don't think it will be for long now.'

'Why not?'

'I'm probably leaving the Battalion.'

'Why's that?'

'There's talk of my going up to Division.'

'On the staff?'

'Not exactly – a command.'

'At Div HQ?'

'Only a subsidiary command, of course. I shall be sorry to leave the Regiment in some ways, if it comes off, but not altogether sorry to see the back of Maelgwyn-Jones.'

'What is it? Or is that a secret?'

Bithel lowered his voice in his accustomed manner when speaking of his own affairs, as if there were always a hint of something dubious about them.

'The Mobile Laundry Unit,' he said.

'You're going to command it?'

'If I'm picked. There are at least two other names in for it from other units in the Division, I happen to know – one of them very eligible. As it happens, I have done publicity work for one of the laundries in my own neighbourhood, so I have quite a chance. In fact, that should stand very much in my favour. The CO seems very anxious for me to get the appointment. He's been on the phone to Division about it himself more than once. Very good of him.'

'What rank does the job carry?'

'A subaltern's command. Still, it's promotion in a way. What you might call a step. The war news doesn't look very good, does it, since the Belgian Government surrendered.'

'What's the latest? I missed the last news.'

'Fighting on the coast. One of our Regular Battalions has been in action, I was told this morning. Got knocked about pretty badly. Do you remember a rather good-looking boy called Jones, D. Very fair.'

'He was in my platoon – went out on the draft.'

'He's been killed. Daniels, my batman, told me that. Daniels gets all the news.'

'Jones, D. was killed, was he. Anyone else from our unit?'

'Progers, did you know him?'

'The driver with a squint?'

'That's the fellow. Used to bring the stuff up to the Mess sometimes. Dark curly hair and a lisp. He's gone too. Talking of messing, what's it like here?'

'We've had beef twice a day for just over a fortnight – thirty-seven times running, to be precise.'

'What does it taste like?'

'Goat covered with brown custard powder.'

We settled down to talk about army food. When I next saw CSM Cadwallader, I asked if he had heard about Jones, D. Corporal Gwylt was standing nearby.

'Indeed, I had not, sir. So a bullet got him.'

'Something did.'

'Always an unlucky boy, Jones, D.,' said CSM Cadwallader.

'Remember how sick he was when we came over the water, Sergeant-Major?' said Corporal Gwylt, 'terrible sick.'

'That I do.'

'Never did I see a boy so sick,' said Corporal Gwylt, 'nor a man neither.'

This was the week leading up to the withdrawal through Dunkirk, so Jones, D. and Progers were not the only fatal casualties known to me personally at that period. Among these, Robert Tolland, serving in France with his Field Security Section, was also killed. The news came in a letter from Isobel. Nothing was revealed, then or later, of the circumstances of Robert's death. So far as it went, he died as mysteriously as he had lived, like many other young men to whom war put an end, an unsolved problem. Had Robert, as Chips Lovell alleged, lived a secret life with 'night-club hostesses old enough to be his mother?' Would he have made a lot of money in his export house trading with the Far East? Might he have married Flavia Wisebite? As in musical chairs, the piano stops suddenly, someone is left without a seat, petrified for all time in their attitude of that particular moment. The balance-sheet is struck there and then, a matter of luck whether its calculations have much bearing, one way or the other, on the commerce conducted. Some die in an apparently suitable manner, others like Robert on the field of battle with a certain incongruity. Yet Fate had ordained this end for him. Or had Robert decided for himself? Had he set aside the chance of a commission to fulfil a destiny that required him to fall in France; or was Flavia's luck so irredeemably bad that her association with him was sufficient – as Dr Trelawney might have said – to summon the Slayer of Osiris, her pattern of life, rather than Robert's, dominating the issue of life and death? Robert could even have died to escape her. The potential biographies of those who die young possess the mystic dignity of a headless statue, the poetry of enigmatic passages in an unfinished or mutilated manuscript, unburdened with contrived or banal ending. These were disturbing days, lived out in suffocating summer heat. While they went by, Gwatkin, for some reason, became more cheerful. The war increasingly revealed persons stimulated by disaster. I thought Gwatkin might be one of this fairly numerous order. However, there turned out to be another cause for his good spirits. He revealed the reason one afternoon.

'I took your advice, Nick,' he said.

We were alone together in the Company Office.

'About the storage of those live Mills bombs?'

Gwatkin shook his head, at the same time swallowing uncomfortably, as if the very thought of live grenades and where they were to be stored, brought an immediate sense of guilt.

'No, not about the Mills bombs,' he said, 'I'm still thinking over the best place to keep them – I don't want any interference from the Ordnance people. I mean about Maureen.'

For a moment the name conveyed nothing. Then I remembered the evening in the pub: Maureen, the girl who had so greatly taken Gwatkin's fancy. Thinking things over the next day, I had attributed his remarks to the amount of stout we had drunk. Maureen had been dismissed from my mind.

'What about Maureen?'

'I asked her to come out with me.'

'You did?'

'Yes.'

'What did she say?'

'She agreed.'

'I said she would.'

'It was bloody marvellous.'

'Splendid.'

'Nick,' he said, 'I'm serious. Don't laugh. I really want to thank you, Nick, for making me take action – not hang about like a fool. That's my weakness. Like the day we were in support and I made such a balls of it.'

'And Maureen's all right?'

'She's wonderful.'

That was all Gwatkin said. He gave no account of the outing. I should have liked to hear a little about it, but clearly he regarded the latest development in their relationship as too sacred to describe in detail. I saw that Kedward, in some matters no great psychologist, had been right in saying that when Gwatkin took a fancy to a girl it was 'like having the measles'. This business of Maureen could be regarded only as a judgment on Gwatkin for supposing Sergeant Pendry's difficulties easy of solution. Now, he had himself been struck down by Aphrodite for his pride in refusing incense at her altars. The goddess was going to chastise him. In any case, there was nothing very surprising in this sort of thing happening, when, even after an exhausting day's training, the camp-bed was nightly a rack of desire, where no depravity of the imagination was unbegotten. No doubt much mutual irritation was caused by this constraint, particularly, for example, something like Gwatkin's detestation of Bithel.

'God,' he said, when he set eyes on him at Castlemallock, 'that bloody man has followed us here.'

Bithel himself was quite unaware of the ferment of rage he aroused in Gwatkin. At least he showed no sign of recognising Gwatkin's hatred, even at times positively thrusting himself on Gwatkin's society. Some persons feel drawn towards those who dislike them, or are at least determined to overcome opposition of that sort. Bithel may have regarded Gwatkin's unfriendliness as a challenge. Whatever the reason, he always made a point of talking to Gwatkin whenever opportunity arose, showing himself equally undeterred by verbal rebuff or crushing moroseness. However, Gwatkin's attitude in repelling Bithel's conversational advances was not entirely based on a simple brutality. Their relationship was more complicated than that. The code of behaviour in the army which Gwatkin had set himself did not allow his own comportment with any brother officer to reach a pitch of unfriendliness he would certainly have shown to a civilian acquaintance disliked as much as he disliked Bithel. This code – Gwatkin's picture of it, that is – allowed, indeed positively kindled, a blaze of snubs directed towards Bithel, at the same time preventing, so to speak, any final dismissal of him as a person too contemptible to waste time upon. Bithel was a brother officer; for that reason always, in the last resort, handed a small dole by Gwatkin, usually in the form of an incitement to do better, to pull himself together. Besides, Gwatkin, with many others, could never finally be reconciled to abandoning the legend of Bithel's VC brother. Mythical prestige still hung faintly about Bithel on that account. Such legends, once taken shape, endlessly proliferate. Certainly I never heard Bithel himself make any public effort to extirpate the story. He may have feared that even the exacerbated toleration of himself Gwatkin was at times prepared to show would fade away, if the figure of the VC brother in the background were exorcised entirely.

'Coming to sit with the Regiment tonight, Captain Gwatkin,' Bithel would say when he joined us; then add in his muttered, confidential tone: 'Between you and me, there're not much of a crowd on this course. Pretty second-rate.'

Bithel always found difficulty in addressing Gwatkin as 'Rowland'. In early days, Gwatkin had protested once or twice at this formality, but I think he secretly rather enjoyed the respect implied by its use. Bithel, like everyone else, possessed one or more initial, but no one ever knew, or at least seemed to have forgotten, the name or names for which they stood. He was always called 'Bith' or 'Bithy', in some ways a more intimate form of address, which Gwatkin, on his side, could never bring himself to employ. The relaxation Bithel styled 'sitting with the Regiment' took place in an alcove, unofficially reserved by Gwatkin, Kedward and myself for our use as part of the permanent establishment of Castlemallock, as opposed to its shifting population of Anti-Gas students. The window seat where I used to read *Esmond* was in this alcove, and we would occasionally have a drink there. Since the night when he had first joined the Battalion, Bithel's drinking, though steady when drink was available, had not been excessive, except on such occasions as Christmas or the New Year, when no great exception could be taken. He would get rather fuddled, but no more. Bithel himself sometimes referred to his own moderation in this respect.

'Got to keep an eye on the old Mess bill,' he would say. 'The odd gin-and-orange adds up. I have had the CO after me once already about my wine bill. Got to mind my p's and q's in that direction.'

As things turned out at Castlemallock, encouragement to overstep the mark came, unexpectedly, from the army authorities themselves. At least that was the way Bithel himself afterwards explained matters.

'It was all the fault of that silly old instruction,' he said. 'I was tired out and got absolutely misled by it.'

Part of the training on the particular Castlemallock course Bithel was attending consisted in passing without a mask through the gas-chamber. Sooner or later, every rank in the army had to comply with this routine, but students of an Anti-Gas course naturally experienced a somewhat more elaborate ritual in that respect than others who merely took their turn with a unit. A subsequent aspect of the test was first-aid treatment, which recommended, among other restoratives, for one poisonous gas sampled, 'alcohol in moderate quantities'. On the day of Bithel's misadventure, the gas-chamber was the last item on the day's programme for those on the course. When Bithel's class was dismissed after this test, some took the advice of the text-book and had a drink; others, because they did not like alcohol, or from motives of economy, confined themselves to hot sweet tea. Among those who took alcohol, no one but Bithel neglected the manual's admonition to be moderate in this remedial treatment.

'Old Bith's having a drink or two this evening, isn't he,' Kedward remarked, even before dinner.

Bithel always talked thickly, and, like most people who habitually put an unusually large amount of drink away, there was in general no great difference between him drunk or sober. The stage of intoxication he had reached made itself known only on such rare occasions as his dance round the dummy. At Castlemallock that night, he merely pottered about the ante-room, talking first to one group of anti-gas students, then to another, when, bored with him, people moved away. He did not join us in the alcove until the end of the evening. Everyone used to retire early, so that Gwatkin, Kedward and myself were alone in the room by the time Bithel arrived there. We were discussing the German advance. Gwatkin's analysis of the tactical situation had continued for some time, and I was making preparations to move off to bed, when Bithel came towards us. He sat down heavily, without making his usual rather apologetic request to Gwatkin that he might be included in the party. For a time he listened to the conversation without speaking. Then he caught the word 'Paris'.

'Ever been to Paris, Captain Gwatkin?' he asked.

Gwatkin shot out a glance of profound disapproval.

'No,' he said sharply.

The answer conveyed that Gwatkin considered the question a ridiculous one, as if Bithel had asked if he had ever visited Lhasa or Tierra del Fuego. He continued to lecture Kedward on the principles of mobile warfare.

'I've been to Paris,' said Bithel.

He made a whistling sound with his lips to express a sense of great conviviality.

'Went there for a weekend once,' he said.

Gwatkin looked furious, but said nothing. A Mess waiter appeared and began to collect glasses on a tray. He was, as it happened, the red-faced, hulking young soldier, who, weeping and complaining his back hurt, had made such a disturbance outside the Company Office. Now, he seemed more cheerful, answering Bithel's request for a final drink with the information that the bar was closed. He said this with the satisfaction always displayed by waiters and barmen at being in a position to make that particular announcement.

'Just one small Irish,' said Bithel. 'That's all I want.'

'Bar's closed, sir.'

'It can't be yet.'

Bithel tried to look at his watch, but the figures evidently eluded him.

'I can't believe the bar's closed.'

'Mess Sergeant's just said so.'

'Do get me another, Emmot – it is Emmot, isn't it?'

'That's right, sir.'

'Do, do get me a whiskey, Emmot.'

'Can't sir. Bar's closed.'

'But it can be opened again.'

'Can't, sir.'

'Open it just for one moment – just for one small whiskey.'

'Sergeant says no, sir.'

'Ask him again.'

'Bar's closed, sir.'

'I beseech you, Emmot.'

Bithel rose to his feet. Afterwards, I was never certain what happened. I was sitting on the same side as Bithel and, as he turned away, his back was towards me. He lurched suddenly forward. This may have been a stumble, since some of the floorboards were loose at that place. The amount he had drunk did not necessarily have anything to do with Bithel's sudden loss of balance. Alternatively, his action could have been deliberate, intended as a physical appeal to Emmot's better feelings. Bithel's wheedling tone of voice a minute before certainly gave colour to that interpretation. If so, I am sure Bithel intended no more than to rest his hand on Emmot's shoulder in a facetious gesture, perhaps grip his arm. Such actions might have been thought undignified, bad for discipline, no worse. However, for one reason or another, Bithel lunged his body forward, and, either to save himself from falling, or to give emphasis to his request for a last drink, threw his arms round Emmot's neck. There, for a split second, he hung. There could be no doubt about the outward impression this posture conveyed. It looked exactly as if Bithel were kissing Emmot – in farewell, rather than in passion. Perhaps he was. Whether or not that were so, Emmot dropped the tray, breaking a couple of glasses, at the same time letting out a discordant sound. Gwatkin jumped to his feet. His face was white. He was trembling with rage.

'Mr Bithel,' he said, 'consider yourself under arrest.'

I had begun to laugh, but now saw things were serious. This was no joking matter. There was going to be a row. Gwatkin's eyes were fanatical.

'Mr Kedward,' he said, 'go and fetch your cap and belt.'

The alcove where we had been sitting was not far from the door leading to the great hall. There, on a row of hooks, caps and belts were left, before entering the confines of the Mess, so Kedward had not far to go. Afterwards, Kedward told me he did not immediately grasp the import of Gwatkin's order. He obeyed merely on the principle of not questioning an instruction from his Company Commander. Meanwhile, Emmot began picking up fragments of broken glass from the floor. He did not seem specially surprised by what had happened. Indeed, considering how far I knew he could go in the direction of hysterical loss of control, Emmot carried off the whole situation pretty well. Perhaps he understood Bithel better than the rest of us. Gwatkin, who now seemed to be in his element, told Emmot to be off quickly, to clear up the rest of the debris in the morning. Emmot did not need further encouragement to put an end to the day's work. He retired from the ante-room at once with his tray and most of the broken glass. Bithel still stood. As he had been put under arrest, this position was no doubt militarily correct. He swayed a little, smiling to himself rather foolishly. Kedward returned, wearing his cap and buckling on his Sam Browne.

'Escort Mr Bithel to his room, Mr Kedward,' said Gwatkin. 'He will not leave it without permission. When he does so, it will be under the escort of an officer. He will not wear a belt, nor carry a weapon.'

Bithel gave a despairing look, as if cut to the quick to be forbidden a weapon, but he seemed to have taken in more or less what was happening, even to be extracting a certain masochistic zest from the ritual. Gwatkin jerked his head towards the door. Bithel turned and made slowly towards it, moving as if towards immediate execution. Kedward followed. I was relieved that Gwatkin had chosen Kedward for this duty, rather than myself, no doubt because he was senior in rank, approximating more nearly to Bithel's two pips. When they were gone, Gwatkin turned to me. He seemed suddenly exhausted by this output of disciplinary energy.

'There was nothing else I could do,' he said.

'I wasn't sure what happened.'

'You did not see?'

'Not exactly.'

'Bithel *kissed* an Other Rank.'

'Are you certain?'

'Haven't you got eyes?'

'I could only see Bithel's back. I thought he lost his balance.'

'In any case, Bithel was grossly drunk.'

'That's undeniable.'

'To put him under arrest was my duty. It was the only course I could follow. The only course any officer could follow.'

'What's the next step?'

Gwatkin frowned.

'Cut along to the Company Office, Nick,' he said in a rather calmer tone of voice. 'You know where the *Manual of Military Law* is kept. Bring it to me here. I don't want Idwal to come back and find me gone. He'll think I've retired to bed. I must have a further word with him.'

When I returned with the *Manual of Military Law*, Gwatkin was just finishing his instructions to Kedward. At the end of these he curtly said good night to us both. Then he went off, the Manual under his arm, his face stern. Kedward looked at me and grinned. He was evidently surprised, not absolutely staggered, by what had taken place. It was all part of the day's work to him.

'What a thing to happen,' he said.

'Going to lead to a lot of trouble.'

'Old Bith was properly pissed.'

'He was.'

'I could hardly get him up the stairs.'

'Did you have to take his arm?'

'Heaved him up somehow,' said Kedward. 'Felt like a copper.'

'What happened when you arrived in his room?'

'Luckily the other chap there went sick and left the course yesterday. Bith's got the room to himself, so things weren't as awkward as they might have been. He just tumbled on to the bed, and I left him. Off to bed myself now. You're for the Company Office tonight, aren't you?'

'I am.'

'Good night, Nick.'

'Good night, Idwal.'

The scene had been exhausting. I was glad to retire from it. Confused dreams of conflict pursued throughout the night. I was in the middle of explaining to the local builder at home – who wore a long Chinese robe and had turned into Pinkus, the Castlemallock Adjutant-Quartermaster – that I wanted the front of the house altered to a pillared façade of Isobel's own design, when a fire-engine manned by pygmies passed, ringing its bell furiously. The bell continued in my head. I awoke. It had become the telephone. This was exceptional in the small hours. There were no curtains to the room, only shutters for the blackout, which were down, so that, opening my eyes, I saw the sky was already getting light above the outbuildings of the yard. I grasped the instrument and gave the designation of the unit and my name. It was Maelgwyn-Jones, Adjutant of our Battalion.

'Fishcake,' he said.

I was only half awake. It was almost as if the dream continued. As I have said, Maelgwyn-Jones's temper was not of the best. He began to get very angry at once, as it turned out, with good reason.

'Fishcake . . .' he repeated. 'Fishcake – fishcake – fishcake . . .'

Obviously 'Fishcake' was a codeword. The question was: what did it mean? I had no recollection ever of having heard it before.

'I'm sorry, I—'

'Fishcake!'

'I heard Fishcake. I don't know what it means.'

'Fishcake, I tell you . . .'

'I know Leather and Toadstool . . .'

'Fishcake has taken the place of Leather – and Bathwater of Toadstool. What the hell are you dreaming about?'

'I don't think—'

'You've bloody well forgotten.'

'First I've heard of Fishcake.'

'Rot.'

'Sure it is.'

'Do you mean to say Rowland hasn't told you and Kedward? I gave him Bathwater a week ago – in person – when he came over to the Orderly Room to report.'

'I don't know about Fishcake or Bathwater.'

'Oh, Christ, is this one of Rowland's half-baked ideas about security? I suppose so. I told him the new code came into force in forty-eight hours from the day before yesterday. Didn't he mention that?'

'Not a word to me.'

'Oh, Jesus. Was there ever such a bloody fool commanding a company. Go and get him, and look sharp about it.'

I went off with all speed to Gwatkin's room, which was in the main part of the house. He was in deep sleep, lying on his side, almost at the position of attention. Only the half of his face above the moustache appeared over the grey-brown of the blanket. I agitated his shoulder. As usual, a lot of shaking was required to get him awake. Gwatkin always slept as if under an anaesthetic. He came to at last, rubbing his eyes.

'The Adjutant's on the line. He says it's Fishcake. I don't know what that means.'

'Fishcake?'

'Yes.'

Gwatkin sat upright in his camp-bed.

'Fishcake?' he repeated, as if he could hardly believe his ears.

'Fishcake.'

'But we were not to get Fishcake until we had been signalled Buttonhook.'

'I've never heard of Buttonhook either – or Bathwater. All I know are Leather and Toadstool.'

Gwatkin stepped quickly out of bed. His pyjama trousers fell from him, revealing sexual parts and hairy brown thighs. The legs were small and boney, well made, their nakedness suggesting something savage and untaught, yet congruous to his nature. He grabbed the garments to him and held them there, standing scratching his head with the other hand.

'I believe I've made a frightful balls,' he said.

'What's to be done?'

'Didn't I mention the new codes to you and Idwal?'

'Not a word.'

'God, I remember now. I thought I'd leave it to the last moment for security reasons – and then I went out with Maureen, and forgot I'd never told either of you.'

'Well, I should go along to the telephone now, or Maelgwyn-Jones will have apoplexy.'

Gwatkin ran off quickly down the passage, still holding up with one hand the untied pyjama trousers, his feet bare, his hair dishevelled. I followed him, also running. We reached the Company Office. Gwatkin took up the telephone.

'Gwatkin . . .'

There was the hum of the Adjutant's voice at the other end. He sounded very angry, as well he might.

'Jenkins didn't know . . .' Gwatkin said, 'I thought it best not to tell junior officers until the last moment . . . I didn't expect to get a signal the first day it came into operation . . . I was going to inform them this morning . . .'

This answer must have had a very irritating effect on Maelgwyn-Jones, whose voice crepitated for several minutes. I could tell he had begun to stutter, a sure sign of extreme rage with him. Whatever the Adjutant was asserting must have taken Gwatkin once more by surprise.

'But Bathwater was to take the place of Walnut,' he said, evidently appalled.

Once more the Adjutant spoke. While he listened, Gwatkin's face lost its colour, as always when he was agitated.

'To take the place of Toadstool? Then that means—'

There was another burst of angry words at the far end of the line. By the time Maelgwyn-Jones had ceased to speak, Gwatkin had recovered himself sufficiently to reassume his parade ground manner.

'Very good,' he said, 'the Company moves right away.'

He listened for a second, but Maelgwyn-Jones had hung up. Gwatkin turned towards me.

'I had to tell him that.'

'Tell him what?'

'That I had confused the codewords. The fact is, I forgot, as I said to you just now.'

'Forgot to pass on the new codewords to Idwal and me?'

'Yes – but not only are the codewords new, the instructions that go with them are amended in certain respects too. But what I said was partly true. I had muddled them in my own mind. I've been thinking of other things. God, what a fool I've made of myself. Anyway, we mustn't stand here talking. The Company is to march on the Battalion right away. Wake Idwal and tell him that. Send the duty NCO to CSM Cadwallader, and tell him to report to me as soon as the men are roused – he needn't bother to be properly dressed. Get your Platoon on parade, Nick, and tell Idwal to do the same.'

He hurried off, shaking up NCOs, delivering orders, amplifying instructions altered by changed arrangements. I did much the same, waking Kedward, who took this disturbance very well, then returning to the Company Office to dress as quickly as possible.

'This is an imperial balls-up,' Kedward said, as we were on the way to inspect our platoons. 'What the hell can Rowland have been thinking about?'

'He had some idea of keeping the codeword up his sleeve till the last moment.'

'There'll be a God Almighty row about it all.'

I found my own Platoon pretty well turned out considering the circumstances. With one exception, they were clean, shaved, correctly equipped. The exception was Sayce. I did not even have to inspect the Platoon to see what was wrong. It was obvious a mile off. Sayce was in his place, no dirtier than usual at a casual glance, even in other respects properly turned out, so it appeared, but without a helmet. In short, Sayce wore no headdress at all. His head was bare.

'Where's that man's helmet, Sergeant?'

Sergeant Basset had replaced Sergeant Pendry as Platoon Sergeant, since Corporal Gwylt, with his many qualities, did not seriously aspire to three stripes. Basset, basically a sound man, had a mind which moved slowly. His small pig eyes set in a broad, flabby face were often puzzled, his capacities included none of Sergeant Pendry's sense of fitness. Sergeant Pendry, even at the time of worst depression about his wife, would never have allowed a helmetless man to appear on parade, much less fall in. He would have found a helmet for him, told him to report sick, put him under arrest, or devised some other method of disposing of him out of sight. Sergeant Basset, bull-necked and worried, began to question Sayce. Time was getting short. Sayce, in a burst of explanatory whining, set forth a thousand reasons why he should be pitied rather than blamed.

'Says somebody took his helmet, sir.'

'Tell him to fall out and find it in double-quick time, or he'll wish he'd never been born.'

Sayce went off at a run. I hoped that was the last we should see of him that day. He could be dealt with on return. Anything was better than the prospect of a helmetless man haunting the ranks of my platoon. It would be the last straw as far as Gwatkin was concerned, no doubt Maelgwyn-Jones too. However, while I was completing the inspection, Sayce suddenly appeared again. This time he was wearing a helmet. It was too big for him, but that was an insignificant matter. This was no time to be particular, still less to ask questions. The platoon moved off to take its place with the rest of the Company. Gwatkin, who looked worried, but had now recovered his self-possession, made a rapid inspection and found nothing to complain of. We marched down the long drives of Castlemallock, out on to the road, through the town. As we passed the alley leading to Maureen's pub, I saw Gwatkin cast an eye in that direction, but it was too early in the morning for Maureen herself, or anyone else much, to be about.

'Something awful are the girls of this town,' said Corporal Gwylt to the world at large, 'never did I see such a way to go on.'

When we reached Battalion Headquarters, there was a message to say the Adjutant wanted an immediate word with Captain Gwatkin. Gwatkin returned from this interview with a set face. It looked as if subordinates might be in for a bad time, such as that after the Company's failure to provide 'support'. However, Gwatkin showed no immediate desire to get his own back on somebody, though he must have had an unenjoyable ten minutes with Maelgwyn-Jones. We set out on the day's scheme, marching and countermarching across the mountains, infiltrating the bare, treeless fields. From start to finish, things went badly. In fact, it was a disastrous day. Still, as Maelgwyn-Jones had said, it passed, like other days in the army, and we returned at length to Castlemallock, bad-tempered and tired. Kedward and I were on the way to our room, footsore, longing to get our boots off, when we met Pinkus, the Adjutant-Quartermaster, the malignant dwarf from the *Morte d'Arthur*. His pleased manner showed there was trouble in the air. He had a voice of horrible refinement, which must have taken years to perfect, and somewhat recalled that of Howard Craggs, the left-wing publisher.

'Where's your Company Commander?' asked Pinkus. 'The Commandant wants him pronto.'

'In his room, I suppose. The Company's just been dismissed. He's probably changing.'

'What's this about putting one of the officers of the course under arrest? The Commandant's bloody well brassed off about it, I can tell you – and, what's more, the Commandant's own helmet is missing, too, and he thinks one of your fellows has taken it.'

'Why on earth?'

'Your Platoon falls in just outside his quarters.'

'Much more likely to be one of the permanent staff on Fire Picquet. They pass just by the door.'

'The Commandant doesn't think so.'

'I bet one of the Fire Picquet pinched it.'

'The Commandant says he doesn't trust your mob an inch.'

'Why not?'

'That's what he says.'

'If he wants to run down the Regiment, he'd better take it up with our Commanding Officer.'

'Make enquiries, or there'll be trouble. Now, where's Gwatkin?'

He went off, mouthing refinedly to himself. I saw what had happened. In the stresses following realization that he had forgotten about the changed codewords, Gwatkin had also forgotten Bithel. During the exertions of the day in the field, I, too, had given no thought to the events of the previous night, at least none sufficient to consider how best the situation should be handled on our return. Now, back at Castlemallock, the Bithel problem loomed up ominously. Bad enough, in any case, to leave the matter unattended made it worse than ever. Even Kedward had no copybook solution.

'My God,' he said, 'I suppose old Bith ought to have been under escort all day. Under my escort, too, if it comes to that. It was Rowland's last order to me.'

'Anyway, Bithel should have been brought up before the Commandant within twenty-four hours and charged, as a matter of routine. That's the regulation, isn't it?'

'Twenty-four hours isn't up yet.'

'Still, it's a bit late in the day.'

'Rowland's going to find this one tough to sort out.'

'There's nothing we can do about it.'

'Look, Nick,' said Kedward, 'I'll go off right away and see exactly what's happened before I take my boots off. Christ, my feet feel like balloons.'

After a while, Kedward returned, saying Gwatkin was already with the Castlemallock Commandant, straightening out the Bithel affair. When I saw Gwatkin later, he looked desperately worried.

'That business of Bithel last night,' he said harshly.

'Yes?'

'We'd better forget about it.'

'OK.'

'This Anti-Gas course is almost at an end.'

'Yes.'

'Bithel goes back to the Battalion.'

'He may be going up to Division.'

'Bithel?'

'Yes.'

'What on earth for?'

'To command the Mobile Laundry.'

'I hadn't heard that,' said Gwatkin. 'How do you know?'

'Bithel himself told me.'

Gwatkin did not look best pleased, but he reserved judgment.

'The CO will be glad to be rid of him,' he said, 'no doubt about that. The point of what I'm saying now is that Bithel may have made a bloody swine of himself last night, but it's going to be too much of a business to see he gets his deserts.'

'I can understand that.'

'I suspect that Bithel himself got hold of the Mess waiter concerned. Between the two of them, they are prepared to swear that the whole thing was an accident. Bithel stayed in bed all day, saying he had 'flu.'

'How did the Commandant know about the arrest?'

'It leaked out. He seemed to think I'd been officious. I suppose he was just waiting to get something back on me for trying to prevent him from standing between me and my own men and their training. He said Bithel may have had a few drinks, even too many, but, after all, he'd been through the gas-chamber, and, as it turned out, was also sickening for 'flu. The Commandant said, too, he didn't want a row of that undesirable sort at his School of Chemical Warfare. He'd already had trouble about that particular Mess waiter, and, if it came up for court-martial, there might be a real stink.'

'Probably just as well to drop the whole affair.'

Gwatkin sighed.

'Do you think that too, Nick?'

'I do.'

'Then you really don't care about discipline either,' said Gwatkin. 'That's what it means. You're like the rest. Well, well, few officers seem to these days – or even decent behaviour.'

He spoke without bitterness, just regret. All the same, it was perhaps a relief to him – as it certainly was to everyone else – that the Bithel charge should be dropped. However, matters had gone too far at the outset for the whole story to be suppressed. Its discussion throughout the Castlemallock garrison eventually spread to the Battalion; no doubt, in due course, to the ears of the Commanding Officer. Bithel himself, as usual, took the whole business in his stride.

'I made a proper fool of myself that night,' he said to me, just before he left Castlemallock. 'Ought to stick to beer really. Whiskey is always a mistake on top of gin-and-orange. Might have messed up my chances of getting that command. Captain Gwatkin does go off the deep-end, though. Never know what he's going to do next. The Commandant was very decent. Saw my side. War news doesn't look too good, does it? What do you think about Italy coming in? Just a lot of ice-creamers, that's my opinion.'

Then, one sweltering afternoon, returning with the Platoon after practising attack under cover of a smoke-screen, I found several things had happened which altered the pattern of life. When I went into the Company Office, Gwatkin and Kedward were both there. They were standing facing each other. Even as I came through the door and saluted, disturbance was in the air. In fact tension could be described as acute. Gwatkin was pale, Kedward rather red in the face. Neither of them spoke. I made some casual remark about the afternoon's training. This was ignored by Gwatkin. There was a pause. I wondered what had gone wrong. Then Gwatkin spoke in his coldest, most military voice.

'There will be some changes announced in Part II Orders next week, Nick,' he said.

'Yes?'

'You'll like to know them before they appear officially.'

I could not imagine why all this to-do should be made; why, if there were to be changes, Gwatkin could not quite simply state what the changes were, instead of behaving as if about to notify me that the British Government had surrendered, and Kedward and I were to make immediate arrangements for our platoons to become prisoners-of-war. He paused again. Behaviour like this was hard on the nerves.

'Idwal is your new Company Commander,' Gwatkin said.

Everything was explained in a flash. There was nothing to do but remain silent.

'There have been other promotions too,' said Gwatkin. He spoke as if this fact, that there were other promotions, was at least some small consolation. I looked at Kedward. Then I saw, what I had missed before, that he was in an ecstasy of controlled delight. I had not at first noticed this to be the reason for his tense bearing. The air of strain had been imposed by an effort not to grin too much. Even Kedward must have realized this was a painful moment for Gwatkin. Now, the presence of a third party slightly easing the situation, he allowed a slight smile to appear on his face. It spread. He could no longer limit its extent. The grin, by its broadness, almost concealed his little moustache.

'Congratulations, Idwal.'

'Thanks, Nick.'

'And what about you, Rowland?'

I could hardly imagine Gwatkin was to be promoted major. If that were to happen, he would be looking more cheerful. There was a possibility he might be going to command Headquarter Company, an appointment he was known to covet. I doubted myself whether he were wholly qualified to deal with Headquarter Company's many components, remembering, among other things, the incident with the bren-carrier. All the same, I was not prepared for the answer I received, even though I knew, as soon as I heard it, that the sentence pronounced on him should have been guessed at the first indication of upheaval.

'I'm going to the ITC,' said Gwatkin.

'Pending—'

'To await a posting,' Gwatkin said abruptly.

He could not conceal his own mortification. The corner of his mouth worked a little. It was not surprising he was upset. There was no adequate comment at hand to offer in condolence. Gwatkin had been relieved of his Company. There was nothing more or less to it than that. He was being sent to the Regimental Depot – the Infantry Training Centre – whence he would emerge, probably posted to a Holding Battalion finding drafts for the First Line. His career as a military paragon was at an end, though not perhaps his visions as a monk of war, after the echoes and dreams of action died away. Gwatkin might get a company again, he might not. His Territorial captaincy at least was substantive, so that he could not, like holders of an emergency commission, be reduced in rank. However, a captaincy was not in every respect an advantage for someone who hoped to repair this catastrophe. An unreducible captain could find himself in some dead-end where three pips were by convention required, ship's adjutant, for example, or like Pinkus at Castlemallock. That would not be much of fate for a Stendhalian hero, a man bent on making a romantic career in arms, the sort of figure I had supposed Gwatkin only a few months before; in Stendhal, I thought this fate would be attributed to malign political intrigue, the work of Ultras or Freemasons.

'You can fall out, both of you, now,' said Gwatkin, speaking with forced cheerfulness. 'I'll straighten out the papers for you, Idwal. We'll go through them together tomorrow.'

'What about the Imprest Account?' asked Kedward.

'I'll bring it up to date.'

'And the other Company accounts?'

'Them, too.'

'I only mention that, Rowland, because you're sometimes a bit behindhand with them. I don't want to have to waste a lot of time on paper work. There's too much to do about the Company without that.'

'We'll check everything.'

'Has that bren been returned we lent to the Anti-Gas School?'

'Not yet.'

'I shall want it formally handed over again, before I sign for the Company's weapons.'

'Of course.'

'Then Corporal Rosser's promotion.'

'What about it?'

'Did you decide to make him up?'

'Yes.'

'Have you told him?'

'Not yet.'

'Then don't tell him, Rowland.'

'Why not?'

'I want to see more of Rosser before I decide he's to have a third stripe,' said Kedward. 'I shall think about it further.'

Gwatkin's face took on a shade more colour. These were forcible reminders of Kedward's changed position. I was myself a little surprised at the manner in which Kedward accepted the Company as his undoubted right. In one sense, he could have behaved in a more tactful manner about the take-over, anyway leave such questions until they were going through the papers together; in another, as Company Commander designate, he was there to arrange matters in the Company's best interests – by Gwatkin's own definition – not to be polite or spare Gwatkin's feelings. Nevertheless, Gwatkin had not cared for being treated in this manner. He tapped with his knuckles on the blanket covering the trestle table, played with his beloved symbol, the rubber stamp. Gwatkin was deeply humiliated, even though keeping himself under control.

'I want to be alone now, boys,' he said.

He began to rustle papers. Kedward and I retired. We went along the passage together, Kedward deep in thought.

'Rowland is taking this pretty hard,' I said.

Kedward showed surprise.

'Losing the Company?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think so?'

'I do.'

'He must have seen it coming.'

'I don't think he did for a moment.'

'Rowland has been getting less and less efficient lately,' Kedward said. 'You must have noticed that. You said yourself something was wrong, when you came back from the Aldershot course.'

'I somehow didn't expect him to be unstuck just like this.'

'The Company needs a thorough overhaul,' said Kedward. 'There are one or two points I shall want altered in your own Platoon, Nick. It is far from satisfactory. I've noticed there's no snap about them when they march in from training. That's always a good test of men. They are the worst of the three platoons at musketry, too. You'll have to give special attention to the range. And another thing, Nick, about your own personal turn-out. Do get that anti-gas cape of yours properly folded. The way you have it done is not according to regulations.'

'I'll see to all that, Idwal. Who are you getting as another subaltern?'

'Lyn Craddock. He'll go in senior to you, of course. I think Lyn should help pull the Company together.'

'When do you put your pips up?'

'Monday. By the way, did I tell you Yanto Breeze is to become a captain too – in the Traffic Control Company. I just heard that this afternoon from one of the drivers who brought some stuff here. It isn't like getting a company in a battalion, but it's promotion all the same.'

'Does Rowland know about Yanto?'

'I was just telling him when you came into the Company

Office – saying it was funny two of his subalterns should become captain at the same moment.'

'How did Rowland take it?'

'Didn't seem much interested. Rowland never liked Yanto. I don't know whether all that about his sister rankled. I say, Nick, do you know what?'

'What?'

'I'm going to write tonight and arrange about the wedding on my next leave.'

'When's that going to be?'

'Getting the Company may mean a postponement, but even then it won't be too far off. By the way, I've got a new snap of my fiancée. Like to see it?'

'Of course.'

We gazed at the photograph.

'She's altered her hair,' Kedward said.

'So I see.'

'I'm not sure I like it the new way,' he said.

Nevertheless, he gave the photograph its routine kiss before putting it away. His promotion, his fiancée, the wedding in prospect, were matters of fact to him, not, as to Gwatkin, dreams come true. When Gwatkin was given the Company, that must have seemed the first important step in a glorious career; when he first took out Maureen, entry into an equally glorious romance. Kedward, it was true, accepted accession of rank with enthusiasm, but without the smallest romanticism, military or otherwise. As Moreland would have said, it is just the way you look at things. We crossed the hall. Emmot, the Mess waiter, appeared from a doorway. The whole Bithel affair had greatly cheered him up. He looked positively a new man. It was hard to believe he had been sobbing like a child only a few weeks before.

'You're wanted on the phone, sir,' he said, grinning, as if he and I had shared most of the fun of the Bithel incident, 'your unit.'

I went to the telephone in the Duty Officer's room.

'Jenkins here.'

It was the Adjutant.

'Hold on a moment,' he said.

I held on. At the other end of the line Maelgwyn-Jones began to talk to someone in the Orderly Room. I waited. He returned at last.

'Who is that?'

'Jenkins.'

'What do you want?'

'You rang up for me.'

'What was it? Oh, yes. Here's the chit. Second-Lieutenant Jenkins. You will report to Divisional Headquarters, DAAG's office, by 1700 hrs tomorrow, taking all your kit with you.'

'Do you know what I'm to do there?'

'No idea.'

'For how long?'

'No idea of that either.'

'What's the DAAG's name?'

'Also unknown. He's a new appointment. Old Square-arse got bowler-hatted.'

'How shall I get to Div HQ?'

'There's a truck going up tomorrow with some details for hospital treatment. I'll tell it to pick you up at Castlemallock on the way. I expect you've heard about certain changes in your Company.'

'Yes.'

'Strictly speaking, this instruction should have been issued by me through your Company Commander, but, to avoid confusion, I thought I'd tell you direct. There was another reason, too, why I wanted to speak personally. If the new DAAG is an approachable chap, find out about that Intelligence course I'm supposed to be going on. Also about those two officer reinforcements we've been promised. All right?'

'All right.'

'Report what I've just told you about yourself to the two officers concerned – Rowland and Idwal – right away. Tell them they'll get it in writing tomorrow. All right?'

'Yes.'

Maelgwyn-Jones hung up. Castlemallock was to be left behind. I heard the news without regret; although in the army – as in love – anxiety is an ever-present factor where change is concerned. I returned to Kedward and told him what was happening to me.

'You're leaving right away?'

'Tomorrow.'

'What are you going to do at Div?'

'No idea. Could be only temporary, I suppose. I may reappear.'

'You won't if you once go.'

'You think not?'

'As I've said before, Nick, you're a bit old for a subaltern in an operational unit. I want to make the Company more mobile. I was a little worried anyway about having you on my hands, to tell the truth.'

'Well, you won't have to worry any longer, Idwal.'

These words of mine expressed, on my own part, no more, no less, than what they were, a mere statement of fact. They did not convey the smallest reverberation of acerbity at being treated so frankly as a more than doubtful asset. Kedward dealt in realities. There is much to be said for persons who traffic in this corn, provided it is always borne in mind that so-called realities present, as a rule, only a small part of the picture. On this occasion, however, I was myself in complete agreement with Kedward's view about my departure, feeling even stimulated by a certain excitement at the thought of being on the move.

'You'd better tell Rowland right away.'

'I'm going to.'

I returned to the Company Office. Gwatkin was surrounded with papers. He looked as if he were handing over an Army in the field, rather than a Company on detachment for security duties. He glared when I came through the door at this disobeying of an order that he should be left undisturbed. I repeated Maelgwyn-Jones's words. Gwatkin pushed back his chair.

'So you're leaving the Battalion too, Nick?'

'The Adjutant didn't say for how long.'

'You won't come back, if you go to Division.'

'That's what Idwal said.'

'What can it be? They'd hardly give you a staff appointment. It's probably something like Bithel. I hear he's going to the Mobile Laundry. The CO must have rigged that.'

I saw that even Bithel's new command was painful to Gwatkin, destined himself for the ITC. My own unexplained move was scarcely less disturbing to him. He frowned.

'This must be part of a general shake-up,' he said. 'CSM Cadwallader is leaving the Battalion too.'

'Why is the Sergeant-Major going?'

'Age. I don't understand why Maelgwyn-Jones did not pass the order about yourself to me in the first instance.'

'He said he spoke to me personally because he wanted to explain about some questions I was to put to the new DAAG.'

'He should have done that through me.'

'He said you would get it in writing tomorrow.'

'If the Adjutant ignores the correct channels, I don't know what he expects other officers to do,' said Gwatkin.

He laughed, as if he found some relief in the thought that the whole framework of the Company, as we had known it together, was now to be broken up; not, so to speak, given over unimpaired to the innovations of Kedward. There was no doubt, I saw now, that Gwatkin would have preferred almost anyone, rather than Kedward, to succeed him.

'Idwal will get either Phillpots or Parry in your place, I expect,' he said.

He began to fiddle with his papers again. I turned to go. Gwatkin looked up suddenly.

'Doing anything special tonight?' he said.

'No.'

'Come for a stroll in the park.'

'After Mess?'

'Yes.'

'All right.'

I went off to pack, and make such other preparations as were required for departure the following day. Gwatkin came into dinner late. I was already sitting in the ante-room when he joined me.

'Shall we go?'

'Right.'

We left the house by the steps leading to what remained of the lawn, its turf criss-crossed now with footpaths worn by the feet of soldiers taking short cuts. Shrubberies divided the garden from the park. When we were among the trees, Gwatkin took the way leading to Lady Caro's Dingle. After the heat of the afternoon, these woods were wonderfully cool and peaceful. The moon was full, the sky almost as light as day. Now that I was about to leave Castlemallock, I began to regret having spent so little time in this park. All I knew was the immediate neighbourhood of the house.

To have frequented its woods and glades would perhaps have only increased the melancholy inherent in the place.

'Do you know, Nick,' said Gwatkin, 'although the Company used to mean everything to me, it's leaving the Battalion that's the real blow. Of course there will be up-to-date training at the ITC, opportunity to get to know the latest weapons and tactics thoroughly, not just rush through them and instruct, as we have to here.'

I did not know what to say to that, but Gwatkin was just getting it off his chest. He did not require answers.

'Idwal is pretty pleased with himself now,' he said. 'Let him see what it's like to be skipper. Perhaps it isn't as easy as he thinks.'

'Idwal certainly enjoys the idea of being a company commander.'

'Then there's Maureen,' Gwatkin said. 'This means leaving her. That was what I wanted to talk to you about.'

I had supposed that to be the reason for our coming to the park.

'You'll at least have time to say goodbye to her.'

That did not sound much consolation. It seemed to me he was well rid of Maureen, if she really was disturbing him to the extent that it appeared; but being judicious about other people's love affairs is easy, often merely a sign one has not understood their force or complexity.

'I'm going to try and get down there tomorrow,' he said, 'take her out for the evening.'

'Have you been seeing much of her?'

'Quite a bit.'

'It's bad luck.'

'I know I've made a bloody fool of myself,' Gwatkin said, 'but I don't know that I'd do different if I started again. Anyway, it isn't quite over.'

'What isn't?'

'Maureen.'

'In what way?'

'Nick—'

'Yes?'

'She's pretty well said – you know—'

'She has?'

'I believe if I can manage to see her tomorrow – but I don't want to talk about it. She can't make up her mind, you see. I understand that.'

I thought of Dicky Umfraville's comment: 'Not tonight, darling, I don't love you enough – not tonight, darling, I love you too much . . .' It sounded as if Gwatkin had had his share of such reservations. As we walked, his mind continually jumped from one aspect of his vexations to another.

'If I'm at the ITC and there's an invasion,' he said, 'I'll at least be nearer the scene of action than here. I don't think the Germans will try this country, do you? There'd be no difficulty in landing here, but it would mean mounting another operation after their arrival.'

'Hardly worth it, I'd have thought.'

'Idwal didn't take long to get hold of the idea he was to command the Company.'

'He certainly did not.'

'Do you remember my saying what we call good manners are just a form of weakness?'

'Very well.'

'I suppose if that's true, Idwal was right to speak as he did.'

'There's a lot to be said for going straight to the point.'

'But that's what I've always tried to do since I've been in the army,' Gwatkin said. 'It doesn't seem to have worked in my case. Here I am being sent back to the ITC as a dud. It's not because I haven't been keen, or slacked in any way –

except I know I forgot about those bloody codewords – and other people make balls-ups too.'

He spoke without self-pity, just lack of understanding, deep desire to know the answer why, so far as he was concerned, things had gone so wrong. It would be no good attempting to explain. I was not even sure I knew the explanation myself. All Gwatkin said was true. He had worked hard. In many respects he was a good officer, so far as he went. He was even conscious of such moral aspects of military life as the fact that the army is a world of the will, accordingly, if the will is weak, the army is weak. I could see, however, that one of the fallacies that made him so vulnerable was the supposition that manners, good or bad, had anything to do with the will as such.

'I loved commanding the Company,' Gwatkin said. 'Don't you enjoy your Platoon, Nick?'

'I might have once. I don't know. It's too late now. That's certain. Thirty men are merely a responsibility without the least compensatory feeling of power. They only need everlasting looking after.'

'Do you really feel that?' he said, astonished. 'When the war broke out, I was thrilled at the thought I might lead men into action. I suppose I may yet. This could be only a temporary set-back.'

He laughed unhappily. By this time we were approaching the dingle, a glade enclosed by a kind of shrubbery. A large stone seat was on one side of it, ornamental urns set on plinths at either end. All at once there was a sound of singing.

'Arm in arm together,
Just like we used to be,
Stepping out along with you
Meant all the world to me . . .'

It was a man's voice, a familiar one. The song, recalling old fashioned music-hall tunes of fifty years before, was, in fact, contemporary to that moment, popular among the men, perhaps, on account of such nostalgic tones and rhythm. The singing stopped abruptly. A woman began giggling and squeaking. Gwatkin and I paused.

'One of our fellows?' he said.

'It sounds to me like Corporal Gwylt.'

'I believe you're right.'

'Let's have a look.'

We skirted the dingle by way of a narrow path among the bushes, stepping quietly through the undergrowth that surrounded the glade. On the stone seat a soldier and a girl were sprawled in a long embrace. The soldier's arm bore two white stripes. The back of the huge head was unmistakably that of Corporal Gwylt. We watched for a moment. Suddenly Gwatkin gave a start. He drew in his breath.

'Christ,' he said very quietly.

He began to pick his way with great care through the shrubs and laurels. I followed him. I was not at first aware why he was moving so soon, nor that something had upset him. I thought his exclamation due to the scratch of a thorn, or remembrance of some additional item to be supervised before handing over the Company. When we were beyond the immediate outskirts of the dingle, he began walking quickly. He did not speak until we were on the path leading back to the house.

'You saw who the girl was?'

'No.'

'Maureen.'

'God, was she?'

There was absolutely no comment to make. This was even more unanswerable than the news that Gwatkin had been superseded in his command. If you are in love with a woman – and Gwatkin was undoubtedly in love – you can recognise her a mile off. The fact that I myself had failed to identify Maureen in the evening light did not make Gwatkin's certainty in the least suspect. The statement could be accepted as correct.

'Corporal Gwylt,' he said. 'Could you believe it?'

'It was Gwylt all right.'

'What do you think of it?'

'There's nothing to say.'

'Rolling about with him.'

'They were certainly in a clinch.'

'Well, say something.'

'Gwylt ought to pray more to Mithras.'

'What do you mean?'

'You know – the Kipling poem – "keep us pure till the dawn".'

'My God,' said Gwatkin, 'you're bloody right.'

He began to laugh. That was one of the moments when I felt I had not been wrong in thinking there was some style about him. We reached the house, parting without further discussion on either side, though Gwatkin had again laughed loudly from time to time. I made my way up the rickety stairs of the stable. The light was out in the bedroom, the blackout down from the window, through which moonlight shone on to the floor. This would usually have meant Kedward was asleep. However, as I came through the door, he sat up in bed.

'You're late, Nick.'

'I went for a walk in the park with Rowland.'

'Is he browned off?'

'Just a shade.'

'I couldn't get to sleep,' Kedward said. 'Never happened to me before. I suppose I'm so bloody pleased to get command of the Company. I keep on having new ideas about running it. I was thinking, I'll probably get Phillpots or Parry in your place, now that you're going up to Div.'

'Phillpots is a nice chap to work with.'

'Parry is the better officer,' said Kedward.

He turned over, in due course going to sleep, I suppose, in spite of these agitations induced by the prospect of power. For a time I thought about Gwatkin, Gwylt and Maureen, then went to sleep myself. The following day there were farewells to be said. I undertook these in the afternoon.

'I hear you're leaving the Battalion too, Sergeant-Major.'

'That I am, sir.'

'I expect you're sorry to go.'

'I am that, sir, and then I'm not. Nice to see home again, that will be, but there needs promotion for these younger lads that must be getting on.'

'Who is going to take your place?'

'It will be Sergeant Humphries, I do believe.'

'I hope Humphries does the job as well as you have.'

'Ah, well, sir, Humphries is a good NCO, and he should be all right, I do think.'

'Thank you for all your help.'

'Oh, it was a pleasure, sir . . .'

Before CSM Cadwallader could say more – not a man to take lightly opportunity to speak at length on the occasion of such a leave-taking, he was certainly going to say more, much more – Corporal Gwylt came running up. He saluted perfunctorily. Evidently I was not the object of his approach. He was tousled and out of breath.

'Excuse me, sir, may I speak to the Sergeant-Major?'

'Go ahead.'

Gwylt could hardly contain his indignation.

'Somebody's broke in and stole the Company's butter, Sergeant-Major, and the lock's all bust and the wire ripped out of the front of the meat-safe where it was put, and the

Messing Corporal do think it be that bugger Sayce again that has taken the butter to flog it, so will you come and see right away, the Messing Corporal says, that we have your witness, Sergeant-Major, if there's a Summary of Evidence like there was those blankets . . .'

CSM Cadwallader shortened his speech in preparation to a mere goodbye and grip of the hand. There was no alternative in the circumstances. He looked disappointed, but characteristically put duty before even the most enjoyably sententious of valedictions. He and Corporal Gwylt hurried off together. By this time the truck that was to take me to Divisional Headquarters had driven up. An NCO was parading the men who were to travel up in it for medical treatment. Gwatkin appeared. He had been busy all the morning, but had promised he would turn up to see me off. We talked for a minute or two about Company arrangements, revisions proposed by Kedward. Gwatkin had resumed his formality of manner.

'Perhaps you'll arrive at the ITC yourself, Nick,' he said, 'on the way to something better, of course, but it's used as a place of transit. I trust I'll be gone by then, but it would be good to meet.'

'We may both turn up on the same staff,' I said, without great seriousness.

'No,' he said gravely, 'I'll never get on the staff. I don't mind that. All I want is to carry out regimental duties properly.'

He tapped his gaiter with the swagger stick he carried. Then his tone changed.

'I had some rather bad news from home this morning,' he said.

'You're not in luck.'

'My father-in-law passed away. I think I told you he had been ill for some time.'

'You did. I'm sorry. Did you get on very well with him?'

'Pretty well,' said Gwatkin, 'but this will mean Blodwen's mother will have to move in with us. I like her all right, but I'd rather that didn't have to happen. Look, Nick, you won't speak to anyone about last night.'

'Of course not.'

'It was bloody awful,' he said.

'Of course.'

'But a lesson to me.'

'One never takes lessons to heart. It's just a thing people talk about – learning by experience and all that.'

'Oh, but I do take lessons to heart,' he said. 'What do you think then?'

'That one just gets these knocks from time to time.'

'You believe that?'

'Yes.'

'You really believe that everyone has that sort of thing happen to them?'

'In different ways.'

Gwatkin considered the matter for a moment.

'I don't know,' he said, 'I can't help thinking it was just because I was such a bloody fool, what with Maureen and making a balls of the Company too. I thought at least I was being some good as a soldier, but I was bloody wrong.'

I thought of Pennistone and his quotations from Vigny.

'A French writer who'd been a regular officer said the whole point of soldiering was its bloody boring side. The glamour, such as it was, was just a bit of exceptional luck if it came your way.'

'Did he?' said Gwatkin.

He spoke without a vestige of interest. I was impressed for the ten thousandth time by the fact that literature illuminates life only for those to whom books are a necessity. Books are unconvertible assets, to be passed on only to those who possess them already. Before I could decide whether it was worth making a final effort to ram home Vigny's point, or whether further energy thus expended was as wasteful of Gwatkin's time as my own, Kedward crossed the yard.

'Rowland,' he said, 'come to the cookhouse at once, will you. It's serious.'

'What's happened?' said Gwatkin, not pleased by this interruption.

'The Company butter's been flogged. So far as I can see, storage arrangements have been quite irregular. I'd like you to be present while I check facts with the CQMS and the Messing Corporal. Another thing, the galantine that's just arrived is bad. It's disposal must be authorized by an officer. I've got to straighten out this butter business before I do anything else. Nick, will you go along and sign for the galantine. Just a formality. It's round at the back by the ablutions.'

'Nick's just off to Div HQ,' said Gwatkin.

'Oh, are you, Nick?' said Kedward. 'Well best of luck, but you will sign for the galantine first, won't you?'

'Of course.'

'Goodbye, then.'

'Goodbye, Idwal, and good luck.'

Kedward hastily shook my hand, then rushed off to the scene of the butter robbery, saying: 'Don't be long, Rowland.'

Gwatkin shook my hand too. He smiled in an odd sort of way, as if he dimly perceived it was no good battling against Fate, which, seen in right perspective, almost always provides a certain beauty of design, sometimes even an occasional good laugh.

'I leave you to your galantine, Nick,' he said. 'Best of luck.'

I gave him a salute for the last time, feeling he deserved it. Gwatkin marched away, looking a trifle absurd with his little moustache, but somehow rising above that. I went off in the other direction, where the burial certificate of the galantine awaited signature. A blazing sun was beating down. For this, my final duty at Castlemallock, Corporal Gwylt, who was representing the Messing Corporal, elsewhere engaged in the butter investigation, had arranged the galantine, an immense slab of it, in its wrappings on a kind of bier, looking like a corpse in a mortuary. Beside the galantine, he had placed a pen and the appropriate Army Form.

'Oh, that galantine do smell something awful, sir,' he said. 'Sign the paper without smelling it, I should, sir.'

'I'd better make sure.'

I inclined my head with caution, then quickly withdrew it. Corporal Gwylt was absolutely right. The smell was appalling, indescribable. Shades of the *Potemkin*, I thought, wondering if I were going to vomit. After several deep breaths, I set my name to the document, confirming animal corruption.

'I'm leaving now, Corporal Gwylt. Going up to Division. I'll say goodbye.'

'You're leaving the Company, sir?'

'That I am.'

The Battalion's form of speech was catching.

'Then I'm sorry, sir. Good luck to you. I expect it will be nice up at Division.'

'Hope so. Don't get into too much mischief with the girls.'

'Oh, those girls, sir, they never give you any peace, they don't.'

'You must give up girls and get a third stripe. Then you'll be like the Sergeant-Major and not think of girls any longer.'

'That I will, sir. It will be better, though I'll not be the man the Sergeant-Major is, I haven't the height. But don't you believe the Sergeant-Major don't like girls. That's just his joke. I know they put something in the tea to make us not want them, but it don't do boys like me no good, it seem, nor the Sergeant-Major either.'

We shook hands on it. Any attempt to undermine the age-old army legend of sedatives in the tea would be as idle as to lecture Gwatkin on Vigny. I returned to the truck, and climbed up beside the driver. We rumbled through the park with its sad decayed trees, its Byronic associations. In the town, Maureen was talking to a couple of corner-boys in the main street. She waved and blew a kiss as we drove past, more as a matter of routine, I thought, than on account of any flattering recognition of myself, because she seemed to be looking in the direction of the men at the back of the truck, who, on passing, had raised some sort of hoot at her. Now they began to sing:

'She'll be wearing purple socks,
And she's always in the pox,
And she's Mickey McGilligan's daughter,
Mary-Anne . . .'

There were no villages in the country traversed, rarely even farms or hovels. One mile looked like another, except when once we passed a pair of stone pillars, much battered by the elements, their capitals surmounted by heraldic animals holding shields. Here were formerly gates to some mansion, the gryphons, the shields, the heraldry, nineteenth century in design. Now, instead of dignifying the entrance to a park, the pillars stood starkly in open country, alone among wide fields: no gates; no wall; no drive; no park; no house. Beyond them, towards the far horizon, stretched hedgeless ploughland, rank grass, across the expanses of which, like the divisions of a chess-board, squat walls of piled stone were beginning to rise. The pillars marked the entrance to Nowhere. Nothing remained of what had once been the demesne, except these chipped, over-elaborate coats of arms, emblems probably of some lord of the Law, like the first Castlemallock, or business magnate, such as those who succeeded him. Here, too, there had been no heirs, or heirs who preferred to live elsewhere. I did not blame them. North or South, this country was not greatly sympathetic to me. All the same, the day was sunny, there was a vast sense of relief in not being required to settle the Company butter problem, nor take the Platoon in gas drill. Respite was momentary, but welcome. At the back of the vehicle the hospital party sang gently:

'Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream doth flow:
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
        Strong Deliverer,
        Strong Deliverer
Be thou still my strength and shield . . .'

Gwatkin, Kedward and the rest already seemed far away. I was entering another phase of my war. By this time we had driven for an hour or two. The country had begun to change its character. Mean dwellings appeared more often, then the outer suburbs of a large town. The truck drove up a long straight road of grim houses. There was a crossroads where half a dozen ways met, a sinister place such as that where Oedipus, refusing to give passage, slew his father, a locality designed for civil strife and street fighting. Pressing on, we reached a less desolate residential quarter. Here, Divisional Headquarters occupied two or three adjacent houses. At one of these, a Military Policeman stood on duty.

'I want the DAAG's office.'

I was taken to see a sergeant-clerk. No one seemed to have heard I was to arrive. The truck had to move on. My kit was unloaded. The DAAG's office was consulted from the switchboard, a message returned that I was to 'come up'. A soldier-clerk showed the way. We passed along passages, the doors of which were painted with the name, rank and appointment of the occupants, on one of them:

Major-General H. de C. Liddament, DSO, MC.
Divisional Commander

The clerk left me at a door on which the name of the former DAAG – 'Old Square-arse', as Maelgwyn-Jones designated him – was still inscribed. From within came the drone of a voice apparently reciting some endless chant, which rose and fell, but never ceased. I knocked. No one answered. After a time, I knocked again. Again there was no answer. Then I walked in, and saluted. An officer, wearing major's crowns on his shoulder, was sitting with his back to the door dictating, while a clerk with pencil and pad was taking down letters in shorthand. The DAAG's back was fat and humped, a roll of flesh at the neck.

'Wait a moment,' he said, waving his hand in the air, but not turning.

He continued his dictation while I stood there.

'. . . It is accordingly felt . . . that the case of the officer in question – give his name and personal number – would be more appropriately dealt with – no – more appropriately regulated – under the terms of the Army Council Instruction quoted above – give reference – of which para II, sections (d) and (f), and para XI, sections (b) and (h), as amended by War Office Letter AG 27/9852/73 of 3 January, 1940, which, it would appear, contemplate exceptional cases of this kind . . . It is at the same time emphasised that this formation is in no way responsible for the breakdown in administration –

no, no, better not say that – for certain irregularities of routine that appear to have taken place during the course of conducting the investigation of the case, *vide* page 23, para 17 of the findings of the Court of Inquiry, and para VII of the above quoted ACI, section (e) – irregularities which it is hoped will be adjusted in due course by the authorities concerned . . .'

The voice, like so many other dictating or admonitory voices of even that early period of the war, had assumed the timbre and inflexions of the Churchill broadcast, slurred consonants, rhythmical stresses and prolations. These accents, in certain circumstances, were to be found imitated as low as battalion level. Latterly, for example, Gwatkin's addresses to the Company could be detected, by an attentive ear, to have veered away a little from the style of the chapel elder, towards the Prime Minister's individualities of delivery. In this, Gwatkin's harangues lost not a little of their otherwise traditional charm. If we won the war, there could be no doubt that these rich, distinctive tones would be echoed for a generation at least. I was still thinking of this curious imposition of a mode of speech on those for whom its manner was totally incongruous, when the clerk folded his pad and rose.

'Will you sign these, sir?' he asked.

' "For Major General",' said the DAAG, 'I'll sign them "for Major-General".'

He turned in his chair.

'How are you?' he said.

It was Widmerpool. He brought his large spectacles to bear on me like searchlights, and held out his hand. I took it. I felt enormously glad to see him. One's associations with people are regulated as much by what they stand for, as by what they are, individual characteristics becoming from time to time submerged in more general implications. At that moment, although I had never possessed anything approaching a warm relationship with Widmerpool, his presence brought back with a rush all kinds of things, more or less desirable, from which I had been cut off for an eternity. I wondered how I could ever have considered him in the disobliging light that seemed so innate since we had been at school together.

'Sit down,' he said.

I looked about. The shorthand clerk had been sitting on a tin box. I chose the edge of a table.

'Anyway, between these four walls,' said Widmerpool, 'don't feel rank makes a gulf between us.'

'How did you know it was me when I came into the room?'

Widmerpool indicated a small circular shaving-mirror, which stood on his table, almost hidden by piles of documents. He may have thought this question already presumed too far on our difference in rank, because he stopped smiling at once, and began to tap his knee. His battle-dress, like his civilian clothes, seemed a little too small for him. At the same time, he was undeniably a somewhat formidable figure in his present role.

'I'll put you in the picture right away,' he said. 'In the first place, I do not mean to stay on this staff long. That is between ourselves, of course. The Division is spoken of as potentially operational. So far as I am concerned, it is a backwater. Besides, I have to do most of the work here. Ack-and-Quack, a Regular, is a good fellow, but terribly slow. He is not too bad on supply, but possesses little or no grasp of personnel.'

'What about the General?'

Widmerpool took off his spectacles. He leant towards me. His face was severe under his blinking. He spoke in a low voice.

'I despair of the General,' he said.

'I thought everyone admired him.'

'Quite a wrong judgment.'

'As bad as that?'

'Worse.'

'He has a reputation for efficiency.'

'Mistakenly.'

'They like him in the units.'

'People love buffoonery,' said Widmerpool, 'soldiers like everyone else. Incidentally, I don't think General Liddament cares for me either. However, that is by the way. I make sure he can find nothing to complain of in my work. As a result, he contents himself with adopting a mock-heroic style of talk whenever I approach him. Very undignified in a relatively senior officer. I repeat, I do not propose to stay with this formation long.'

'What job do you want?'

'That's my affair,' said Widmerpool, 'but in the meantime, so long as I remain, the work will be properly done. Now it happens lately there has been a spate of courts-martial, none of special interest, but all requiring, for one reason or another, a great deal of work from the DAAG. With his other duties, it has been more than one man can cope with. It was too much for my predecessor. That was to be expected. Now I thrive on work, but I saw at once that even I must have assistance. Accordingly, I have obtained War Office authority for the temporary employment of a junior officer to aid me in such matters as taking Summaries of Evidence. Various names were put forward within the Division, yours among them. I noticed this. I had no reason to suppose you would be the most efficient, but, since none of the others had any more legal training than yourself, I allowed the ties of old acquaintance to prevail. I chose you – subject to your giving satisfaction, of course.'

Widmerpool laughed.

'Thanks very much.'

'I take it you did not find yourself specially cut out to be a regimental officer.'

'Not specially.'

'Otherwise, I doubt if your name would have been submitted to me. Let's hope you will be better adapted to staff duties.'

'We can but hope.'

'I remember when we last met, you came to see me with a view to getting help in actually entering the army. How did you get in?'

'In the end I was called up. As I told you at the time, my name was already on the Emergency Reserve. I merely consulted you as to the best means of speeding up that process.'

I saw no reason to give Widmerpool further details about that particular subject. It had been no thanks to him that the calling-up process had been accelerated. By now he had succeeded in dispelling, with extraordinary promptness, my earlier apprehension that army contacts were necessarily preferable with people one knew in civilian life. I began to wonder whether I was not already regretting Gwatkin and Kedward.

'Like so many units and formations at this moment,' said Widmerpool, 'the Division is under-establishment. You will be expected to help while you are here in other capacities than purely "A" duties. When in the field – on exercises, I mean – you will be something of a dogsbody, to use a favourite army phrase, with which you are no doubt familiar. You understand?'

'Perfectly.'

'Good. You will be in F Mess. F is low, but not the final dregs of the Divisional Headquarters staff, if they can be so called. The Mobile Bath Officer, and his like, are in E Mess.

By the way, a body from your unit, one Bithel, is coming up to command the Mobile Laundry.'

'So I heard.'

'Brother of a VC, I understand, and was himself a notable sportsman when younger. Pity they could not find him better employment, for he should be a good type. But we must get on with the job, not spend our time coffee-housing here. Your kit is downstairs?'

'Yes.'

'I will give orders for it to be taken round to your billet – you had better go with it to see the place. Come straight back here. I will run through your duties, then take you back to the Mess to meet some of the staff.'

Widmerpool picked up the telephone. He spoke for some minutes about my affairs. Then he said to the operator: 'Get me Major Farebrother at Command.'

He hung up the receiver and waited.

'My opposite number at Command is one, Sunny Farebrother, a City acquaintance of mine – rather a slippery customer to deal with. He was my Territorial unit's Brigade-Major at the beginning of the war.'

'I met him years ago.'

The telephone bell rang.

'Well, get cracking,' said Widmerpool, without commenting on this last observation. 'The sooner you go, the sooner you'll be back. There's a good deal to run through.'

He had already begun to speak on the telephone when I left the room. I saw that I was now in Widmerpool's power. This, for some reason, gave me a disagreeable, sinking feeling within. On the news that night, motorized elements of the German army were reported as occupying the outskirts of Paris.

The Soldier's Art

for
Roy Fuller

1

When, at the start of the whole business, I bought an army greatcoat, it was at one of those places in the neighbourhood of Shaftesbury Avenue, where, as well as officers' kit and outfits for sport, they hire or sell theatrical costume. The atmosphere within, heavy with menace like an oriental bazaar, hinted at clandestine bargains, furtive even if not unlawful commerce, heightening the tension of an already novel undertaking. The deal was negotiated in an upper room, dark and mysterious, draped with skiing gear and riding-breeches, in the background of which, behind the glass windows of a high display case, two headless trunks stood rigidly at attention. One of these effigies wore Harlequin's diagonally spangled tights; the other, scarlet full-dress uniform of some infantry regiment, allegorical figures, so it seemed, symbolising dualisms of the antithetical stock-in-trade surrounding them . . . Civil and Military . . . Work and Play . . . Detachment and Involvement . . . Tragedy and Comedy . . . War and Peace . . . Life and Death . . .

An assistant, bent, elderly, bearded, with the congruous demeanour of a Levantine trader, bore the greatcoat out of a secret recess in the shadows and reverently invested me within its double-breasted, brass-buttoned, stiffly pleated khaki folds. He fastened the front with rapid bony fingers, doing up the lapels to the throat; then stepped back a couple of paces to judge the effect. In a three-sided full-length looking-glass nearby I, too, critically examined the back view of the coat's shot-at-dawn cut, aware at the same time that soon, like Alice, I was to pass, as it were by virtue of these habiliments, through its panes into a world no less enigmatic.

'How's that, sir?'

'All right, I think.'

'Might be made for you.'

'Not a bad fit.'

Loosening now quite slowly the buttons, one by one, he paused as if considering some matter, and gazed intently.

'I believe I know your face,' he said.

'You do?'

'Was it *The Middle Watch*?'

'Was what the middle watch?'

'The show I saw you in.'

I have absolutely no histrionic talent, none at all, a constitutional handicap in almost all the undertakings of life; but then, after all, plenty of actors possess little enough. There was no reason why he should not suppose the Stage to be my profession as well as any other. Identification with something a shade more profound than a farce of yesteryear treating boisterously of gun-room life in the Royal Navy might have been more gratifying to self-esteem, but too much personal definition at such a point would have been ponderous, out of place. Accepting the classification, however sobering, I did no more than deny having played in that particular knockabout. He helped me out of the sleeves, gravely shaking straight their creases.

'What's this one for?' he asked.

'Which one?'

'The overcoat—if I might make bold to enquire?'

'Just the war.'

'Ah,' he said attentively. '*The War* . . .'

It was clear he had remained unflustered by recent public events, at the age he had reached perhaps disillusioned with the commonplaces of life; too keen a theatre-goer to spare time for any but the columns of dramatic criticism, however indifferently written, permitting no international crises from the news pages to cloud the keenness of aesthetic consideration. That was an understandable outlook.

'I'll bear the show in mind,' he said.

'Do, please.'

'And the address?'

'I'll take it with me.'

Time was short. Now that the curtain had gone up once more on this old favourite—*The War*—in which, so it appeared, I had been cast for a walk-on part, what days were left before joining my unit would be required for dress rehearsal. Cues must not be missed. The more one thought of it, the more apt seemed the metaphor. Besides, clothes, if not the whole man, are a large part of him, especially when it comes to uniform. In a minute or two the parcel, rather a bulky one, was in my hands.

'Tried to make a neat job of it,' he said, 'though I expect the theatre's only round the corner from here.'

'The theatre of war?'

He looked puzzled for a second, then, recognising a mummer's obscure quip, nodded several times in appreciation.

'And I'll wish you a good run,' he said, clasping together his old lean hands, as if in applause.

'Thanks.'

'Good day, sir, and thank *you*.'

I left the shop, allowing a final glance to fall on the pair of flamboyantly liveried dummies presiding from their glass prison over the sombre vistas of coat-hangers suspending tweed and whipcord. On second thoughts, the headless figures were perhaps not antithetical at all, on the contrary, represented 'Honour and Wit, fore-damned they sit', to whom the Devil had referred in the poem. Here, it was true, they stood rather than sat, but precise posture was a minor matter. The point was that their clothes were just right; while headlessness—like depicting Love or Justice blindfold—might well signify the inexorable preordination of twin destinies that even war could not alter. Indeed, war, likely to offer both attributes unlimited range of expression, would also intensify, rather than abate, their ultimate fatality. Musing on this surmise in the pale, grudging sunshine of London in December, a light wan yet intimate, I recognised the off-licence ever memorable for the bottle of port—could the fluid be so designated—that Moreland and I, centuries before, had bought with such high hopes that Sunday afternoon, later so dismally failed to drink.

Looking back from a disturbed, though at the same time monotonous present, those Moreland days seemed positively Arcadian. Even the threatening arbitrament of war (the Prime Minister's rather ornate phrase in his broadcast) had lent a certain macabre excitement to the weeks leading up to the purchase of the greatcoat. Now, some fourteen months later, that day seemed scarcely less remote than the immolation of the port bottle. The last heard of Moreland —from one of Isobel's letters—was that a musical job had taken him to Edinburgh. Even that information had been sent long ago, soon after my own arrival at Division. Since then I had served a million years at these Headquarters, come to possess no life but the army, no master but Widmerpool, no table companions but Biggs and Soper.

Meanwhile, the war itself had passed through various phases, some of them uncomfortable enough: France in defeat: Europe overrun: invasion imminent: the blitz opened over London. In this last aspect—more specifically—Isobel reported, too, a direct hit on Barnby's frescoes in the Donners-Brebner Building, a pictorial memory dim as Barnby himself, now Camouflage Officer on some distant RAF station. Latterly, things had looked up a trifle, in the Western Desert, for example, but in general the situation remained capable of considerable improvement before being regarded as in the least satisfactory. F Mess—defined by Widmerpool as 'low, though not the final dregs of the Divisional Staff'—did not at all alter a sense that much was wrong with the world.

After our first local blitz—when they killed a thousand people, at that stage of the war regarded as quite a large number for a provincial city in a single night—Major-General Liddament, the Divisional Commander, ordered the Defence Platoon (of which I had temporary charge) to mount brens within the billeting area between the sounding of Air-raid Warning and All Clear. This was just a drill, in practice no shooting envisaged, unless exceptional circumstances—dive-bombing, for example—were to arise; Command, of course, operating normal anti-aircraft batteries. Announced by the melancholy dirge of sirens, like ritual wailings at barbarous obsequies, the German planes used to arrive shortly before midnight—it was a long way to come—turning up in principle about half an hour after sleep had descended. They would fly across the town at comparatively high altitude, then, wheeling lower, hum fussily back on their tracks, sometimes dropping an incendiary or two, for luck, in the immediate neighbourhood of the Mess, before passing on to the more serious business of lodging high explosive on docks and shipyards. These circlings over the harbour lasted until it was time to return. On such nights, after weapons were back in the armoury, sections dismissed to the barrack-room, not much residue of sleep was to be recaptured.

The last jerky, strangled notes of the Warning, as it died away, always recalled some musical instrument inadequately mastered; General Conyers, for example, rendering Gounod or Saint-Saëns on his 'cello, or that favourite of Moreland's (also inclined to play Saint-Saëns), the pirate-like man with an old-fashioned wooden leg and patch over one eye, who used to scrape away at a fiddle in one of the backstreets off Piccadilly Circus. Still sleepy, I began to dress in the dark, since switching on the light in the curtainless bedroom would entail the trouble of rearranging the window's blackout boards. Musical variations of different forms of Air-raid Warning might repay study. Where Isobel was living in the country, the vicar, as chief warden, issued the local Warning in person by telephone. Either to instil the seriousness of the notification, or because intoning came as second nature to one of his calling, he always enunciated the words imitatively, ululating his voice from high to low in paraphrase of a siren:

'. . . Air-raid Warning . . . *Air-raid Warning* . . . Air-raid Warning . . . *Air-raid Warning* . . . Air-raid Warning . . . *Air-raid Warning* . . .'

Such reveries floated out of the shadows of the room, together with the hope that the Luftwaffe, bearing in mind the duration of their return journey, would not protract with too much Teutonic conscientiousness the night's activities. Tomorrow, a Command three-day exercise opened, when, so far as the Defence Platoon was concerned, sleep might be equally hard to come by. Outside in the street the air was sharp, although by now meagre signs of the spring were appearing in the surrounding countryside, the hedgeless fields partitioned one from another by tumbledown stone walls. The moonlight had to compete with a rapidly increasing range of artificial illumination that made blackout nugatory. Section posts were to be inspected in turn. The guns were already setting up a good deal of noise. Once a minute fragment of shrapnel pattered with a tinny rattle, like attack from a pea-shooter, against the metal of my helmet. The bren section at the corner of the sports field, last to be visited, had their weapon mounted for aircraft action already and revealed, rather apologetically, they had just discharged a burst.

'Got tired of hanging about watching them drop those things,' said Corporal Mantle, 'so we shot down a flare, for goodness' sake.'

His spectacles gave him a learned, scholarly air, out of keeping with such impatience and violent action. He was a young, energetic NCO, whose name was to go in as candidate for a commission, unless the process were thwarted by Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, recently showing signs of obstruction in that quarter.

'We'll have to account for the rounds.'

'I'll remember that, sir. Had a few in hand, as a matter of fact. Always just as well, in case there's one of those snap inspections of ammo.'

A shapeless, dumpy figure in a mackintosh came towards us out of the night, the garment so long it reached almost to his heels. This turned out to be Bithel. It was impossible to guess why he should be wandering about at this hour of the night in the middle of a raid. As officer in charge of the Mobile Laundry, his duties could scarcely be required at this moment. He came close to us.

'You can't sleep with this noise going on,' he said.

He spoke peevishly, as if remedy, easily applicable, had been for some reason disregarded by the authority responsible.

'I've run out of those pills of mine,' he went on. 'Not even sure I'll be able to get them any longer. Gone off the market, like so many other useful commodities these days. Thought it wiser to put on a helmet. Regulation about that anyway, I expect. I didn't know you or any of the rest of Div HQ were on duty on these occasions. Don't Command organise the pom-poms? That's what they're called, I believe. Then there's a Bofors gun. That's ack-ack too, isn't it? Swedish. I ought to know much more about the Royal Artillery and their functions. Don't come your way as an infantryman, though I've picked up a bit since being at Div.'

He smiled uncomfortably, looking, as always, as if he expected a rebuff. Some months before, he had shaved off the untidy moustache worn when—from some forlorn hope of the Territorial Army Reserve—he had first joined our former Battalion. The physical change, more in keeping with his other natural characteristics, additionally emphasised, in a large moonlike face, the unbelievably inexpert adjustment of his false teeth. That Bithel had lasted so comparatively long in charge of the Mobile Laundry was little short of a miracle. Survival was chiefly due to the fact that this unit was attached only for purposes of administrative convenience, never officially part of the Divisional establishment, therefore liable to be removed at short notice. Accordingly, it never received quite the same disciplinary attention; and, in any case, he was lucky in having Sergeant Ablett as subordinate, who probably did most of the administration. Another reason, too, may have played a part in delaying Bithel's dislodgement, ultimately inevitable. He was accustomed to speak enthusiastically of his own affiliations with the theatrical world, boasts reduced on closer examination to having worked as 'front of the House', for a few months, at the theatre of the provincial capital where for a time he had existed precariously. The job had come to an end when that playhouse had been transformed into a cinema, but some shreds of Thespian prestige still clung to Bithel, anyway in his own eyes, so that when the officer in charge of the Mobile Bath Unit—traditional impresario of the Divisional Concert Party—went sick in the middle of rehearsal, the enterprise was handed over to Bithel, who, as producer and director, mounted a very tolerable show.

All the same, ejection sooner or later could not be in doubt. Widmerpool, as DAAG conveniently placed for furthering this measure, was anxious to oust Bithel at the first opportunity; undoubtedly would have done so long before had the Laundry been of our own establishment. Widmerpool's disapproval was not only on understandable general grounds, but, in addition, because he had—rather uncharacteristically, since usually well informed on such matters—swallowed Bithel's intermittently propagated myth about being brother of an officer of the same name and regiment who had won a VC in the '14–'18 war. There seemed no reason why even a VC's younger brother should not fall short in commanding a Mobile Laundry, but for some reason, at an earlier stage, Widmerpool's imagination had been temporarily captured by the legend, so that he felt bitterly about it when the story was shown to be patently untrue. Now, Bithel stood gazing at the bren with close attention, as if he had never before seen such a weapon.

'So far as Div HQ are concerned, only the Defence

Platoon stands-to when there's a raid—one of the General's ideas to keep everyone on their toes,' I said.

Bithel nodded gravely at this explanation of why we were on guard over the sports field. As it happened, he and I had hardly spoken since the night when, in his own phrase, he had 'taken a glass too much' after traversing the gas-chamber at the Castlemallock School of Chemical Warfare. The peregrinations of the Laundry, by definition, kept its officer, a subaltern, in a state of almost permanent circuit throughout the formation's area, while my own duties, however trivial, were too numerous and dispersed to offer much time for hobnobbing with other branches of HQ. We had therefore done no more up to that moment than exchange an odd word together, usually as neighbours at periodical assemblies of all Headquarters officers to attend a lecture or listen to harangues delivered from time to time by the General. This was the first occasion we had met without a crowd of other people round about.

'Bit of a sweat to have to get up like this night after night,' he said. 'Shall we take a turn up the field?'

His sympathy was not without a touch of despair. Few officers could have looked less on their toes than himself at that moment.

'Wait till I've checked this bren.'

The section was found correct. Bithel and I strolled across the grass towards a broken-down cricket pavilion or changing room, a small wooden structure, not much more than a hut. The place had been the cause of trouble lately, because Biggs, Staff Officer Physical Training, had mislaid the key just at the moment when the civilian owners of the requisitioned sports field wanted to store benches or garden seats there. Widmerpool had complained greatly of time wasted on this matter, and, with justice, had been very cross with Biggs, to whom the hut and its key had become almost an obsession. I tried the door to see if it had been properly locked again after the key had been found and the seats moved there. It would not open. Biggs must have seen to that.

The noise of the cannonade round about was deepening. An odour like smouldering rubber imposed a rank, unsavoury surface smell on lesser exhalations of soot and smoke. Towards the far side of the town—the direction of the harbour—thin greenish rays of searchlight beam rapidly described wide intersecting arcs backwards and forwards against the eastern horizon, their range ever reducing, ever extending, as they sliced purposefully across each other's tracks. Then, all at once, these several zigzagging angles of light would form an apex on the same patch of sky, creating a small elliptical compartment through which, once in a way, rapidly darted a tiny object, moving like an angry insect confined in a bottle. As if reacting in deliberately regulated unison to the searchlights' methodical fluctuations, shifting masses of cloudbank alternately glowed and faded, constantly redesigning by that means half-a-dozen intricately pastelled compositions of black and lilac, grey and saffron, pink and gold. Out of this resplendent firmament—which, transcendentally speaking, seemed to threaten imminent revelation from on high—slowly descended, like Japanese lanterns at a fête, a score or more of flares released by the raiding planes. Clustered together in twos and threes, they drifted at first aimlessly in the breeze, after a time scarcely losing height, only swaying a little this way and that, metamorphosed into all but stationary lamps, apparently suspended by immensely elongated wires attached to an invisible ceiling. Suddenly, as if at a prearranged signal for the climax of the spectacle—a set-piece at midnight—high swirling clouds of inky smoke rose from below to meet these flickering airborne torches. At ground level, too, irregular knots of flame began to blaze away like a nest of nocturnal forges in the Black Country. All the world was dipped in a livid, unearthly refulgence, theatrical yet sinister, a light neither of night nor day, the penumbra of Pluto's frontiers. The reek of scorched rubber grew more than ever sickly. Bithel fidgeted with the belt of his mackintosh.

'There's been a spot of bother about a cheque,' he said.

'Yours?'

'I think that's what was really keeping me awake as much as lack of those pills. Things may work out all right because I've paid up—borrowed a trifle from the Postal Officer, as a matter of fact—but cheques are always a worry. They ought to be abolished.'

'Perhaps they will after the war.'

'That'll be too late for me,' said Bithel.

He spoke quite seriously.

'Large sum?'

'Matter of a quid or two—but it did bounce.'

'Can't you keep it quiet?'

'I don't think the DAAG knows up to date.'

That was an important factor from Bithel's point of view. Otherwise Widmerpool might find the opportunity for which he was waiting. I was about to commiserate further, when a deep, rending explosion, that seemed to split the earth, sounded above the regular thud-thud-thud of the guns, vibrations of its crash echoing back in throbbing, shuddering waves from the surrounding hills. Bithel shook his head, his attention distracted for the moment from his own troubles, no doubt worrying enough.

'That must have got home,' he said.

'Sounded like it.'

He began to speak again, then for some reason stopped, apparently changing his mind about the way he was going to put a question. Having evidently decided to frame it in a different form, he made the enquiry with conscious diffidence.

'Told me you were a reader—like me—didn't you?'

'Yes, I am. I read quite a lot.'

I no longer attempted to conceal the habit, with all its undesirable implications. At least admitting to it put one in a recognisably odd category of persons from whom less need be expected than the normal run.

'I love a good book when I have the time,' said Bithel. 'St John Clarke's *Match Me Such Marvel*, that sort of thing. Something serious that takes a long time to get through.'

'Never read that one, as it happens.'

Bithel seemed scarcely aware of my answer. St John Clarke's novel was evidently a side issue, not at all the goal at which these ranging shots were aimed. Though rarely possible to guess, when in a mood for intimate conversation, what he would say next, such pronouncements of Bithel's were always worth attention. Something special was on his mind. When he put the next question, there was a kind of fervour in his voice.

'Ever buy magazines like *Chums* and the *Boy's Own Paper* when you were a nipper?'

'Of course—used to read them in bound annuals as a rule. I've a brother-in-law who still does.'

It was Erry's only vice, though one he tried to keep dark, as showing in himself a lack of earnestness and sense of social obligation. Bithel made some reply, but a sudden concentrated burst of ack-ack fire, as if discharged deliberately for that purpose, drowned his utterance.

'What was that you said?'

Bithel spoke again.

'Still can't hear.'

He came closer.

'. . . hero . . .' he shouted.

'You feel a hero?'

'No . . . I . . .'

The noise lessened, but he still had to yell at the top of his voice to make himself heard.

'. . . always imagined myself the hero *of those serials.*'

The shouted words were just audible above the clatter of guns. He seemed to think they offered a piece of unparalleled psychological revelation on his own part.

'Every boy does,' I yelled back.

'Everyone?'

He was disappointed at that answer.

'I'm sure my brother-in-law does to this day.'

Bithel was not at all interested in my own, or anyone else's, brother-in-law's tendency to self-identification while reading fiction. That was reasonable, because he knew nothing of Erridge's existence. Besides, he wanted only to talk about himself. Although wholly concentrated on that subject, he remained at the same time apologetic as well as intense.

'Only I was thinking the other night—when Jerry first came over—that I was having the very experience I used to read about as a lad.'

'How do you mean?'

' "Coming under fire for the first time"—that was always a great moment in the hero's career. You must remember. Where he "showed his mettle", as the story usually put it.'

He laughed, as if trying to excuse such reckless flights of fancy, in doing so displaying the double row of Low Comedy teeth.

'"The rattle of musketry from distant hills"—"a little shower of sand churned up by a bullet in front of the redoubt"?'

These conventional phrases from boys' adventure stories might encourage Bithel to plunge further into observations about life. The clichés did indeed stir him.

'That's it,' he said, speaking with much more animation than usual, 'that's just what I meant. Wonderful memory you've got. What you said brings those yarns right back. I was a great reader as a lad. One of those thoughtful little boys. Never kept it up as I should.'

This was all a little reminiscent of Gwatkin, my former Company Commander, poring secretly in the Company office over the *Hymn to Mithras*; but, whereas Gwatkin had meditated such literary material as a consequence of his own infatuation with the mystique of a soldier's life, Bithel's ruminations were quite other. In Bithel, memory of his former partiality for tales of military prowess merely gave rise to a very natural surprise that he was not himself more personally frightened at this moment of comparative danger.

'Strictly speaking, one experienced raids—coming under fire, if you like—when still reading the *Boy's Own Paper*. During the earlier war, I mean.'

'Oh, I didn't,' said Bithel. 'The Zeppelins never came near any of the places we lived when I was a kid. That's just why I was surprised not to mind this sort of thing more. I'm the nervy type, you see. I once had to give evidence in court, rather a nasty case—nothing to do with me, I'm glad to say, just a witness—and I thought my legs were going to give way under me. But this business we're listening to now really doesn't worry me. Worst moment's when the Warning goes, don't you think?'

The question of fear inevitably propounds itself from time to time if a state of war exists. Will circumstances arise when its operation on the senses might become uncomfortably hard to control? Like Bithel, I, too, had thought a certain amount about that subject, reaching the very provisional conclusion that fear itself was less immediately related to unavoidable danger than might at first be supposed; although no doubt that danger, more or less indefinitely increased in motive power, might—indeed certainly would—cause the graph to rise steeply. In bed at night, months before the blitz struck the locality, I would occasionally feel something like abject fear, turning this way and that in my sleeping-bag, for no special reason except that life seemed so utterly out of joint. That was a kind of nervous condition—as Bithel had said of himself—perfectly imaginable in time of peace; perhaps even experienced then, now forgotten, like so much else of that lost world. In the same way, I would sometimes lie awake enduring torments of thwarted desire, depraved fantasies hovering about the camp-bed, reveries of concupiscence that seemed specifically generated by unprepossessing military surroundings. Indeed, it was often necessary to remind oneself that low spirits, disturbed moods, senses of persecution, were not necessarily the consequence of serving in the army, or being part of a nation at war, with which all-inclusive framework depressive mental states now seemed automatically linked.

The raid in progress at that moment was, as Bithel had indicated, more spectacular than alarming, even a trifle stimulating now one was fully awake and dressed; so long as the mind did not dwell on the tedium of a three-day exercise the following day, undertaken after a missed night's sleep. On the other hand, if bombs began to fall in the sports field, such light-hearted impressions might easily deteriorate, especially if the bren were knocked out, removing chance of retaliation. (It might be added that all sense of excitement was to evaporate from air-raids three or four years later.) However, Bithel had ceased to require comment on his own meditations about 'baptism of fire'. He now returned to those personal worries, predominantly financial, which were never far from his mind.

'I do hope things will be OK about that cheque,' he said. 'It all started with the Pay Department being late that month in paying Field Allowance into my banking account.'

This situation did, indeed, arise from time to time, owing to absence of method, possibly downright incompetence, on the part of the Financial Branch of the War Office concerned; possibly due to economic ineptitudes, or ingrained malice, of what Pennistone used later to call the 'cluster of highly educated apes' ultimately in charge of such matters at the Treasury. Whatever the cause, the army from time to time had to forego its wages; sometimes such individual disasters as Bithel's resulting.

'I can see there'll be a fuss,' he said, 'but with any luck it won't come to a court-martial.'

Two or three lesser reports, each thunderous enough, had followed the last big explosion. Now noise was diminishing, the barrage gradually, though appreciably, reducing its volume. Quite suddenly the guns fell entirely silent, like dogs in the night, which, after keeping you awake for hours by their barking, suddenly decide to fall asleep instead. There was a second or two of absolute stillness. Then in the far distance the bell of a fire-engine or ambulance clanged desperately for a time, until the echoes died sadly away on the wind. This discordant ringing was followed by a great clamour, shouts, starting-up of trucks, hooting . . . *the sound of horns and motors, which shall bring Sweeney to Mrs Porter in the spring*. . . . Huge smuts, like giant moths exploring the night air, pervaded its twilight. The smell of burning rubber veered towards a scent more specifically chemical in character, in which the fumes of acetylene seemed recognisable. The consolatory, long drawn out drone came at last. At its first note, as if thus signalled, large drops of rain began to fall. In a minute or two the shower was coming down in buckets, the freshness of the newly wet grass soon obtruding on the other scents.

'Buck up and get that bren covered, Corporal.'

'Shall we pack it in now, sir?'

'Go ahead.'

'Think I'll return to bed too,' said Bithel. 'Doubt if I'll get much sleep. Glad I brought a mac with me now. Need it more than a helmet really. Awful climate over here. Makes you swill down too much of that porter, as they call it. More than you can afford. Just to keep the damp out of your bones. Come and see us in G Mess some time. You'd like Barker-Shaw, the Field Security Officer. He's a professor—philosophy, I think—at one of the 'varsities. Can't remember which. Clever face. The bloke in charge of the Hygiene Section is a bright lad too. You should hear him chaffing the Dental Officer about sterility.'

Our several ways parted. Corporal Mantle marched off his men to the barrack-room. I completed the rounds of the other bren sections, dismissed them, made for bed.

F Mess was only a few minutes' walk from the last of these posts. The Mess was situated in a redbrick, semi-detached villa, one of the houses of a side-street sloping away towards the perimeter of the town. Entering the front door, you were at once assailed by a nightmare of cheerlessness and squalor, all the sordid melancholy, at its worst, of any nest of bedrooms where only men sleep; a prescript of nature unviolated by the character of solely male-infested sleeping quarters established even in buildings hallowed by age and historical association. F Mess was far from such; at least any history to be claimed was in the making. From its windows in daytime, beyond the suburbs, grey, stony hills could be seen, almost mountains; in another direction, that of the docks over which the blitz had been recently concentrating, rose cranes and factory chimneys beyond which inland waters broadened out towards the sea—'the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea.' About half a mile away from the Mess, though still in the same predominantly residential area, two or three tallish houses accommodated all but the ancillary services of Divisional Headquarters. A few scattered university buildings in the same neighbourhood failed to impart any hint of academic flavour.

'No room in this bloody Mess as it is,' said Biggs, Staff Officer Physical Training, expressing this opinion when I first turned up there. 'Now you come along and add to the crowd, Jenkins, making an extra place at that wretched rickety table we've been issued with to eat off, and another body to occupy the tin sink on the top floor they call a bath—no shaving in the bathroom, remember, absolutely *verboten*. What are you supposed to be doing at Div anyway?'

A captain with '14–'18 ribbons, bald as an egg, he had perhaps been good-looking in a heavy classical manner when younger; anyway, had himself so supposed. Now, with chronically flushed cheeks, he was putting on flesh, his large bulbous nose set between fierce frightened eyes and a small cupid's bow mouth that kept twitching open and shut like a rubber valve. Muscular over-development of chest, shoulder and buttock gave him the air of a strong man at a circus—a strong woman almost—or professional weight-lifter about to present an open-air act to a theatre queue. His voice, harsh and unsure, registered the persecution mania that beset him, that condition, not uncommon in the army, of for ever expecting a superior to appear—bursting like the Demon King out of a trapdoor in the floor—and find fault. In civilian life sports organiser at a seaside resort, Biggs, so I learnt later, was in process of divorcing his wife, a prolonged undertaking, troublesome and expensive, of which he would often complain.

'I'm attached to the DAAG's office.'

'How long for?'

'Don't know.'

'How's Major Widmerpool got authority for an assistant, I should like to know?'

'War Office Letter.'

'Go on.'

'It's to help clear up a lot of outstanding stuff like court-martial proceedings and requisition claims.'

'I've got a lot of outstanding stuff too,' said Biggs. 'A bloody lot. I'm not given an assistant. Well, I don't envy you, Jenkins. It's a dog's life. And don't forget this. Don't forget it. There's nothing lower in the whole bloody army than a second-lieutenant. Other Ranks have got their rights, a one-pipper's none. That goes especially for a Div HQ, and what's more Major Widmerpool is a stickler for having things done the right way. He's been on my own track before now, I can tell you, about procedure he didn't consider correct. He's a devil for procedure.'

After that Biggs lost interest in what was not, indeed, a very interesting subject, except in the light indicated, that to acquire an understrapper at all was, on Widmerpool's part, an achievement worthy of respect. No one but a tireless creator of work for its own sake would have found an assistant necessary in his job, nor, it could be added, in the ordinary course of things been allowed one, even if required. Widmerpool had brought that off. As it happened, a junior officer surplus to establishment was to some extent justified additionally, not long before my arrival at Division, by Prothero, commanding the Defence Platoon, falling from his motor-bicycle and breaking his leg. While he was in hospital I was allotted some of Prothero's duties as well as those delegated by Widmerpool.

'You'll find there's a lot of work to do here,' said Widmerpool, on my first morning. 'A great deal. We shall be at it to a late hour most nights.'

This warning turned out to be justified. There were, as it happened, several courts-martial pending, and another, convened in the past, the findings of which Widmerpool considered unsatisfactory in law. A soldier, who had temporarily gone off his head and assaulted two civilians, had been acquitted at his trial. Widmerpool was engaged in a complicated correspondence on this matter with the Judge Advocate General's Department. Such things took up time, as most of the week was spent out of doors on exercises. Although, since days when we had been at school together, I had been seeing him on and off—very much on and off—for more than twenty years by this time, I found when I worked under him there were still comparatively unfamiliar sides to Widmerpool. Like most persons viewed through the eyes of a subordinate, his nature was to be appreciated with keener insight from below. This new angle of observation revealed, for example, how difficult he was to work with, particularly on account of a secretiveness that derived from perpetual fear, almost obsession, that tasks completed by himself might be attributed to the work of someone else. On that first morning at Division, Widmerpool spoke at length of his own methods. He was already sitting at his table when I arrived in the room. Removing his spectacles, he began to polish them vigorously, assuming at the same time a manner of hearty military geniality.

'No excuses required,' he said, before I could speak. 'Your master is always the first staff officer to arrive at these Headquarters in the morning, and, apart from those on night duty, the last to leave after the sun has gone down. Now I want to explain certain matters before I go off to attend A & Q's morning conference. The first thing is that I never turn work away, neither in the army nor anywhere else. To turn work away is always an error. Never let me find you doing that—unless, of course, it is work another branch is wrongly trying to foist on us, for which they themselves will ultimately reap the credit. A man fond of stealing credit for other people's work is Farebrother, my opposite number at Command. I do not care for Farebrother. He is too smooth. Besides, he is always trying to get even with me about a certain board-meeting in the City we both once attended.'

'I met Farebrother years ago.'

'So you keep on telling me. You mentioned the fact at least once last night. Twice, I think.'

'Sorry.'

'I hope previous acquaintance will prevent you being taken in by his so-called charm, should you have dealings with him as my representative.'

Widmerpool's feud with Sunny Farebrother, so I found, was of old standing, dating back to long before this, though, militarily speaking, in especial to the period when

Farebrother had been brigade-major to Widmerpool's Territorials soon after the outbreak of war. The work of the 'A' staff, which Widmerpool (under 'A & Q', Colonel Pedlar) represented at Division, comprised administration of 'personnel' and 'interior economy', spheres in which, so it appeared, Farebrother had more than once thwarted Widmerpool, especially in such matters as transfers from one unit to another, candidates for courses and the routine of disciplinary cases. Farebrother was, for example, creating difficulties about Widmerpool's correspondence with the Judge Advocate's Department. There were all kind of ways in which an 'opposite number' at Corps or Command could make things awkward for a staff officer at Division. As Command Headquarters were established in one of the blocks of regular army barracks on the other side of the town, I had no contact with Farebrother in the flesh, only an occasional word on the telephone when the DAAG was not available; so the matter of our having met before had never arisen. It was hard to estimate how justly, or otherwise, Widmerpool regarded this mutual relationship. Farebrother's voice on the line never showed the least trace of irritation, even when in warm conflict as to how some order should be interpreted. That quiet demeanour was an outstanding feature of Sunny Farebrother's tactic. On the whole, honours appeared fairly evenly divided between the two of them where practical results were concerned.

'Right, Sunny, right,' Widmerpool would mutter, gritting his teeth when he had sustained a defeat.

'It's gone the way Kenneth wants,' was Farebrother's formula for accepting the reverse situation.

Then there were my own hopes and fears. Though by now reduced to the simplest terms, these were not without complication. In the first place, I desired to separate myself from Widmerpool; at the same time, if possible, achieve material improvement in my own military condition. However, as the months went by, no prospect appeared of liberation from Widmerpool's bottle-washing, still less of promotion. After all, I used to reflect, the army was what you wanted, the army is what you've got—in terms of Molière, *le sous-lieutenant Georges Dandin*. No use to grumble, not to mention the fact that a great many people, far worse off, would have been glad of the job. This was a change, of course, from taking pride in the thought that only luck and good management had brought a commission at all at a moment when so many of my contemporaries were still failing to achieve that. However, to think one thing at one moment, another at the next, is the prescriptive right of every human being. Besides, I recognised the fact that those who desire to share the faint but perceptible inner satisfaction of being included, however obscurely, within the armed forces in time of war, must, if in their middle thirties and without any particular qualifications for practising its arts, pay for that luxury, so far as employment is concerned, by taking what comes. Consolation was to be found, if at all, in Vigny's views (quoted that time in the train by David Pennistone) on the theme of the soldier's 'abnegation of thought and action'.

All the same, although the soldier might abnegate thought and action, it has never been suggested that he should abnegate grumbling. There seemed no reason why I alone, throughout the armies of the world, should not be allowed to feel that military life owed me more stimulating duties, higher rank, increased pay, simply because the path to such ends was by no means clear. Even if Widmerpool left Divisional Headquarters for what he himself used to call 'better things', my own state, so far from improving, would almost certainly be worsened. The Battalion, made up to strength with a flow of young officers increasingly available, would no longer require my services as platoon commander, still less be likely to offer a company. Indeed, those services, taking them all in all, were not to be exaggerated in value to a unit set on streamlining its efficiency. I was prepared to admit that myself. On the other hand, without ordination by way of the War Intelligence Course, or some similar apostleship, there was little or no likelihood of capturing an appointment here or on any other staff. For a course of that sort I should decidedly not be recommended so long as Widmerpool found me useful. When, for one reason or another, that subjective qualification ceased to be valid—when, for example, Widmerpool went to 'better things'—it looked like pretty certain relegation to the Regiment's Infantry Training Centre, a fate little to be desired, and one unlikely to lead to name and fame. Widmerpool himself was naturally aware of these facts. Once, in an expansive mood, he had promised to arrange a future preferable to assignment—as an object to be won, rather than as a competitor—to the lucky-dip provided by an ITC.

'I look after people who've been under me,' Widmerpool said, in the course of cataloguing some of his own good qualities. 'I'll see you get fixed up in a suitable job when I move up the ladder myself. That shouldn't be long now, I opine. At very least I'll get you sent on a course that will make you eligible for the right sort of employment. Don't worry, my boy, I'll keep you in the picture.'

That was a reasonable assurance in the circumstances, and, I felt, not undeserved. 'Putting you in the picture', that relentlessly iterated army phrase, was a special favourite of Widmerpool's. He had used it when, on my first arrival at Headquarters, he had sketched in for me the characteristics of the rest of the Divisional staff. Widmerpool had begun with General Liddament himself.

'Those dogs on a lead and that hunting horn stuck in the blouse of his battle-dress are pure affectation,' he said. 'Come near to being positively undignified in my opinion. Still, of the fifteen thousand men in the Division, I can think of only one other fit to command it.'

'Who is?'

'Modesty forbids my naming him.'

Widmerpool allowed some measure of jocularity to invest his tone when he said that, which increased, rather than diminished, the impression that he spoke with complete conviction. The fact was he rather feared the General. That was partly on account of General Liddament's drolleries, some of which were indeed hard to defend; partly because, when in the mood, the Divisional Commander liked to tease his officers. Widmerpool did not like being teased. The General was not, I think, unaware of Widmerpool's qualities as an efficient, infinitely industrious DAAG, while at the same time laughing at him as a man. In this Widmerpool was by no means his only victim. Generals are traditionally represented as stupid men, sometimes with good reason; though Pennistone, when he talked of such things later, used to argue that the pragmatic approach of the soldier in authority—the basis of much of this imputation—is required by the nature of military duties. It is an approach which inevitably accentuates any individual lack of mental flexibility, an ability, in itself, to be found scarcely more among those who have risen to eminence in other vocations; anyway when operating outside their own terms of reference. In General Liddament, so I was to discover, this pragmatic approach, even if paramount, was at the same time modified by notable powers of observation. A bachelor, devoted to his profession, he was thought to have a promising future ahead of him. Earlier in the war he had been wounded in action with a battalion, a temporary disability that probably accounted for his not already holding a command in the field.

When the General himself was present, Widmerpool was prepared to dissemble his feelings about the two attendant dogs (he disliked all animals), which could certainly become a nuisance when their double-leashed lead became entangled between the legs of staff officers and their clerks in the passages of Headquarters. All the same, Widmerpool was not above saying 'wuff-wuff' to the pair of them, if their owner was in earshot, which he would follow up by giving individual, though unconvincing, pats of encouragement.

'Thank God, the brutes aren't allowed out on exercise,' he said. 'At least the General draws the line there. I think Hogbourne-Johnson hates them as much as I do. Now Hogbourne-Johnson is a man you must take care about. He is bad-tempered, unreliable, not more than averagely efficient and disliked by all ranks, including the General. However, *I* can handle him.'

Hogbourne-Johnson, a full colonel with red tabs, was in charge of operational duties, the staff officer who represented the General in all routine affairs. A Regular, decorated with an MC from the previous war, he was tall, getting decidedly fat, with a small beaky nose set above a pouting mouth turning down at the corners. He somewhat resembled an owl, an angry, ageing bird, recently baulked of a field-mouse and looking about for another small animal to devour. The MC suggested that he was presumably a brave man, or, at very least, one who had experienced enough active service to make that term almost beside the point. Widmerpool acknowledged these earlier qualities.

'Hogbourne-Johnson's had a disappointing career up to date,' he said. 'Unrealized early hopes. At least that's his own opinion. Sword of Honour at Sandhurst, all that sort of thing. Then he made a balls-up somewhere—in Palestine, I think—just before the war. However, he hasn't by any means given up. Still thinks he'll get a Division. If he asked me, I could tell him he's bound for some administrative backwater, and lucky if he isn't bowler-hatted before the cessation of hostilities. The General's going to get rid of him as soon as he can lay hands on the particular man he wants.'

'But the General could sack him tomorrow.'

'For some reason it doesn't suit him to do that. Hogbourne-Johnson is also given to putting on a lot of swank about being a Light Infantryman. To tell the truth, I'm surprised any decent Line regiment could put up with him. They might at least have taught him not to announce himself to another officer on the telephone as "*Colonel* Hogbourne-Johnson". I know Cocksidge says, "This is *Captain* Cocksidge speaking", if he's talking to a subaltern. You expect that from Cocksidge. Hogbourne-Johnson is supposed to know better. The CRA doesn't say, "This is *Brigadier* Hawkins", he says "Hawkins here". However, I suppose I shouldn't grumble. I can manage the man. That's the chief thing. If he hasn't learn how to behave by now, he never will.'

All this turned out to be a pretty just description of Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson and his demeanour, from which in due course I saw no reason to dissent. The army is a place where simple characterisation flourishes. An officer or man is able, keen, well turned out; or awkward, idle, dirty. He is popular or detested. In principle, at any rate, few intermediate shades of colour are allowed to the military spectrum. To some extent individuals, by the very force of such traditional methods of classification, fall into these hard and fast categories. Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson was one of the accepted army types, disappointed, sour, on the look-out for trouble; except by his chief clerk, Diplock, not much loved. On the other hand, although he may have had his foolish moments as well as his disagreeable ones, Hogbourne-Johnson was not a fool. Where Widmerpool, as it turned out, made a mistake, was in supposing he had Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson eating out of his hand. The Colonel's failings, such as they were, did not include total lack of grasp of what Widmerpool himself was like in his dealings. Indeed, Hogbourne-Johnson showed comparatively deep understanding of Widmerpool eventually, when the titanic row took place about Diplock, merging—so far as Widmerpool and Hogbourne-Johnson were concerned—into the question of who was to command the Divisional Reconnaissance Regiment.

The Reconnaissance Unit, then in process of generation, was one in which Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson took a special interest from the start, though not an entirely friendly interest.

'These Recce fellows are doing no more than we Light Bobs used to bring off on our flat feet,' he would remark. 'Nowadays they want a fleet of armoured vehicles for their blasted operations and no expense spared. There's a lot of damned nonsense talked about this so-called Recce Battalion.'

The Reconnaissance Corps—as in due course it emerged

—was indeed, on first coming into being, a bone of considerable contention among the higher authorities. Some pundits thought like Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson; others, just the opposite. One aspect of the question turned on whether the Recce Corps—to some extent deriving in origin from the Anti-tank Companies of an earlier phase of the war—should be used as a convenient limbo for officers, competent, but judged, for one reason or another, less than acceptable in their parent unit; or, on the other hand, whether the Corps should be moulded into one of the élites of the army, having its pick of the best officers and men available. Yanto Breeze, for example, of my former Battalion, had transferred to an Anti-tank Company after the never-explained death—suicide or murder—of Sergeant Pendry. Breeze had been implicated only to the extent of being Orderly Officer that night, sufficient contact—bringing the unpleasantness of a Court of Inquiry—to make him want to leave the Battalion. A good, though not particularly ornamental officer, he was felt to be entirely suitable for the Anti-tank Company. Adherents of a more stylish Recce Corps might, rightly or wrongly, have required rather more outward distinction from their officer in-take than Breeze could show. That was much how things stood. The whole question also appealed greatly to Widmerpool, both as an amateur soldier in relation to tactical possibilities, and, as a professional trafficker in intrigue, a vehicle offering all sorts of opportunity for personal interference.

'Hogbourne-Johnson is playing a double game about the Recce Corps,' he said. 'I happen to know that. The Divisional Commander is very keen on this new unit. The Generals at Corps and Command, on the other hand, are neither of them enthusiastic on the subject, not helpful about speeding things up. Hogbourne-Johnson thinks—in my opinion rightly—that General Liddament plans to get rid of him. Accordingly, he is doing his best to suck up to the other two Generals by backing their policy. He'll then expect help if relieved of his appointment.'

'Like the Unjust Steward.'

'Who was he?'

'In the Bible.'

'I thought you meant an officer of that name.'

'The one who said write ten, when it ought to have been fifty.'

'There's nothing unjust about it,' said Widmerpool, always literal-minded. 'Naturally Hogbourne-Johnson has to obey his own Divisional Commander's orders. I do not for a moment suggest he is overstepping the bounds of discipline. After all, Recce developments are a matter of opinion. A regular officer of his standing has a perfect right to hold views. However, what our General would not be specially pleased to hear is that Hogbourne-Johnson is also moving heaven and earth to get a friend from his own regiment appointed to this new unit's command.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I too have my candidate.'

'To command the Recce Corps?'

'Going into the matter, I discovered Hogbourne-Johnson's tracks. However, I can circumvent him.'

Widmerpool smiled and nodded in a manner to indicate extreme slyness.

'Who?'

'No one you would have met. An excellent officer of my acquaintance called Victor Upjohn. Knew him as a Territorial. First-rate man.'

'Won't they appoint a cavalryman, in spite of Hogbourne-Johnson and yourself?'

'They'll appoint my infantryman—and be glad of him.'

'If the General is likely to be annoyed about Hogbourne-Johnson messing about behind his back as to appointments to command in his Division, he'll be even less pleased to find you at the same game.'

'He won't find out. Neither will Hogbourne-Johnson. Upjohn will simply be gazetted. In the meantime, so far as it goes, I am prepared to play ball with Hogbourne-Johnson up to a point. After all, if I know the right man to command the Recce Corps, it's surely my duty to get him there.'

There was something to be said for this view. If you want your own way in the army, or elsewhere, it is no good following the rules too meticulously, a canon all great military careers—and most civil ones—abundantly illustrate. What Widmerpool had not allowed for, as things turned out, was a sudden deterioration of his own relations with Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson. No doubt one reason for his assurance about that, in spite of the Colonel's uncertain temper, was that most of Widmerpool's dealings were with his own immediate superior, Colonel Pedlar, so less likelihood of friction existed in the other more explosive quarter. Naturally he was in touch with Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson from time to time, but there was no day-to-day routine, during which Hogbourne-Johnson was likely, sooner or later, to make himself disagreeable as a matter of principle.

Colonel Pedlar, as 'A & Q', set no problem at all. Also a regular full colonel with an MC, he had little desire to be unaccommodating for its own sake. A certain stiffness of manner in official transactions was possibly due to apprehension that more might be required of him than he had to offer, rather than an innate instinct, like Hogbourne-Johnson's, to be unreasonable in all his dealings. Colonel Pedlar seemed almost surprised to have reached the rank he had attained; appeared to possess little or no ambition to rise above it, or at least small hope that he would in due course be promoted to a brigade. The slowness of his processes of thought sometimes irked his subordinate, Widmerpool, even though these processes were on the whole reliable. If Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson looked like an owl, Colonel Pedlar resembled a retriever, a faithful hound, sound in wind and limb, prepared to tackle a dog twice his size, or swim through a river in spate to collect his master's game, but at the same time not in the top class for picking up a difficult scent.

Trouble with Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson might never have arisen, as it did at that particular moment, had not Colonel Pedlar been, quite by chance, out of the way. When it came, sudden and violent, the cause was a far more humdrum matter than the clandestine guiding of appointments. Indeed, the incident itself was such a minor one, so much part of the day's work, that, had I not myself witnessed it—owing to the exceptional occurrence of Advance Headquarters and Rear Headquarters being brought together in one element at the close of the three-day exercise—I should always have believed some essential detail to have been omitted from the subsequent story; guessed that nothing so trivial in itself could have so much discomposed Widmerpool. That incredulity was due, I suppose, to underestimation, even after the years I had known him, of Widmerpool's inordinate, almost morbid, self-esteem.

During 'schemes', the Defence Platoon was responsible for guarding the Divisional Commander's Advance Headquarters. This meant, on these occasions, accommodation for myself in the General's Mess; accordingly, temporary disengagement from Widmerpool, whose duties as DAAG focussed on Rear Headquarters. On the last evening of this particular exercise, the Command three-day one, Advance HQ had been established, as usual, in a small farmhouse, one of the scattered homesteads lying in the forbidding countryside of the Command's north-western area, right up in the corner of the map. The first fifty-six hours had been pretty active—as foreseen by me the night before we set out—giving little chance of sleep. However, by the time the General and his operational staff sat down to a late meal at the end of the third day, there was a feeling abroad that the main exertions of the exercise might reasonably be regarded as at an end. Everyone could take things easy for a short time. The General himself was in an excellent temper, the battle against the Blue Force to all intents won.

A single oil lamp threw a circle of dim light round the dining table of the farm parlour where we ate, leaving the rest of the room in heavy shadow, dramatising by its glow the central figures of the company present. Were they a group of conspirators—something like the Gunpowder Plot—depicted in the cross-hatchings of an old engraved illustration? It was not exactly that. At the same time the hard lights and shades gave the circle of heads an odd, mysterious unity. The faces of the two colonels, bird and beast, added a note deliberately grotesque, surrealist, possibly indicating a satirical meaning on the part of the artist, a political cartoonist perhaps. The colonels were placed on either side of General Liddament, who sat at the head of the table, deep in thought. His thin, cleanshaven, ascetic features, those of a schoolmaster or priest—also a touch of Sir Magnus Donners—were yellowish in complexion. Perhaps that tawny colour clarified the imagery, for now it became plain.

Here was Pharaoh, carved in the niche of a shrine between two tutelary deities, who shielded him from human approach. All was manifest. Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson and Colonel Pedlar were animal-headed gods of Ancient Egypt. Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson was, of course, Horus, one of those sculptured representations in which the Lord of the Morning Sun resembles an owl rather than a falcon; a bad-tempered owl at that. Colonel Pedlar's dog's muzzle, on the other hand, was a milder than normal version of the jackal-faced Anubis, whose dominion over Tombs and the Dead did indeed fall within A & Q's province. Some of the others round about were less easy to place in the Egyptian pantheon. In fact, one came finally to the conclusion, none of them were gods at all, mere bondsmen of the temple. For example, Cocksidge, officer responsible for Intelligence duties, with his pale eager elderly-little-boy expression—although on the edge of thirty—was certainly the lowest of slaves, dusting only exterior, less sacred precincts of the shrine, cleaning out with his hands the priest's latrine, if such existed on the temple premises. Next to Cocksidge sat Greening, the General's ADC, pink cheeked, fair haired, good-natured, about twenty years old, probably an alien captive awaiting sacrifice on the altar of this anthropomorphic trinity. Before anyone else could be satisfactorily identified, Colonel Pedlar spoke.

'How went the battle, Derrick?' he asked.

There had been silence until then. Everyone was tired. Besides, although Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson and Colonel Pedlar were not on notably good terms with each other, they felt rank to inhibit casual conversation with subordinates. Both habitually showed anxiety to avoid a junior officer's eye at meals in case speech might seem required. To make sure nothing so inadvertent should happen, each would uninterruptedly gaze into the other's face across the table, with all the fixedness of a newly engaged couple, eternally enchanted by the charming appearance of the other. The colonels were, indeed, thus occupied when Colonel Pedlar suddenly put his question. This was undoubtedly intended as a form of expressing polite interest in his colleague's day, rather than to show any very keen desire for further tactical information about the exercise, a subject with which Colonel Pedlar, and everyone else present, must by now be replete. However Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson chose to take the enquiry in the latter sense.

'Pretty bloody, Eric,' he said. 'Pretty bloody. If you want to know about it, read the sit-rep.'

'I've read it, Derrick.'

The assonance of the two colonels' forenames always imparted a certain whimsicality to their duologues.

'Read it again, Eric, read it again. I'd like you to. There are several points I want to bring up later.'

'Where is it, Derrick?'

Colonel Pedlar seemed to possess no intellectual equipment for explaining that he had absolutely no need, even less desire, to re-read the situation report. Perhaps, having embarked on the subject, he felt a duty to follow it up.

'Cocksidge will find it for you, Eric, writ in his own fair hand. Seek out the sit-rep, Jack.'

In certain moods, especially when he teased Widmerpool, the General was inclined to frame his sentences in a kind of Old English vernacular. Either because the style appealed equally to himself, or, more probably, because use of it implied compliment to the Divisional Commander, Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson also favoured this mode of speech. At his words, Cocksidge was on his feet in an instant, his features registering, as ever, deference felt for those of higher rank than himself. Cocksidge's demeanour to his superiors always recalled a phrase used by Odo Stevens when we had been on a course together at Aldershot:

'Good morning, Sergeant-Major, here's a sparrow for your cat.'

Cocksidge was, so to speak, in a chronic state of providing, at a higher level of rank, sparrows for sergeant-majors' cats. His own habitual incivility to subordinates was humdrum enough, but the imaginative lengths to which he would carry obsequiousness to superiors displayed something of genius. He took a keen delight in running errands for anyone a couple of ranks above himself, his subservience even to majors showing the essence of humility. He had made a close, almost scientific study of the likes and dislikes of Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson and Colonel Pedlar, while the General he treated with reverence in which there was even a touch of worship, of deification. In contact with General Liddament, so extreme was his respect that Cocksidge even abated a little professional boyishness of manner, otherwise such a prominent feature of his all-embracing servility, seeming by its appealing tone to ask forbearance for his own youth and immaturity. Widmerpool, to do him justice, despised Cocksidge, an attitude Cocksidge seemed positively to enjoy. The two colonels, on the other hand, undoubtedly approved his fervent attentions, appeared even appreciative of his exaggeratedly juvenile mannerisms. In addition, it had to be admitted Cocksidge did his job competently, apart from such elaborations of his own personality. Now he came hurriedly forward with the situation report.

'Thanks, Jack,' said Colonel Pedlar.

He studied the paper, gazing at it with that earnest, apparently uncomprehending stare, of which Widmerpool had more than once complained.

'I've seen this,' he said. 'Seems all right, Derrick. Take it back where it belongs, Jack.'

'Glad it seems all right to you, Eric,' said Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, 'because I rather flatter myself the operational staff, under my guidance, did a neat job.'

The bite in his tone should have conveyed warning. He terminated this comment, as was his habit, by giving a smirk, somehow audibly extruded from the left-hand side of his mouth, a kind of hiss, intended to underline the aptness or wit of his words. Unless in a bad humour he would always give vent to this muted sound after speaking. The fact was Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson did not attempt to conceal his own sense of superiority over a brother officer, inferior not only in appointment, regiment and mental equipment, but also in a field where Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson felt himself particularly to shine, that is to say in the arena where men of the world sparklingly perform. The play of his wit was often directed against the more leisurely intellect of Colonel Pedlar, whose efforts to keep up with all this parade of brilliance occasionally landed him in disaster. It was so on that night. After giving a glance at the situation report, he handed it back to Cocksidge, who received the document with bent head, as if at Communion or in the act of being entrusted with a relic of supreme holiness. There could be no doubt that the sit-rep had at least confirmed Colonel Pedlar in the belief that nothing remained to worry about where the exercise was concerned. At such moments as this one he was inclined to overreach himself.

'Going to finish up with a glass of port tonight, Derrick,' he asked, 'now that our exertions are almost at an end?'

'Port, Eric?'

A wealth of meaning attached to the tone given by Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson to the name of the wine. Widmerpool's mother, years before, had pronounced 'port' with a similar interrogative inflexion in her voice, though probably to imply her guests were lucky to get any port at all, rather than for the reasons impelling Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson so precisely to enunciate the word.

'Yes, Derrick?'

'Not tonight, Eric. Port don't do the liver any good. Not the sort of port we have in this Mess anyway. I shall steer clear of port myself, Eric, and I should advise you to do the same.'

'You do?'

'I do, Eric.'

'Well, I think I'll have a small glass nevertheless, Derrick. I'm sorry you won't be accompanying me.'

Colonel Pedlar gave the necessary order. Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson shook his head in disapproval. He was known to favour economy; it was said, even to the extent of parsimony. A glass of port was brought to the table. Colonel Pedlar, looking like an advertisement for some well known brand of the wine in question, held the glass to the lamp-light, turning the rim in his hand.

'Fellow in my regiment was telling me just before the war that his grandfather laid down a pipe of port for him to inherit on his twenty-first birthday,' he remarked.

Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson grunted. He did this in a manner to imply observation of that particular custom, even the social necessity of such a provision, was too well accepted in decent society for any casual commendation of the act to be required; though the tradition might be comparatively unfamiliar in what he was accustomed to describe as 'Heavy' infantry; and, it might be added, not much of a regiment at that.

'Twelve dozen bottles,' said Colonel Pedlar dreamily. 'Pretty good cellar for a lad when he comes of age.'

Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson suddenly showed attention. He began to bare a row of teeth under the biscuit-coloured bristles and small hooked nose.

'Twelve dozen, Eric?'

'That's it, isn't it, Derrick?'

Colonel Pedlar sounded nervous now, already aware no doubt that he had ventured too far in claiming knowledge of the world; had made, not for the first time, an elementary blunder.

'*Twelve dozen?*' repeated Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson.

He added additional emphasis to the question, carrying the implication that he himself must have misheard.

'Yes.'

'You're wide of the mark, Eric. Completely out of the picture.'

'I am, Derrick?'

'You certainly are, Eric.'

'What is a pipe then, Derrick? I'm not in the wine trade.'

'Don't have to be in the wine trade to know what a pipe of port is, old boy. Everyone ought to know that. Nothing to do with being a shopman. *More than fifty dozen*. That's a pipe. You're absolutely out in your calculations. Couldn't be more so. Mismanaged your slide-rule. Landed in an altogether incorrect map-square. Committed a real bloomer.

Got off on the wrong foot, as well as making a false start.'

'Is that a pipe, by Jove?'

'That's a pipe, Eric.'

'I got it wrong, Derrick.'

'You certainly did, Eric. You certainly got it wrong. You did, by Jove.'

'You've shaken me, Derrick. I'll have to do better next time.'

'You will, Eric, you will—or we won't know what to think of you.'

General Liddament seemed not to hear them. It was as if he had fallen into a cataleptic sleep or was under the influence of some potent drug. After this exchange between the two colonels, another long silence fell, one of those protracted abstinences from all conversation so characteristic of army Messes—British ones, at least—during which, as every moment passes, you feel someone is on the point of giving voice to a startling utterance, yet, for no particular reason, that utterance is always left pending, for ever choked back, incapable, from inner necessity, of being finally brought to birth. An old tin alarm-clock ticked away noisily on the dresser, emphasising the speedy passing of mortal life. Colonel Pedlar sipped away at his port, relish departed after his blunder. Cocksidge, with the side of his palm, very quietly scraped together several crumbs from the surface of the table cloth, depositing them humbly, though at the same time rather coyly, on his own empty plate, as if to give active expression, even in the sphere of food, to his perpetual dedication in keeping spick and span the surroundings of those set in authority over him, doing his poor best in making them as comfortable as possible. Only that morning, in the dim light at an early hour in the farmhouse kitchen, I had tripped over him, nearly fallen headlong, as he crouched on his knees before the fire, warming the butter ration so that its consistency might be appropriately emulsified for the General to slice with ease when he appeared at the breakfast table. No doubt, during all such silences as the one that now had fallen on the Mess, the mind of Cocksidge was perpetually afire with fresh projects for self-abasement before the powerful. By now there was no more to hope for, so far as food was concerned. It seemed time to withdraw from the board, in other respects unrewarding.

'May I go and see how the Defence Platoon is getting on, sir?'

General Liddament appeared not to have heard. Then, with an effort, he jerked himself from out of his deep contemplation. It was like asking permission from one of the supine bodies in an opium den. He took a few seconds more to come to, consider the question. When he spoke it was with almost biblical solemnity.

'Go, Jenkins, go. No officer of mine shall ever be hindered from attending to the needs of his men.'

A sergeant entered the room at that moment and approached the General.

'Just come through on the W/T, sir, enemy planes over the town again.'

'Right—take routine action.'

The sergeant retired. I followed him out into a narrow passage where my equipment hung from a hook. Then, buckling on belt and pouches, I made for the outbuildings. Most of the platoon were pretty comfortable in a loft piled high with straw, some of them snoring away. Sergeant Harmer was about to turn in himself, leaving things in the hands of Corporal Mantle. I ran through the matter of sentry duties. All was correct.

'Just come through they're over the town again, Sergeant.'

'Are they again, the buggers.'

Harmer, a middle-aged man with bushy eyebrows, largely built, rather slow, given to moralising, was in civilian life foreman in a steel works.

'We haven't got to wake up for them tonight.'

'It's good that, sir, besides you never know they won't get you.'

'True enough.'

'Ah, you don't, life's uncertain, no mistake. Here today, gone tomorrow. After my wife went to hospital last year the nurse met me, I asked how did the operation go, she didn't answer, said the doctor wanted a word, so I knew what he was going to say. Only the night before when I'd been with her she said "I think I'll get some new teeth". We can't none of us tell.'

'No, we can't.'

Even the first time I had been told the teeth story, I could think of no answer than that.

'I'll be getting some sleep. All's correct and Corporal Mantle will take over.'

'Good night, Sergeant.'

Corporal Mantle remained. He wanted to seize this opportunity for speaking a word in private about the snag arisen about his candidature for a commission. Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson had decided to make things as difficult as possible. Mantle was a good NCO. Nobody wanted to lose him. Indeed, Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson had plans to promote him sergeant, eventually perhaps sergeant-major, when opportunity arose to get rid of Harmer, not young enough or capable of exceptional energy, even if he did the job adequately. Widmerpool, through whom such matters to some extent circulated, was not interested either way in what happened to Mantle. He abetted Hogbourne-Johnson's obstructive tactics in that field, partly as line of least resistance, partly because he was himself never tired of repeating the undeniable truth that the army is an institution directed not towards the convenience of the individual, but to the production of the most effective organisation for an instrument designed to win wars.

'At the present moment there are plenty of young men at OCTUs who are potentially good officers,' Widmerpool said. 'Good corporals, on the other hand, are always hard to come by. That situation could easily change. If we get a lot of casualties, it *will* change so far as officers are concerned—though no doubt good corporals will be harder than ever to find. In the last resort, of course, officer material is naturally limited to the comparatively small minority who possess the required qualifications—and do not suppose for one moment that I presume that minority to come necessarily, even primarily, from the traditional officer class. On the contrary.'

'But Mantle doesn't come from what you call the traditional officer class. His father keeps a newspaper shop and he himself has some small job in local government.'

'That's as may be,' said Widmerpool, 'and more power to his elbow. Mantle's a good lad. At the same time I see no reason for treating Mantle's case with undue bustle. As I've said before, I have no great opinion of Hogbourne-Johnson's capabilities as a staff officer—on that particular point I find myself in agreement with the General—but Hogbourne-Johnson is within his rights, indeed perfectly correct, in trying to delay the departure of an NCO, if he feels the efficiency of these Headquarters will be thereby diminished.'

There the matter rested. Outside the barn I had a longish talk with Mantle about his situation. By the time I returned to the house, everyone appeared to have gone to bed; at least the room in which we had eaten seemed at first deserted, although the oil lamp had not been extinguished. It had, however, been moved from the dinner table to the dresser standing on the right of the fireplace. Then, as I crossed the room to make for a flight of stairs on the far side, I saw General Liddament himself had not yet retired to his bedroom. He was sitting on a kitchen chair, his feet resting on another, while he read from a small blue book that had the air of being a pocket edition of some classic. As I passed he looked up.

'Good night, sir.'

'How goes the Defence Platoon?'

'All right, sir. Guards correct. Hay to sleep on.'

'Latrines?'

'Dug two lots, sir.'

'Down wind?'

'Both down wind, sir.'

The General nodded approvingly. He was rightly keen on sanitary discipline. His manner showed he retained the unusually good mood of before dinner. There could be no doubt the day's triumph over the Blue Force had pleased him. Then, suddenly, he raised the book he had been reading in the air, holding it at arm's length above his head. For a moment I thought he was going to hurl it at me. Instead, he waved the small volume backwards and forwards, its ribbon marker flying at one end.

'Book reader, aren't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What do you think of Trollope?'

'Never found him easy to read, sir.'

The last time I had discussed books with a general had been with General Conyers, a much older man than General Liddament, one whose interests were known to range from psychoanalysis to comparative religion; and in many other directions too. Long experience of the world of courts and camps had given General Conyers easy tolerance for the opinions of others, literary as much as anything else. General Liddament, on the other hand, seemed to share none of that indulgence for those who did not equally enjoy his favourite authors. My answer had an incisive effect. He kicked the second chair away from him with such violence that it fell to the ground with a great clatter. Then he put his feet to the floor, screwing round his own chair so that he faced me.

'*You've never found Trollope easy to read?*'

'No, sir.'

He was clearly unable to credit my words. This was an unhappy situation. There was a long pause while he glared at me.

'Why not?' he asked at last.

He spoke very sternly. I tried to think of an answer. From the past, a few worn shreds of long forgotten literary criticism were just pliant enough to be patched hurriedly together in substitute for a more suitable garment to cover the dialectic nakedness of the statement just made.

'. . . the style . . . certain repetitive tricks of phrasing . . . psychology often unconvincing . . . sometimes downright dishonest in treating of individual relationships . . . women don't analyse their own predicaments as there represented . . . in fact, the author does more thinking than feeling . . . of course, possessor of enormous narrative gifts . . . marshalling material . . . all that amounting to genius . . . certain sense of character, even if stylised . . . and naturally as a picture of the times . . .'

'Rubbish,' said General Liddament.

He sounded very angry indeed. All the good humour brought about by the defeat of the Blue Force had been dissipated by a thoughtless expression of literary prejudice on my own part. It might have been wiser to have passed some noncommittal judgment. Possibly I should be put under arrest for holding such mutinous views. The General thought for a long time, perhaps pondering that question. Then he picked up the second chair from the floor where it had fallen on its side. He set it, carefully, quietly, at the right distance and angle in relation to himself. Once more he placed his feet on the seat. Giving a great sigh, he tilted back his own chair until its joints gave a loud crack. This physical relaxation seemed to infuse him with a greater, quite unexpected composure.

'All I can say is you miss a lot.'

He spoke mildly.

'So I've often been told, sir.'

'Whom do you like, if you don't like Trollope?'

For the moment, I could not remember the name of a single novelist, good or bad, in the whole history of literature. Who was there? Then, slowly, a few admired figures came to mind—Choderlos de Laclos—Lermontov—Svevo. . . . Somehow these did not have quite the right sound. The impression given was altogether too recondite, too eclectic. Seeking to nominate for favour an author not too dissimilar from Trollope in material and method of handling, at the same time in contrast with him—not only in being approved by myself—in possessing greater variety and range, the *Comédie Humaine* suddenly suggested itself.

'There's Balzac, sir.'

'*Balzac!*'

General Liddament roared the name. It was impossible to know whether Balzac had been a very good answer or a very bad one. Nothing was left to be considered between. The violence of the exclamation indicated that beyond argument. The General brought the legs of the chair down level with the floor again. He thought for a moment. Fearing cross-examination, I began to try and recall the plots of all the Balzac books, by no means a large number in relation to the whole, I had ever read. However, the next question switched discussion away from the sphere of literary criticism as such.

'Read him in French?'

'I have, sir.'

'Get along all right?'

'I'm held up with occasional technical descriptions—how to run a provincial printing press economically on borrowed money, what makes the best roofing for a sheepcote in winter, that sort of thing. I usually have a fairly good grasp of the narrative.'

The General was no longer listening.

'You must be pretty bored with your present job,' he said.

He pronounced these words deliberately, as if he had given the matter much thought. I was so surprised that, before I could make any answer or comment, he had begun to speak again; now seeming to have lost all his former interest in writers and writing.

'When's your next leave due?'

'In a week's time, sir.'

'It is, by God?'

I gave the exact date, unable to imagine what might be coming next.

'Go through London?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And you'd like a change from what you're doing?

'I should, sir.'

It had never struck me that General Liddament might be sufficiently interested in the individuals making up Divisional Headquarters to have noticed any such thing. Certainly, as a general, he was exceptional enough in that respect. He was also, it occurred to me, acting in contrast with Widmerpool's often propagated doctrines regarding the individual in relation to the army. His next remark was even more staggering.

'You've been very patient with us here,' he said.

Again I could think of no reply. I was also not sure he was not teasing. In one sense, certainly he was; in another, he seemed to have some project in mind. This became more explicit.

'The point is,' he said, 'people like you may be more useful elsewhere.'

'Yes, sir.'

'It's not a personal matter.'

'No, sir.'

'We live such a short time in the world, it seems a pity not to do the jobs we're suited for.'

These sentences were closer to Widmerpool's views, though more sanely interpreted; their reminder that life was dust had a flavour, too, of Sergeant Harmer's philosophy.

'I'm going to send a signal to Finn.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Ever heard of Finn?'

'No, sir.'

'Finn was with me at the end of the last war—a civilian, of course—in the City in those days.'

'Yes, sir.'

General Liddament mentioned 'the City' with that faint touch of awe, a lowering of the voice, somewhere between reverence and horror, that regular soldiers, even exceptional ones like himself, are apt to show for such mysterious, necromantic means of keeping alive.

'But he put up a good show when he was with us.'

'Yes, sir.'

'An excellent show.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Got a VC.'

'I see, sir.'

'Then, after the war, Finn gave up the City. Went into the cosmetic business—in Paris.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Made a good thing out of it.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Now he's come back here with the Free French.'

'I see, sir.'

'I understand Finn's looking for suitable officers for the work he's doing. I suggest you drop in on him during your leave. Give him my compliments. Robin will issue you with an instruction when we get back to base.'

'Robin' was Greening, the ADC.

'Shall I mention this to the DAAG, sir?'

General Liddament thought for a moment. For a split second he looked as if he were going to smile. However, his mouth finally remained at its usual enigmatically set position when in repose.

'Keep it under your hat—keep it under your hat—just as well to keep it under your hat.'

Before I could thank him, or indeed any more might be said between us, the door of the room opened violently. Brigadier Hawkins, Commanding the Divisional artillery, came in almost at a run. Tall, lean, energetic, the CRA was the officer Widmerpool had commended for 'knowing how to behave when speaking on the telephone', in contrast with Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson. Widmerpool was right about that. Brigadier Hawkins, who had seen to it the Gunner Mess was the best run in the Division, was one of the few members of its staff who set about his duties with the 'gaiety', which, according to Dicky Umfraville, Marshal Lyautey regarded as the first requirement of an officer. Both Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson and Colonel Pedlar had to be admitted to fall unequivocally short in that respect. Not so, in his peculiar way, the General, whose old friend the Brigadier was said to be.

'Glad to find you still up, sir,' he said. 'Sorry to disturb you at this hour, but you should see a report at once they've just brought in. I thought I'd come myself, to cut out a lot of chat. The Blue Force we thought encircled is moving men in driblets across the canal.'

General Liddament once more kicked away the chair from his feet, sending it sliding across the room. He picked up a map-case lying beside him, and began to clear a space on the table, littered with a pipe, tobacco, other odds and ends. Trollope—I could not see which novel he had been reading—he slipped into the thigh pocket of his battle-dress. Brigadier Hawkins began to outline the situation. I made a move to retire from their conference together.

'Wait . . .' shouted the General.

He scribbled some notes on a pad, then pointed towards me with his finger.

'Wake Robin,' he said. 'Tell him to come down at once—before dressing. Then go and alert the Defence Platoon to move forthwith.'

I went quickly up the stairs to Greening's room. He was asleep. I shook him until he was more or less awake. Greening was used to that sort of thing. He jumped out of bed as if it were a positive pleasure to put an end to sleep, be on the move again. I gave him the General's orders, then returned to the Defence Platoon in the loft. They were considerably less willing than Greening to be disturbed. In fact there was a lot of grousing. Not long after that the Movement Order was issued. Advance Headquarters set off to a new location. This was the kind of thing General Liddament thoroughly enjoyed, unexpected circumstances that required immediate action. Possibly, in its minuscule way, my own case had suggested itself to him in some such terms.

'They do never want us to have no sleep,' said Sergeant-Major Harmer, 'but at least it's all on the way home.'

The Blue Force was held in check before the time limits of the exercise ran out. In short, the battle was won. It was nearly morning when Advance Headquarters were again ordered to move, this time in preparation for our return to base. We were on this occasion brought, contrary to habit in such manœuvres, into direct contact with our own Rear Headquarters; both branches of the staff being assembled together in a large farm building, cowshed or barn, waiting there while transport arrangements went forward. It was here that the episode took place which so radically altered Widmerpool's attitude towards Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson.

Cars and trucks were being marshalled along a secondary road on the other side of a ploughed field on which drizzle was falling. A short time earlier, a message had come through from base stating that the raid during the night had done damage that would affect normal administration on return to the town. Accordingly, Colonel Pedlar had driven back at once to arrange any modification of routine that might be required. Colonel Pedlar's presence with the rest of the staff could possibly, though by no means certainly, have provided a buffer between Widmerpool and Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson. As things fell out, those two came into direct impact just before we moved off. Widmerpool, with the two other officers who normally shared the same staff car, was about to leave the cowshed where we were hanging about, sleepless and yawning, when Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson came suddenly through the doorway. He was clearly very angry, altogether unable to control the rage surging up within him. Even for a professionally bad-tempered man, he was in a notably bad temper. 'Where's the DAAG?' he shouted at the top of his voice.

Widmerpool came forward with that serious, self-important air of his, which, always giving inadequate impression of his own capabilities, was often calculated to provoke irritation in people he dealt with, even if not angry already.

'Here I am, sir.'

Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson turned on Widmerpool as if he were about to strike him.

'What the bloody hell do you think of yourself?' he asked, still speaking very loudly.

'Sir?'

Widmerpool was not in the least prepared at that moment for such an onslaught. Only a few minutes before he had been congratulating himself aloud on how successfully had gone his share of the exercise. Now he stood staring at Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson in a way that was bound to make matters worse rather than better.

'Traffic circuits!' shouted Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson. 'What in God's name have you done about them? Don't you know that's a DAAG's job? I suppose you don't. You're not fit to organise an outing for a troop of Girl Guides in the vicarage garden. Divisional Headquarters has been ordered to move back to base forthwith. Are you aware of that?'

'Certainly, sir.'

'You've read the Movement Order? Have you got as far as that?'

'Of course, sir.'

'And made appropriate arrangements?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Then why is the Medium Field Regiment coming in at right angles across our route? That's not all. It has just been reported to me that Divisional Signals, and all their technical equipment, are being held up at another cross-roads half a mile up the same road by the Motor Ambulance Convoy making a loop and entering the main traffic artery just ahead of them.'

'I talked with the DAPM about distributory roads, sir—' began Widmerpool.

'I don't want to hear who you talked to,' said Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, his voice rising quite high with fury. 'I want an immediate explanation of the infernal muddle your incompetence has made.'

If Widmerpool were not allowed to mention recommendations put forward by Keef, Captain Commanding Military Police at Div HQ, also to some extent responsible for traffic control, it was obviously impossible for him to give a clear picture of what arrangements had been made for moving the column back. Brigadier Hawkins used to advocate two sovereign phrases for parrying dissatisfaction or awkward interrogation on the part of a superior: 'I don't know, sir, I'll find out', and its even more potent alternative: 'the officer/man in question has been transferred to another unit'. On this occasion, neither of those great international army formulae of exorcism were applicable. Matters were in any case too urgent. For once, those powerful twin spells were ineffective. However, Widmerpool, as it turned out, could do far better than fall back on such indecisive rubric, however magical, to defend his own position. He possessed chapter and verse. Instead of answering at once, he allowed Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson to fume, while he himself drew from the breast pocket of his battle-dress blouse a fat little notebook. After glancing for a second or two at one of its pages, he looked up again, and immediately began to recite a detailed account of troop movements, unit by unit, throughout the immediate area of Divisional activities.

'. . . Medium Field Regiment proceeding from . . . on the move at . . . must have reached . . . in fact, sir, should already have passed that point on the road twenty minutes ago . . . Motor Ambulance Convoy . . . shouldn't be anywhere near the Royal Signals route . . . proceeding to base via one of the minor roads parallel to and south of our main body . . . I'll show you on the map in a second, sir . . . only thing I can think of is some trouble must have occurred on that narrow iron bridge crossing the canal. That bridge wasn't built for heavy traffic. I'll send a DR right away . . .'

These details showed commendable knowledge of local transport conditions. Widmerpool recapitulated a lot more in the same vein, possessing apparently the movement-tables of the entire Division, an awareness that certainly did him credit as DAAG. The information should have satisfied Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson that, whatever else could have happened, Widmerpool, at least on the face of it, was not to blame for any muddle that might have taken place. However, Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson was in no state of mind to give consideration to any such possibility; nor, indeed, to look at the problem, or anything else, in the light of reason. There was something to be said for this approach. It is no good being too philosophical about such questions as a column of troops in a traffic jam. Action is required, not explanation. Such action may have to transcend reason. Historical instances would not be difficult to find. That concept provided vindication for Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson's method, hard otherwise to excuse.

'You've made a disgraceful mess of things,' he said. 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I know we have to put up these days with a lot of amateur staff officers who've had little or no experience, and possess even less capacity for learning the ABC of military affairs. Even so, we expect something better than this. Off you go now and find out immediately what's happened. When you've done so, report back to me. Look sharp about it.'

Widmerpool's face had gone dark red. It was an occasion as painful to watch as the time when Budd had hit him between the eyes full-pitch with an overripe banana; or that moment, even more portentous, when Barbara Goring poured sugar over his head at a ball. Under the impact of those episodes, Widmerpool's bearing had indicated, under its mortification, masochistic acceptance of the assault—'that slavish look' Peter Templer had noted on the day of the banana. Under Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson's tirade, Widmerpool's demeanour proclaimed no such thing. Perhaps that was simply because Hogbourne-Johnson was not of sufficiently high rank, in comparison with Budd (then captain of the Eleven), not a person of any but local and temporary importance in the eyes of someone like Widmerpool, who thought big—in terms of the Army Council and beyond—while Barbara had invoked a passion in him which placed masochism in love's special class. All the same, the difference is worth recording.

'Right, sir,' he said.

He saluted, turned smartly on his heel (rather in the manner of one of Bithel's boyhood heroes), and tramped out of the cowshed. Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson showered a hail of minor rebukes on several others present, then went off to raise hell elsewhere. In due course, not without delays, matters were sorted out. The dispatch-rider sent by Widmerpool returned with news that one of the field ambulances, skidding in mud churned up by the passing and repassing of tanks, had wedged its back wheels in a deep ditch. Meanwhile, the Light Aid Detachment, occupied some miles away with an infantry battalion's damaged carrier tracks, was not allowed—as too heavy in weight—to cross the iron bridge mentioned by Widmerpool. The LAD had therefore been forced to make a detour. The blocked road necessitated several other traffic diversions, which resulted in the temporary hold-up. That had already been cleared up by the time the DR reached the crossroads. No one was specially to blame, certainly not Widmerpool, such accidents as that of the ambulance representing normal wear-and-tear to be expected from movement of most of the available Command transport across country where roads were few and bad.

At the same time, to be unjustly hauled over the coals about such a matter is in the nature of things, certainly military things. Incidents like this must take place all the time in the army. In due course, I was to witness generals holding impressive appointments receiving a telling-off in the briskest manner imaginable, from generals of even greater eminence, all concerned astronomically removed from the humble world of Hogbourne-Johnson and Widmerpool. All the same, it was true Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson had been violent in his denunciation, conveying strictures on what he believed to be inefficiency with a kind of personal contempt that was unfitting, something over and above an official reprimand for supposed administrative mishandling. In addition, Hogbourne-Johnson, as a rule, seemed thoroughly satisfied with Widmerpool, as Widmerpool himself had often pointed out.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the case, Widmerpool was very sore about it. He took it as badly as my former Company Commander, Rowland Gwatkin, used to take his tickings-off from the adjutant, Maelgwyn-Jones. In fact this comparatively trivial exchange between them transformed Widmerpool from an adherent of Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson—even if, in private, a condescending one—to becoming the Colonel's most implacable enemy. As it turned out, opportunity to make himself awkward arose the day we returned from the exercise. In fact, revenge was handed to Widmerpool, as it were, on a plate. This came about in connexion with Mr Diplock, Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson's chief clerk.

'Diplock may be an old rascal,' Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson himself had once commented, 'but he knows his job backwards.'

Repeating the remark later, Widmerpool had indulged in one of his rare excursions into sarcasm.

'We all know Diplock's a rascal,' he had remarked, 'and also knows his job backwards. The question is—does he know it forwards? In my own view, Diplock is one of the major impediments to the dynamic improvement of this formation.'

Mr Diplock (so styled from holding the rank of Warrant Officer, Class One) was a Regular Army Reservist, recalled to the colours at the outbreak of war. As indicating status bordering on the brink of a commissioned officer's (more highly paid than a subaltern), he was entitled to service dress of officer-type cloth (though high-collared) and shoes instead of boots. His woolly grey hair, short thick body, air of perpetual busyness, suggested an industrious gnome conscripted into the service of the army; a gnome who also liked to practise considerable malice against the race of men with whom he mingled, by making as complicated as possible every transaction they had to execute through himself. Diplock was totally encased in military obscurantism. Barker-Shaw, the FSO—as Bithel mentioned, a don in civil life—had cried out, in a moment of exasperation, that Diplock, with education behind him, could have taken on the whole of the Civil Service, collectively and individually, in manipulation of red tape; and emerged victorious. He would have outdone them all, Barker-Shaw said, in pedantic observance of regulation for its own sake to the detriment of practical requirement. Diplock's answer to such criticism was always the same: that no other way of handling the matter existed. Filling in forms, rendering 'states', the whole process of documentation, seemed to take the place of religion in his inner life. The skill he possessed in wielding army lore reached a pitch at which he could sabotage, or at least indefinitely protract, almost any matter that might have earned the disapproval of himself or any superior of whom he happened to be the partisan—in practice, Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson—while at the same time, if something administratively unusual had to be arranged, Diplock always said he knew how to arrange it. This self-confidence, on the whole justified, was perhaps the main reason why Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson was so well affected towards his chief clerk. The other was no doubt the parade of deference—of a deeper, better understood sort than Cocksidge's—that Diplock, in return, offered to

Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson. Diplock's methods had always irritated Widmerpool, although himself no enemy to formal routine as a rule.

'I told Hogbourne-Johnson in so many words this morning that we should never get anything done here so long as we had a chief clerk who was such an old woman. Do you know what he said?'

Although Widmerpool prided himself on his own grasp of army life, he had not been able wholly to jettison the more civilian approach, that you are paid to give advice to your superiors in whatever happens to be a specialised aspect of your particular job; that such advice should be presented in the plainest, most forceful terms. He never quite became accustomed to a tradition that aims at total self-effacement in the subordinate, more especially when his professional recommendations are controversial.

'What was the answer?'

'"Diplock wasn't an old woman when he won the Military Medal".'

'How does he know?—some old women are very tough.'

'I replied in the most respectful manner that Diplock won the MM a long time ago,' said Widmerpool, ignoring this facetiousness. 'That I was only referring to his present fumbling about with ACIs, Ten-Ninety-Eights, every other bit of bumph he can lay his hands on, especially when something is needed in a hurry. I suppose Hogbourne-Johnson thought he was snubbing me. He gave that curious snarling laugh of his.'

This slight brush had taken place before Widmerpool's more disastrous encounter with the Colonel. It illustrated not only Widmerpool's retention, in certain respects, of civilian values, but also his occasional lack of grasp of some quite obvious matter. Even in civilian life, a frontal attack would have been ill-judged in approaching a relationship in a business firm such as Hogbourne-Johnson's with Diplock. It was not going to alter the stranglehold Diplock enjoyed on Hogbourne-Johnson. At the same time, the fact that Widmerpool felt it possible to offer that remark about Diplock at all, absolved him from any suggestion of later deliberately assailing the Colonel through insidious attack by way of his own chief clerk. Widmerpool had already decided Diplock was unsatisfactory. When the time came, of course, he was not blind to pleasure derived from that method, but he did not contrive it of sheer malice. Once the ball was rolling, as DAAG, he had no alternative but to follow up suspicions aroused.

That even the lightest of such suspicions should have come into being on the subject of Mr Diplock behaving in an irregular manner might seem out of the question; far less, that there should be indications he was embezzling government funds. However, that was how things began to look. Possibly so much rectitude in observing the letter of the law in matters of daily routine required, psychologically speaking, release in another direction. General Conyers had been fond of expatiating on something of the sort. Anyway, the affair opened by Widmerpool saying one day, soon after the three-day exercise, that he was not satisfied with the financial administration of the HQ Sergeants' Mess.

'Something funny is going on there,' he said. 'Diplock is at the bottom of it, I'm sure. I've told those Mess treasurers time and again to take the bottle from the cellar account and charge it to the bar account. They never seem to understand. In Diplock's case, it looks to me as if he *won't* understand.'

These doubts were not set at rest as the weeks passed.

Not long after Widmerpool made this comment, several small sums of money disappeared from places where they had been deposited.

'I've recommended that cash-boxes be screwed to the floor,' said Widmerpool. 'At least you know then where they've been left. Diplock put all sorts of difficulties in the way, but I insisted.'

'Have you mentioned these losses higher up?'

'I had a word with Pedlar, who didn't at all agree with what I am beginning to wonder—I try to have as few direct dealings as possible now with Hogbourne-Johnson. I am well aware I should not receive a sympathetic hearing there. It will be a smack in the eye for him if my suspicions turn out to be correct.'

Then it appeared, in addition to the Sergeants' Mess, something unsatisfactory was afoot in connexion with the Commuted Ration Allowance.

'Mark my words,' said Widmerpool. 'This is all going to link up. What I require is evidence. As a start, you will go out to the Supply Column tomorrow and make a few enquiries. I must have facts and figures. As you are to be travelling in that direction, it will be a good opportunity to explain those instructions I have here just issued to RASC sub-units. You can go on to the Ammunition Company and the Petrol Company, after you've gathered the other information. Take haversack rations, as they're some distance apart, and the other thing will need some little time to extract. There may be lack of co-operation. CRASC has been difficult ever since the business of those trucks, which I was, in fact, putting to a perfectly legitimate use.'

At one time or another, Widmerpool had quarrelled with most of the officers at Divisional Headquarters. The row with CRASC—Commanding Royal Army Service Corps at

HQ, a lieutenant-colonel—had been about employment of government transport on some occasion when interpretation of regulations was in doubt. It had been a drawn battle, like that with Sunny Farebrother. Widmerpool's taste for conflict seemed to put him less at a disadvantage than might be supposed. His undoubted reputation for efficiency had indeed been to some extent built up on being regarded as a difficult man to deal with; rather than on much more deserved respect for the plodding away at unspectacular work to which he used to devote himself every night in his own office. Personal popularity is an asset easy to exaggerate in the transaction of practical affairs. Possibly it can even be a handicap. The fact that Widmerpool was brusque with everyone he met, even actively disobliging to most, never seemed in the last resort to weaken his position. However the Diplock affair was rather a different matter.

Enquiries at the quarters of the Supply Column indicated that, as Widmerpool supposed, all was not well. His feud with CRASC had certainly penetrated there, if unwillingness to spare time to impart information was anything to judge by. I left the place with a clearer understanding of my father's strictures, in the distant past, regarding Uncle Giles's transference to the Army Service Corps. However, certain essential details were now to some extent available. There could be no doubt that, at best, existing arrangements, so far as the Sergeants' Mess was concerned, were in disorder; at worst, something more serious was taking place in which Diplock might be involved. I brought back the material required by Widmerpool that evening.

'Just as I thought,' he said, 'I'll go and have a word with A & Q right away.'

Widmerpool stayed a long time with Colonel Pedlar. He had told me to wait until his return, in case further information collected during the day might be needed. When he came back to the room his expression immediately showed that he regarded the interview to have been unsatisfactory.

'Things will have to be looked into further,' he said. 'Pedlar's still unwilling to believe anything criminal is taking place. I don't agree with him. Just run through what they told you again.'

It was nearly dinner time when I arrived back that night at F Mess. I went to the bedroom to change into service dress. When I came down the stairs, the rest of them were going into the room where we ate.

'Buck up, Jenkins,' said Biggs, 'or you'll miss all the lovely bits of gristle Sopey's been collecting from the swill tubs all the afternoon for us to gnaw. Wonder he has the cheek to put the stuff he does in front of a man.'

He was in one of his noisy moods that night. When Biggs felt cheerful—which was not often—he liked to shout and indulge in horseplay. This usually took the form of ragging Soper, the Divisional Catering Officer. Soper, also a captain with '14–'18 ribbons, was short and bandy-legged, which, with heavy eyebrows and deep-set shifty eyes, gave him a simian appearance that for some reason suggested a professional comedian. In civil life one of the managers, on the supply side, of a chain of provincial restaurants, he was immersed in his work as DCO, never in fact making a remark that in the least fitted in with his promisingly slapstick appearance, or even one to be classed as a joke. Off duty he talked of scarcely any subject but army allowances. Biggs and Soper to some extent reproduced, at their lower level, the relationship of Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson and Colonel Pedlar in the General's Mess; that is to say they grated on each other's nerves, but, as twin veterans of the earlier war, maintained some sort of uneasy alliance. This bond was strengthened by a fellow feeling engendered by the relatively unexalted nature of their own appointments, both being much on their dignity where the 'G' staff—'operational' in duties—was concerned. There was, however, this important deviation in their reflection of the two colonels' relationship, for, although Biggs, aggressive and strident, so to speak bullied Soper (like Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson oppressing Colonel Pedlar), it was Soper who, vis-à-vis Biggs, enjoyed the role of man of the world, pundit of a wider sophistication. For example, Soper's knowingness about food—albeit army food—impressed Biggs, however unwillingly.

'How are the diet sheets, Sopey?' said Biggs, belching as he sat down. 'When are you going to give us a decent bit of beefsteak for a change? Can you tell me that?'

Soper showed little or no interest in this enquiry, certainly predominantly rhetorical in character. He had picked up a fork, from which he was removing with his thumbnail a speck of dried vegetable matter that adhered to the handle.

'Wouldn't you like to know,' was all he replied, adding to the table in general, 'Suppose if I complain about the washing up, we'll just be told there's not enough water.'

The raid that had taken place while we were on the Command exercise had damaged one of the local mains, so that F Mess was suffering from a water shortage; produced as excuse for every inadequacy in the kitchen.

'What do you say, Doc?' said Biggs, turning in the other direction. 'Couldn't you do with a nice cut of rump steak with a drop of blood on it? I know I could. Makes my mouth water, the thought. I'd just about gobble it up.'

Macfie, DADMS, a regular Royal Army Medical Corps major, who had seen some pre-war service in India, gaunt, glum, ungenial, rarely spoke at meals or indeed at any other time. Now, glancing at Biggs with something like aversion, he made no answer beyond jerking his head slightly a couple of times before returning to the typewritten report he was thumbing over. No one among the two or three others at the table seemed any more disposed to comment.

'Come on, Doc, give the VD stats a rest at mealtimes,' said Biggs, who had perhaps drunk more beer than usual before dinner. 'God, I'm looking forward to some grub. Feel as empty as a bloody drum.'

He began stamping his feet loudly on the bare boards of the floor, at the same time banging with his clenched fists on the table.

'Buck up, waiter!' he shouted. 'When are we going to get something to eat, you slow bugger?'

'I want to swop night duty tomorrow,' said Soper. 'Take it on, Jenkins?'

'Mine's next Friday.'

'That'll do me.'

'They won't change the system again?'

'I'll act for you even if they do.'

'OK.'

Soper had caught me out once on a reorganised Duty Roster, avoiding my turn for night duty as well as his own. He was sharp on matters of that kind. I did not want to fall for a second confidence trick. Biggs ceased his tattoo on the surface of the table.

'Couldn't get a bloody staff car all day,' he said. 'I've a good mind to put in a report to A & Q.'

'Fat lot of good that would do,' said Soper.

He seemed satisfied now the fork was fairly clean, replacing it by the side of his plate. A spoon now attracted his attention.

'Organising that bloody boxing next week's going to be a bugger,' said Biggs. 'Don't have an easy life like you, Sopey, you old sod, driving round the units in state and tasting the sea-pie and Bisto. Hope this bloody beef isn't as tough tonight as it was yesterday. I'll be after you, Sopey, if it is. God, what a day it's been. A & Q on my tail all the time about that bloody boxing, and Colonel H-J giving me the hell of a rocket about a lot of training pamphlets I'd never heard of. He came through on the blower after I'd locked the safe and was looking forward to downing a pint. I'm just about brassed off, I can tell you. Went to see Bithel of the Mobile Laundry this afternoon. He's a funny bugger, if ever there was one. We had a pint together all the same. He soaks up that porter pretty easy. It was about one of his chaps that's done a bit of boxing. Might represent Div HQ, if he's the right weight. We could win that boxing compo, you know. That would put me right with Colonel H-J. Command's best welterweight had a bomb dropped on him in the blitz the other night, when they hit the barracks. Gives us a chance.'

Plates of meat were handed round by a waiter.

'Potatoes, sir?'

I was thinking of other things; thinking, to be precise, that I could do with a bottle of wine, then and there, however rough or sour. The Mess waiter was holding a dish towards me. I took a potato; then, for some reason, looked up at him. His enquiry, though quietly made, had penetrated incisively into these fantasies of the grape, cutting a neat channel, as it were, through both vinous daydreams and a powerful conversational ambience generated by Biggs in his present mood. I glanced at the waiter's face for a second, then looked away, feeling, as I took a second potato, faintly, indeterminately uneasy. The soldier was tall and thin, about my own age apparently, with a pale, washed-out complexion, high forehead, dark hair receding at the temples and slightly greying. Bloodshot eyes, with dark, bluish rims, were alive, but gave at the same time an impression of poor health, this vitiated look increased by the fact of a battle-dress blouse with a collar too big in circumference for a long thin neck. I replaced the spoon in the potato dish, still aware of a certain inner discomfort. The waiter moved on to Biggs, who took four potatoes, examining each in turn, as, one after another, they rolled on to his plate, splashing gravy on the cloth. I followed the waiter with my eyes, while he offered the dish to Macfie.

'Spuds uneatable again,' said Biggs. 'Like bloody golf balls. They haven't been done long enough. That's all about it. Here, waiter, tell the chef, with my compliments, that he bloody well doesn't know how to cook water.'

'I will, sir.'

'And he can stick these spuds up his arse.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Repeat to him just what I've said.'

'Certainly, sir.'

'Where's he to stick the spuds?'

'Up his arse, sir.'

'Bugger off and tell him.'

So far as cooking potatoes went, I was wholly in agreement with Biggs. However, purely gastronomic considerations were submerged in confirmation of a preliminary impression; an impression upsetting, indeed horrifying, but correct. There could no longer be any doubt of that.

What I had instantaneously supposed, then dismissed as inconceivable, was, on closer examination, no longer to be denied. The waiter was Stringham. He was about to go through to the kitchen to deliver Biggs's message to the cook, when Soper stopped him.

'Half a tick,' said Soper. 'Who laid the table?'

'I did, sir.'

'Where's the salt?'

'I'll get some salt, sir.'

'Why didn't you put any salt out?'

'I'm afraid I forgot, sir.'

'Don't forget again.'

'I'll try not to, sir.'

'I didn't say try not to, I said don't.'

'I won't, sir.'

'Haven't they got any cruets in the Ritz?' said Biggs. 'Hand the pepper and salt round personally to all the guests, I suppose.'

'Mustard, sir—French, English, possibly some other more obscure brands—so far as I remember, sir, rather than salt and pepper,' said Stringham, 'but handing round the latter too could be a good idea.'

He went out of the room to find the salt, and tell the cook what Biggs thought about the cooking. Soper turned to Biggs. He was plainly glad of this opportunity to put the SOPT in his place.

'Don't show your ignorance, Biggy,' he said. 'Handing salt round at the Ritz. I ask you. You'll be going into the Savoy next for a plate of fish and chips or baked beans and a cup o' char.'

'That's no reason why we shouldn't have any salt here, is it?' said Biggs.

He spoke belligerently, disinclined for once to accept

Soper as social mentor, even where a matter so familiar to the DCO as restaurant administration was in question.

'Something wrong with that bloke,' he went on. 'Man's potty. You can see it. Hear what he said just now? Talks in that la-di-da voice. Why did he come to this Mess? What happened to Robbins? Robbins wasn't much to look at, but at least he knew you wanted salt.'

'Gone to hospital with rupture,' said Soper. 'This one's a replacement for Robbins. Can't be much worse, if you ask me.'

'This one'll have to be invalided too,' said Biggs. 'Only got to look at him to see that. Bet I'm right. No good having a lot of crazy buggers about, even as waiters. Got to get hold of blokes who are fit for something. Jesus, what an army.'

'Always a business finding a decent Mess waiter,' said Soper. 'Can't be picking and choosing all the time. Have to take what you're bloody well offered.'

'Don't like the look of this chap,' said Biggs. 'Gets me down, that awful pasty face. Can't stick it. Reckon he tosses off too much, that's what's wrong with him, I shouldn't wonder. You can always tell the type.'

From the rubber valve formed by pressure together of upper and lower lip, he unexpectedly ejected a small morsel of fat, discharging this particle with notable accuracy of aim on to the extreme margin of his plate, just beyond the potatoes left uneaten. It was a first-rate shot of its kind.

'When did the new waiter arrive?' I asked.

Nothing was to be gained by revealing previous acquaintance with Stringham.

'Started here at lunch today,' said Soper.

'I've run across him before,' said Biggs.

'At Div HQ?'

'One of the fatigue party fixing up the boxing ring,' said Biggs. 'Ever so grand the way he talks, you wouldn't believe. Needs taking down a peg or two in my opinion. That's why I asked him about the Ritz. Don't expect he's ever been inside the Ritz more than I have.'

Soper did not immediately comment. He stared thoughtfully at the scrap of meat rejected by Biggs, either to imply censure of too free and easy table manners, or, in official capacity as DCO, professionally assessing the nutritive value of that particular cube of fat—and its waste—in wartime. Macfie also gave Biggs a severe glance, rustling his typewritten report admonishingly, as he propped the sheets against the water jug, the better to absorb their contents while he ate.

'He'll do as a waiter so long as we keep him up to the mark,' said Soper, after a while. 'You're always grousing about something, Biggy. If it isn't one thing, it's another. Why don't you put a bloody sock in it?'

'There's enough to grouse about in this bloody Mess, isn't there?' said Biggs, his mouth full of beef and cabbage, but still determined to carry the war into Soper's country. 'Greens stewed in monkeys' pee and pepper as per usual.'

Stringham had returned by this time with the salt. Dinner proceeded along normal lines. Food, however unsatisfactorily cooked, always produced a calming effect on Biggs, so that his clamour gradually died down. Once I caught Stringham's eye, and thought he gave a faint smile to himself. Nothing much was said by anyone during the rest of the meal. It came to an end. We moved to the anteroom. Later, when preparing to return to the DAAG's office, I saw Stringham leave the house by the back door. He was accompanied by a squat, swarthy lance-corporal, no doubt the cook so violently stigmatised by Biggs. At Headquarters, when I got back there, Widmerpool was already in his room, going through a pile of papers. I told him about the appearance of Stringham in F Mess. He listened, showing increasing signs of uneasiness and irritation.

'Why on earth does Stringham want to come here?'

'Don't ask me.'

'He might easily prove a source of embarrassment if he gets into trouble.'

'There's no particular reason to suppose he'll get into trouble, is there? The embarrassment is for me, having him as a waiter in F Mess.'

'Stringham was a badly behaved boy at school,' said Widmerpool. 'You must remember that. You knew him much better than I did. He took to drink early in life, didn't he? I recall at least one very awkward incident when I myself had to put him to bed after he had had too much.'

'I was there too—but he is said to have been cured of drink.'

'You can never be sure with alcoholics.'

'Perhaps he could be fixed up with a better job.'

'But being a Mess waiter is one of the best jobs in the army,' said Widmerpool impatiently. 'It's not much inferior to sanitary lance-corporal. In that respect he has nothing whatever to grumble about.'

'So far as I know, he isn't grumbling. I only meant one might help in some way.'

'In what way?'

'I can't think at the moment. There must be something.'

'I have always been told,' said Widmerpool, '—and rightly told—that it is a great mistake in the army, or indeed elsewhere, to allow personal feelings about individuals to affect my conduct towards them professionally. I mentioned this to you before in connexion with

Corporal Mantle. Mind your own business is a golden rule for a staff officer.'

'But you're not minding your own business about who's to command the Recce Corps.'

'That is quite different,' said Widmerpool. 'In a sense the command of the Recce Corps *is* my business—though perhaps someone like yourself cannot see that. The point is this. Why should Stringham have some sort of preferential treatment just because you and I happen to have been at school with him? That is exactly what people complain about—and with good reason. You must be aware that such an attitude of mind—that certain persons have a right to a privileged existence—causes a lot of ill feeling among those less fortunately placed. War is a great opportunity for everyone to find his level. I am a major—you are a second-lieutenant—he is a private. I have no doubt that you and I will achieve promotion. So far as you are concerned, you will in any case receive a second pip automatically at the conclusion of eighteen months' service as an officer, which in your case cannot be far off by now. I think I can safely say that my own rank will not much longer be denoted by a mere crown. Of Stringham, I feel less certain. A private soldier he is, and, in my opinion, a private soldier he will remain.'

'All the more reason for trying to find him a suitable billet. It can't be much fun handing round the vegetables in F Mess twice a day.'

'We are not in the army to have fun, Nicholas.'

I accepted the rebuke, and said no more about Stringham. However, that night in bed, I reflected further on his arrival at Div HQ. We had not met for years; not since the party his mother had given for Moreland's symphony—where all the trouble had started about

Moreland and my sister-in-law, Priscilla. Priscilla, as it happened, was in the news once more, from the point of view of her family. Rumours were going round that, separated from Chips Lovell by the circumstances of war, she was not showing much discretion about her behaviour. A 'fighter-pilot' was said often to be seen with her, this figment, in another version, taking the form of a 'commando', loose use of the term to designate an individual, rather the unit's collective noun. However, all that was by the way. The last heard of Stringham himself had been from his sister, Flavia Wisebite, who had described her brother as cured of drink and serving in the army. At least the second of these two statements was now proved true. It was to be hoped the first was equally reliable. Meanwhile, there could be no doubt it was best to conceal the fact that we knew each other. Widmerpool also agreed on this point, when he himself brought up the subject again the following day. He too appeared to have pondered the matter during the night.

'So you think something else should be found for Stringham?' he asked that afternoon.

'I do.'

'I'll give my mind to it,' he said, speaking more soberly than on the earlier occasion. 'In the meantime, we are none of us called upon to do more than fulfil the duties of our respective ranks and appointments, vegetables or no vegetables. Now go and find out from the DAPM whether he has proceeded with the enquiries to be made in connexion with Diplock and his dealings. Get cracking. We can't talk about Stringham all day.'

So far as Stringham's employment in F Mess was concerned, nothing of note happened during the next day or two. On the whole he did what was required of him with competence—certainly better than Robbins—though he would sometimes unsmilingly raise his eyebrows when waiting on me personally. For one reason or another, circumstances always prevented speech between us. I began to think we might not be able to find an opportunity to talk together before I went on leave. Then one evening, on the way back to F Mess from Headquarters, I saw Stringham coming towards me in the twilight. He saluted, looking straight ahead of him, was going to pass on, when I put out a hand.

'Charles.'

'Hullo, Nick.'

'This is extraordinary.'

'What is?'

'Your turning up here.'

'What makes you think so?'

'Let's get off the main road.'

'If you like.'

We went down into a kind of alley-way, leading to a block of office buildings or factory works, now closed for the night.

'What's been happening to you, Charles?'

'As you see, I've become a waiter in F Mess. I always used to wonder what it felt like to be a waiter. Now I know with immense precision.'

'But how did it all come about?'

'How does anything come about in the army?'

'When did you join, for instance?'

'Too long ago to remember—right at the beginning of the Hundred Years War. After enlisting in my first gallant and glorious corps, and serving at their depot, I managed to exchange into the infantry, and got posted to this melancholy spot. You know how—to use a picturesque army phrase—one gets arsed around. I don't expect that happens any less as an officer. When the Royal Army Ordnance Corps took me to its stalwart bosom, I was not medically graded A.1.—which explains why in the past one's so often woken up feeling like the wrath of God—so I got drafted to Div HQ, a typical example of the odds and sods who fetch up at a place like that. Hearing there was a job going as waiter in F Mess, I applied in triplicate. My candidature was graciously confirmed by Captain Soper. That's the whole story.'

'But isn't—can't we find something better for you?'

'What sort of thing?'

That had been Widmerpool's question too. Stringham asked it without showing the smallest wish for change, only curiosity at what might be put forward.

'I don't know. I thought there might be something.'

'Don't you feel I'm quite up to the mark as waiter?' he said. 'Nick, you fill me with apprehension. Surely you are not on the side of Captain Biggs, who, I realise, does not care for my personality. I thought I was doing so well. I admit failure about the salt. I absolutely acknowledge the machine broke down at that point. All the same, such slips befall the most practised. I remember when the Duke of Connaught lunched with my former in-laws, the Bridgnorths, the butler, a retainer of many years' standing, no mere neophyte like myself, offered him macaroni cheese without having previously provided His Royal Highness with a plate to eat it off. I shall never forget my ex-father-in-law's face, richly tinted at the best of times—my late brother-in-law, Harrison Wisebite, used to say Lord Bridgnorth's complexion recalled Our Artist's Impression of the Hudson in the Fall. On that occasion it was more like the Dutch bulb fields in bloom. No, forget about the salt, Nick. We all make mistakes. I shall improve with habit.'

'I don't mean——'

'Between you and me, Nick, I think I have it in me to make a first-class Mess waiter. The talent is there. It's just a question of developing latent ability. I never dreamed I possessed such potentialities. It's been marvellous to release them.'

'I know, but——'

'You don't like my style? You feel I lack polish?'

'I wasn't——'

'After all, you must agree it's preferable to hand Captain Biggs his food, and retire to the kitchen with Lance-Corporal Gwither, rather than sit with the Captain throughout the meal, to have to watch him masticate, day in day out. Gwither, on the other hand, is a delightful companion. He was a plasterer's mate before he joined the army, and, whatever Captain Biggs may say to the contrary, is rapidly learning to cook as an alternative. In addition to that, Nick, I understand you yourself work for our old schoolmate, Widmerpool. You're not going to try and swop jobs, are you? If so, it isn't on. How did your Widmerpool connexion come about, anyway?'

I explained my transference from battalion to Div HQ had been the result of Widmerpool applying for me by name as his assistant. Stringham listened, laughing from time to time.

'Look, Charles, let's fix up dinner one night. A Saturday, preferably, when most of the stuff at the DAAG's office has been cleared up after the week's exercise. We've a mass of things to talk about.'

'My dear boy, are you forgetting our difference in rank?'

'No one bothers about that off duty. How could they? London restaurants are packed with officers and Other

Ranks at the same table. Life would be impossible otherwise. My own brothers-in-law, for example, range from George, a major, to Hugo, a lance-bombardier. We needn't dine at the big hotel, such as it is, if you prefer a quieter place.'

'I didn't really mean that, Nick. I know perfectly well, in practice, we could dine together—even though you would probably have to pay, as I'm not particularly flush at the moment. It isn't that. I just don't feel like it. Dining with you would spoil the rhythm so far as I'm concerned. I wouldn't go so far as to say I'm actively enjoying what I'm doing at the moment—but then how little of one's life has ever been actively enjoyable. At the same time, what I'm doing is what I've chosen to do. Even what I want to do, if it comes to that. Up to a point it suits me. I've become awfully odd these days. Perhaps I always was odd. Anyway, that's beside the point. How I drone on about myself. Talking of your relations, though, I heard your brother-in-law, Robert Tolland, was killed.'

'Poor Robert. In the fighting round the Channel ports.'

'Awfully chic to be killed.'

'I suppose so.'

'Oh, yes, of course. You can't beat it. Smart as hell. Fell in action. I'm always struck by that phrase. Seems absolutely no chance of action here, unless Captain Biggs draws a gun on me for handing him the brussels sprouts the wrong side, or spilling gravy on that bald head of his. You know Robert Tolland was running round with my sister, Flavia, before he went to France and his doom. You never met Flavia, did you?'

'Saw her and Robert together when I was on leave last year.'

'Flavia never has any luck with husbands and lovers.

Think of being married to Cosmo Flitton and Harrison Wisebite in quick succession. Why, I'd make a better husband myself. No doubt you heard at the same time that my mother's parted company with Buster Foxe. She's having money troubles at the moment. One of the reasons why Buster packed up. I'm feeling the draught myself. Decided shortage of ready cash. My father left what halfpence he had to that French wife of his, supposing, quite mistakenly, Mama would always be in a position to shell out.'

'Your mother's at Glimber?'

'Good God, no. Glimber has some ministry evacuated there, so that's one problem off her hands. She's living in a labourer's cottage near a camp in Essex to be near Norman—you remember, her little dancer. At one moment she was getting up at half-past five every morning to cook his breakfast. There's devotion for you. Norman's going to an OCTU. Won't he look wonderful in a Sam Browne belt—that waist. Of course by the nature of things he can only be a son to her—a better son than her own, I fear—and in any case living with Norman in a cottage must be infinitely preferable to Buster in a castle, even allowing for the early rising. How sententious one gets. Just the sort of conclusion Tennyson was always coming to. You know, talking of the Victorians, I've taken to reading Browning.'

'Our General reads Trollope—the Victorians are obviously the fashion in this Division.'

'It was Tuffy who started me off on him. Rather a surprising taste for her in a way. You remember Tuffy? Nick, you make me talk of old times.'

'Miss Weedon—of course.'

'Tuffy cured me of the booze. Then, having done that, she got bored with me. I see the point, there was nothing more to do. I mean I was going to prove absolutely impossible to set up as a serious member of civilised society. Stopping drinking alone was sufficient to ensure that. Even I myself grasped I'd become the most desperate of bores by being permanently sober. Then the war came along and I began to develop all sorts of martial ambitions. Tuffy didn't really approve of them, although the fact they were even within the bounds of possibility so far as I was concerned was a considerable tribute to herself. She saw, all the same, one way or another, I was going to escape her clutches. The long and the short of it was, I entered the army, while Tuffy married an octogenarian—perhaps by now even nonagenarian—general. Just the age when you get into your stride as a soldier. They'll probably appoint him CIGS.'

'You're out of touch. Generals are frightfully young nowadays. Widmerpool will be one at any moment. Anyway, they might do worse than employ General Conyers. I've known him for years.'

'My dear Nick, you know everybody. Not a social item escapes you. I myself can no longer keep up with births, marriages and deaths—well, deaths now and then perhaps, but not births and marriages. That's why being in the ranks suits me. No strain in that particular respect. Nobody asks you if you read in this morning's *Times* that so-and-so's engaged or somebody else is getting a divorce. All that had begun to get me down for some reason. Make me tired. Anyway, to hark back to the long and wearisome story of my own life, the point was that Tuffy, like everyone else, had had enough of me. She wanted another sphere in which to exercise her tireless remedial activities. That was why I took the shilling:

I 'listed at home for a lancer,
Oh who would not sleep with the brave?

I am not, as your familiarity with military insignia will already have proclaimed, strictly speaking a lancer—just as well, for these days I couldn't possibly take part in those musical rides lancers are always performing at the Military Tournament and places like that . . . haven't sat on a horse for years . . .'

Stringham paused a moment, beginning now to hum a bar or two of a jerky tune, the sort to which riders at a Horse Show might canter round the paddock.

'So-let-each-cavalier-who-loves-honour-and-me
Come-follow-the-bonnets-of-Bonny-Dundee . . .'

He curled his wrists slightly, lifting them in the air as if holding reins. He seemed far away, to have forgotten completely that we were talking. I wondered how sane he remained. Then he came suddenly back to himself.

'. . . What was I saying? Oh, yes, A. E. Housman, of course . . . not my favourite poet, as a matter of fact, but that was just what happened . . . though I hasten to add I sleep with the brave only in the sense of dormitory accommodation. To tell the truth, Nick, I had the greatest difficulty in extracting the metaphorical shilling from an equally metaphorical Recruiting Sergeant. No magnificent figure with a bunch of ribbons in his cap, but several rather seedy characters in a stuffy office drinking cups of tea. Even so, they wouldn't look at me when I first breezed in. Then the war took a turn for the worse, in Norway and elsewhere, and they saw they'd need Stringham after all. One of the reasons I left the RAOC is that they have a peculiarly trying warrant rank called Conductor—just as if you were on a bus—so I made the exchange I spoke of. What a fascinating place the army is. Before I joined, I thought all you had to do when you fired a rifle was to get your eye and the sights and the target all in one line and then blaze away. The army has produced a whole book about it, a fat little volume. But my egotism is insufferable, Nick. Tell me about yourself. What have you been doing? How are you reacting to it all? You look a trifle harassed, if I may say so. Not surprising, working with Widmerpool.'

Stringham himself looked ill, though not in the least harassed.

'On top of everything else,' he said, 'one's getting frightfully old. Do you think I shall qualify as a Chelsea pensioner after the war? I'd like one of those red frockcoats, though I've never cared for Chelsea as a neighbourhood. No leanings whatever towards bohemian life. However, one may come to both before one's finished—residence in Chelsea and a bohemian to boot. You know I've been thinking a lot about myself lately, when scrubbing the floors and that sort of thing—an activity for some reason I often find myself quite enjoying—and I've come to the conclusion I'm narcissistic, mad about myself. That's why my marriage went wrong. I really was awfully glad when it was over.'

'Do you do anything about girls now?'

'Seem to have lost all interest. Isn't that strange? You know how it is. My great amusement now is trying to get things straight in my own mind. That takes me all my time, as you can imagine. The more I think, the less I know. Funny, isn't it? Talking of girls, what happened to our old pal, Peter Templer? Do you remember how he used to go on about girls?'

'Peter's said to have some government job to do with finance.'

'Not in the army?'

'Not so far as I know.'

'How like Peter. Always full of good sense, in his own way, though many people never guessed that at first. Married?'

'First wife ran away—second one, he appears to have driven mad.'

'Has he?' said Stringham. 'Well, I daresay I might have driven Peggy mad, had we not gone our separate ways. Talking of separate ways, I'll have to be getting back to my cosy barrack-room, or I'll be on a charge. It's late.'

'Won't you really dine one night?'

'No, Nick, no. Better not, on the whole. I won't salute, if you'll forgive such informality, as no one seems to be about. Nice to have had a talk.'

He moved away before there was time even to say good-night, walking quickly up the path leading to the main thoroughfare. I followed at less speed. By the time I reached the road at the top of the alley, Stringham was already out of sight in the gloom. I turned again in the direction of F Mess. This reunion with an old friend had been the reverse of enjoyable, indeed upsetting, painful to a degree. I tried to imagine what Stringham's present existence must be like, but could reconstruct in the mind only superficial aspects, those which least disturbed, probably even stimulated him. I felt more than ever glad a week's leave lay ahead of me, one of those curious escapes that in wartime punctuate army life, far more than a 'holiday', comparable rather with brief and magical entries into another incarnation.

Widmerpool did not like anyone going on leave, least of all his own subordinates. In justice to this attitude, he appeared to treat his own leaves chiefly as opportunities for extending freedom of contact with persons who might further his military career, working scarcely less industriously than when on duty. I should be in no position to criticise him in that respect, if General Liddament fulfilled his promise in relation to this particular leave, during which I too hoped to better my own condition. However, it was probable the General had forgotten about his remarks during the exercise. The tactical upheaval which immediately followed our talk would certainly have justified that. I had begun to wonder whether I ought to remind him, and, if so, how this should be effected. However, by the morning after the encounter with Stringham, I had still taken no step in that direction; nor had I mentioned the meeting to Widmerpool, who was, as it happened, in a peevish mood.

'When do you begin this leave of yours?' he asked.

'Tomorrow.'

'I thought it was the day after.'

'Tomorrow.'

'If you see your relations, the Jeavonses, it's as well for you to know their sister-in-law staying as a paying guest in my mother's cottage wasn't a success. My mother decided she'd rather have evacuees.'

'Has she got evacuees?'

'She had some for a short time,' said Widmerpool, 'then they went back to London. They were absolutely ungrateful.'

He talked of his mother less than formerly, even giving an impression from time to time that Mrs Widmerpool's problems had begun to irritate him, that he felt she was becoming a millstone round his neck. Widmerpool had been on edge for several days past owing to the Diplock affair turning out to be so much more complicated than appeared on first examination. Diplock had brought all his own notable powers of causing confusion to bear, darkening the waters round him like a cuttlefish, so that evidence was hard to collect. Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, for his part, made no secret of regarding Widmerpool's attempted impeachment of his chief clerk as nothing more nor less than a personal attack on himself. Indeed, Widmerpool could not have hit on a more wounding method of revenging himself on the Colonel, if his suspicions about Diplock were in due course to be substantiated. On the other hand, there was likely to be trouble if nothing more could be proved than that Diplock had been in the habit of keeping rather muddled accounts. Greening, the General's ADC, came into the DAAG's room at that moment. He handed me a small slip of paper.

'His Nibs says you know about this,' he said.

Greening, although he blushed easily, was otherwise totally unselfconscious. He was inclined to express himself in a curious, outdated schoolboy slang that sounded as if it had been picked up from some favourite book in childhood. Probably this habit appealed to General Liddament's taste for a touch of the exotic in his entourage. He may even have encouraged Greening in vagaries of speech, an extension of his own Old English. The piece of paper was inscribed with the typewritten words 'Major L. Finn, VC', followed by the name of a Territorial regiment and a telephone number. I saw I had underrated General Liddament's capacity for detail.

'Not much he forgets about,' said Greening, with artless curiosity. 'What is it?'

ADCs are a category of officer usually disparaged in popular scrutiny of military matters. On the whole, they are no worse than most, better than many; while the job they do is the best possible training, if they are likely to rise in the world. Greening was, of course, not the sort likely to rise very far.

'Just a message to be delivered in London.'

Widmerpool looked up from the file in which he was writing away busily.

'What is that?'

'Something for the General.'

'What are you to do?'

'Telephone this officer.'

'What officer?'

'A Major Finn.'

'And say what?'

'Give him the General's compliments.'

'Nothing else?'

'See what he says.'

'Sounds odd.'

'That's what the General said.'

'Let me see.'

I handed him the paper.

'Finn?' he said. 'It's a Whitehall number.'

'So I see.'

'A VC.'

'Yes.'

'I seem to know the name—Finn. Sure I know it. When did the General tell you to do this?'

'On the last Command exercise.'

'At what moment?'

'After dinner on the last night.'

'Did he say anything else?'

'He talked about Trollope—and Balzac.'

'The authors?'

I was tempted to reply, 'No--the generals,' but discretion prevailed.

'You seem to be on very intimate terms with the Divisional Commander,' said Widmerpool sourly. 'Well, let me tell you that you will return from leave to find a pile of work. Are you waiting for something, Greening?'

'The General bade me discourse fair words to you, sir, anent traffic circuits.'

'What the hell do you mean?'

'I don't know, sir,' said Greening. 'That's exactly how the General put it.'

Widmerpool did not answer. Greening went away. He was one of the most agreeable officers at those Headquarters. I never saw him much except on exercises. Towards the end of the war, I heard, in a roundabout way, that, after return to his regiment, he had been badly wounded at Anzio as a company commander and—so my informant thought—might have died in hospital.

2

Sullen reverberations of one kind or another—blitz in England, withdrawal in Greece—had been providing the most recent noises-off in rehearsals that never seemed to end, breeding a wish that the billed performance would at last ring up its curtain, whatever form that took. However, the date of the opening night rested in hands other than our own; meanwhile nobody could doubt that more rehearsing, plenty more rehearsing, was going to be needed for a long time to come. Although these might be dispiriting thoughts, an overwhelming sense of content descended as the train reached the outskirts of London. Spring seas had been rough the night before, the railway carriage as usual overcrowded, while we threaded a sluggish passage through blackness towards the south; from time to time entering—pausing in—then vacating—areas where air-raid warnings prevailed. Viewed from the windows of the train, the deserted highways and gutted buildings of outlying districts created to the eye the semblance of an abandoned city. Nevertheless, I felt full of hope.

London contacts had to be sorted out. A letter from Chips Lovell, received only the day before, complicated an arrangement to dine with Moreland that evening. Lovell had heard I was coming on leave, and wanted to talk about 'family affairs'. That was a motive reasonable enough in principle; in practice, a disturbing phrase, when considered in relation to rumoured 'trouble' with Priscilla. Lovell was a Marine. He had been commissioned into the Corps at the time of its big expansion at the beginning of the war, soon after this being posted to a station on the East Coast. Evidently he had moved from there, because he gave a London telephone exchange (with extension) to find him, though no indication of what his new employment might be.

First, I called up the number Greening had consigned from General Liddament. The voice of Major Finn on the line was quiet and deep, persuasive yet firm. I began to tell my story. He cut me short at once, seeming already aware what was coming, another tribute to the General's powers of transmuting thought to action. Instructions were to report later in the day to an address in Westminster. This offered breathing space. A hundred matters of one sort or another had to be negotiated before going down to the country. After speaking with Major Finn, I rang Lovell.

'Look, Nick, I never thought you'd get in touch so soon,' he said, before there was even time to suggest anything. 'Owing to a new development, I'm booked for dinner tonight—first date for months—but that makes it even more important I see you. I'm caught up in work at lunchtime—only knocking off for about twenty minutes—but we can have a drink later. Can't we meet near wherever you're dining, as I shan't get away till seven at the earliest.'

'The Café Royal—with Hugh Moreland.'

'I'll be along as soon as I can.'

'Hugh said he'd turn up about eight.'

It seemed required to emphasise that, if Lovell stayed too long over our drink, he would encounter Moreland.

This notification was in Moreland's interest, rather than Lovell's. Lovell had never been worried by the former closeness of Priscilla and Moreland. Priscilla might or might not have told her husband the whole affair with Moreland had been fruitless enough, had never taken physical shape; if she had, Lovell might or might not have believed her. It was doubtful whether he greatly minded either way. I myself accepted they had never been to bed, because Moreland had told me that in one of his few rather emotional outbursts. It was because Moreland was sensitive, perhaps even touchy about such matters, that he might not want to meet Lovell. Besides, if Priscilla were now behaving in a manner to cause Lovell concern, he too might well prefer to remain unreminded of a former beau of his wife's; a man with whom he had in any case not much in common, apart from Priscilla. This turned out to be a wrong guess on my own part. Lovell showed no sign whatever of wanting to avoid Moreland. On the contrary, he was disappointed the three of us were not all dining together that evening.

'What a relief to meet someone like Hugh Moreland again,' he said. 'Pity I can't join the party. I can assure you it would be more fun than what faces me. Anyway, I'll go into *that* when we meet.'

Lovell was an odd mixture of realism and romanticism; more specifically, he was, like quite a lot of people, romantic about being a realist. If, for example, the suspicion ever crossed his mind that Priscilla had married him 'on the rebound', any possible pang would have been allayed, in his philosophy, by the thought that he had in the end himself 'got the girl'. He might also have argued, of course, that the operation of the rebound is unpredictable, some people thwarted in love, shifting, bodily and totally, on to another person the whole weight of a former strong emotion. Lovell was romantic, especially, in the sense of taking things at their face value—one of the qualities that made him a good journalist. It never struck him anyone could think or do anything but the perfectly obvious. This took the practical form of disinclination to believe in the reality of any matter not of a kind to be ventilated in the press. At the same time, although incapable of seeing life from an unobvious angle, Lovell was prepared, when necessary, to vary the viewpoint—provided obviousness remained unimpeded, one kind of obviousness simply taking the place of another. This relative flexibility was owed partly to his own species of realism—when his realism, so to speak, 'worked'—partly forced on him by another of his firm moral convictions: that every change which took place in life—personal—political—social—was both momentous and for ever; a system of opinion also stimulating to the practice of his profession.

Once Lovell's way of looking at the world was allowed, he could be subtle about ways and means. With the additional advantages of good looks and plenty of push, these methods were bringing fair success in his chosen career by the time war broke out. In marrying Priscilla, he had not, it is true, consummated a formerly voiced design to 'find a rich wife'; but then that project had never, in fact, assumed the smallest practical shape. Its verbal expression merely illustrated another facet of Lovell's romanticism—in this case, romanticism about money. He had, in any case, taken a keen interest in Priscilla even back in the days when he and I had been working on film scripts together (none of which ever appeared on any screen), so there was no surprise when the two of them married. At first he lost jobs and they were hard up. Priscilla, who had some taste for living dangerously, never seemed to mind these lean stretches. Lovell himself used to present an equally unruffled surface to the world where shortage of money was concerned, though underneath he certainly felt guilty regarding lack of it. He looked upon lack of money as a failing in himself; or, for that matter, in anyone else. From time to time, though without any strong force behind it, his romanticism would take moral or intellectual turns too. He would indulge, for instance, in fits of condemning material things and all who pursued them. These moods were sometimes accompanied by reading potted philosophies: the Wisdom of the East in one volume, Marx Without Tears, the Treasury of Great Thought. Like everyone else of his kind he was writing a play, an undertaking that progressed never further than the opening pages of the First Act.

'I never get time to settle down to serious writing,' he used to say, thereby making what almost amounted to a legal declaration in defining his own inclusion within an easily recognisable category of non-starting literary apprenticeship.

These were some of the thoughts about Lovell that passed through my head while I sat on a bench in the hall waiting to see Major Finn. The address in Westminster to which I had been told to report turned out to be a large house converted to the use of military headquarters. After a while a Free French corporal, his arm in a sling, joined me on the bench; then two members of the Free French women's service. Soon the three of them began an argument together in their own language. I re-read Moreland's postcard—a portrait of Wagner in a kind of tam-o'-shanter—confirming our dinner that night. Enigmatic in tone, its wording indefinably lacked the liveliness of manner usual in this, Moreland's habitual mode of communication.

We had not met since the first week of the war, soon after Matilda had left him. Matilda's subsequent marriage to Sir Magnus Donners had been effected with an avoidance of publicity remarkable even at a time when all sorts of changes, public and private, many of these revolutionary enough, were being quietly brought about. Muting the news of the ceremony was no doubt to some extent attributable to controls Sir Magnus found himself in a position to exercise in certain fields. The wedding of the divorced wife of a musician, well known even if not particularly prosperous, to a member of the Government rated in general more attention, even allowing for the paper shortage, than the few scattered paragraphs that appeared at the time. People said the break-up of Moreland's marriage had at first so much disturbed him that he seemed likely to go to pieces entirely, giving himself up increasingly to drink, while living as best he could from one day to the next. However, a paradox of that moment in the war was an excess, rather than deficiency, of musical employment; so that, in fact, Moreland found himself immersed in work of one sort or another, which, even if not very inspiring professionally, kept him alive and busy. That, at any rate, was what I had heard. Inevitably we had lost touch with each other since I had been in the army. Friendship, popularly represented as something simple and straightforward—in contrast with love—is perhaps no less complicated, requiring equally mysterious nourishment; like love, too, bearing also within its embryo inherent seeds of dissolution, something more fundamentally destructive, perhaps, than the mere passing of time, the all-obliterating march of events which had, for example, come between Stringham and myself.

These rather sombre speculations were interrupted by a door opening nearby. A Free French officer in a képi appeared. Middle-aged, with spectacles, rather red in the face, he was followed from the room by a youngish, capless captain, wearing Intelligence Corps badges.

'Et maintenant, une dernière chose, mon Capitaine,' said the Frenchman, 'maintenant que nous avons terminé avec l'affaire Szymanski. Le Colonel s'est arrangé avec certains membres du Commandement pour que quelques jeunes officiers soient placés dans le Génie. Il espère que vous n'y verrez pas d'inconvenient.'

'Vous n'avez pas utilisé la procédure habituelle, Lieutenant?'

'Mon Capitaine, le Colonel Michelet a pensé que pour une pareille broutille on pouvait se dispenser des voies hierarchiques.'

'Nous aurons des ennuis.'

'Le Colonel Michelet est convaincu qu'ils seront négligeables.'

'Ça m'étonnerait.'

'Vous croyez vraiment?'

'J'en suis sûr. Il nous faut immédiatement une liste de ces noms.'

'Très bien, mon Capitaine, vous les aurez.'

The English officer shook his head to express horror at what had been contemplated. They both laughed a lot.

'Au revoir, Lieutenant.'

'Au revoir, mon Capitaine.'

The Frenchman retired. The captain turned to me.

'Jenkins?'

'Yes.'

'Finn told me about you. Come in here, will you.'

I followed into his room, and sat opposite while he turned the pages of a file.

'What have you been doing since you joined the army?'

Reduced to narrative form, my military career up to date did not sound particularly impressive. However, the captain seemed satisfied. He nodded from time to time. His manner was friendly, more like the good-humoured approach of my old Battalion than the unforthcoming demeanour of most of the officers at Div HQ. The story came to an end.

'I see—how old are you?'

I revealed my age. He looked surprised that anyone could be so old.

'And what do you do in civilian life?'

I indicated literary activities.

'Oh, yes,' he said. 'I believe I read one.'

However, he showed none of General Liddament's keen interest in the art of the novel, made no effort to explore further this aspect of my life.

'What about French?'

It seemed simplest to furnish the same descriptive phrases offered to the General.

'I can read a book as a rule, but get held up with slang or something like the technical descriptions of Balzac.'

The captain laughed.

'Well,' he said, 'suppose we come back to that later. Are you married?'

'Yes.'

'Children?'

'One.'

'Prepared to go abroad?'

'Of course.'

'Sure?'

'Yes.'

He seemed almost surprised at this rather minimal acceptance of military obligation.

'We're looking for liaison officers with the Free French,' he said. 'At battalion level. They're not entirely easy to find. Speaking another language tolerably well seems so often to go with unsatisfactory habits.'

The captain smiled sadly, a little archly, across the desk at me.

'Whilst our Allies expect nothing less than one hundred per cent service,' he said, 'and quite right too.'

He fixed me with his eye.

'Care to take the job on?'

'Yes—but, as I explained, I'm no great master of the language.'

He did not reply. Instead, he opened a drawer of the desk from which he took a document. He handed this to me. Then he rose and went to a door on the other side of the room. It gave on to a smaller room, almost a cupboard, surrounded by dark green metal safes. In one corner was a little table on which stood a typewriter in its rubber cover. A chair was beside it.

'Make a French translation of these instructions,' he said. 'Subsistence Allowance is *frais d'alimentation*. Here is paper—and a typewriter, should you use one. Alternatively, here too is *la plume de ma tante*.'

Smiling not unkindly, he shut me in. I settled down to examine the printed sheet handed to me. It turned out to be an Army Form, one specifying current regulations governing issue, or non-issue, of rations to troops in the field. At first sight the prose did not seem to make much sense in English; I saw at once there was little hope of my own French improving it. Balzac on provincial typesetting was going to be nothing to this. However, I sat down and worked away, because I wanted the job badly.

Outside, on cornices and parapets of government buildings, starlings in thousands chattered and quarrelled. I was aware of that dazed feeling that is part of the impact of coming on leave. I read through the document again, trying to compose my mind to its meaning. This was like being 'kept in' at school. '. . . the items under (i) are obtainable on indent (A.B.55) which is the ordinary requisition of supplies . . . the items under (iii) and other items required to supplement the ration so as to provide variety and admit of the purchase of seasonable produce, and which are paid for with money provided by the Commuted Ration Allowance and Cash Allowance (iii above) . . . the officer i/c Supplies renders a return (A. F. B. 179), which shows the quantities and prices of rations actually issued in kind to the unit during the month, from which their total value is calculated . . .'

The instruction covered a couple of foolscap pages. I remembered being told never to write 'and which', but the mere grammar used by the author was by no means his most formidable side. It was not the words that were difficult. The words, on the whole, were fairly familiar. Giving them some sort of conviction in translation was the problem; conveying that particular tone sounded in official manifestos. Through the backwoods of this bureaucratic jungle, or the like, Widmerpool was hunting down Mr Diplock, in relentless safari. Such distracting thoughts had to be put from the mind. I chose *la plume de ma tante* in preference to the typewriter, typescript imparting an awful bareness to language of any kind, even one's own. For a time I sweated away. Some sort of a version at last appeared. I read it through several times, making corrections. It did not sound ideally idiomatic French; but then the original did not sound exactly idiomatic English. After embodying a few final improvements, I opened the door a crack.

'Come in, come in,' said the captain. 'Have you finished? I thought you might have succumbed. It's dreadfully stuffy in there.'

He was sitting with another officer, also a captain, tall, fair, rather elegant. A blue fore-and-aft cap lay beside him with the lion-and-unicorn General Service badge. I passed my translation across the desk to the I. Corps captain. He took it, and, rising from his chair, turned to the other man.

'I'll be back in a moment, David,' he said—and to me: 'Take a seat while I show this to Finn.'

He went out of the room. The other officer nodded to me and laughed. It was Pennistone. We had met on a train during an earlier leave of mine and had talked of Vigny. We had talked of all sorts of other things, too, that seemed to have passed out of my life for a long time. I remembered now Pennistone had insisted his own military employments were unusual. No doubt the Headquarters in which I now found myself represented the sort of world in which he habitually functioned.

'Splendid,' he said. 'Of course we agreed to meet as an exercise of the will. I'm ashamed to say I'd forgotten until now. Your own moral determination does you credit. I congratulate you. Or is it just one of those eternal recurrences of Nietzsche, which one gets so used to? Have you come to work here?'

I explained the reason for my presence in the building.

'So you may be joining the Free Frogs.'

'And you?'

'I look after the Poles.'

'Do they have a place like this too?'

'Oh, no. The Poles are dealt with as a Power. They have an ambassador, a military attaché, all that. The point about France is that we still recognise the Vichy Government. The other Allied Governments are those in exile over here in London. That is why the Free French have their own special mission.'

'You've just come to see them?'

'To discuss some odds and ends of Polish affairs that overlap with Free French matters.'

We talked for a while. The other captain returned.

'Finn wants to see you,' he said.

I followed him along the passage into a room where an officer was sitting behind a desk covered with papers. The I. Corps captain announced my name and withdrew. I had left my cap in the other office, so, on entering, could not salute, but, with the formality that prevailed in the area where I was serving, came to attention. The major behind the desk seemed surprised at this. He rose very slowly from his desk, and, keeping his eye on me all the time, came round to the front and shook hands. He was small, cleanshaved, almost square in shape, with immensely broad shoulders, large head, ivory-coloured face, huge nose. His grey eyes were set deep back in their sockets. He looked like an enormous bird, an ornithological specimen very different from Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, kindly but at the same time immensely more powerful. I judged him in his middle fifties. He wore an old leather-buttoned service-dress tunic, with a VC, Légion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre avec palmes, and a couple of other foreign decorations I could not identify.

'Sit down, Jenkins,' he said.

He spoke quietly, almost whispered. I sat down. He began to fumble among his papers.

'I had a note from your Divisional Commander,' he said. 'Where is it? Draw that chair a bit nearer. I'm rather deaf in this ear. How is General Liddament?'

'Very well, sir.'

'Knocking the Division into shape?'

'That's it, sir.'

'Territorial Division, isn't it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'He'll get a Corps soon.'

'You think so, sir?'

Major Finn nodded. He seemed a little embarrassed about something. Although he gave out an extraordinary sense of his own physical strength and endurance, there was also something mild, gentle, almost undecided, about his manner.

'You know why you've been sent here?' he asked.

'It was explained, sir.'

He lowered his eyes to what I now saw was my translation. He began to read it to himself, his lips moving faintly. After a line or two of doing this, it became clear to me what the answer was going to be. The only question that remained was how long the agony would be drawn out. Major Finn read the whole of my version through to himself; then, rather nobly, read it through again. This was either to give dramatic effect, or to rouse himself to the required state of tension for making an unwelcome announcement. Those, at least, were the reasons that occurred to me at the time, because he must almost certainly have gone through the piece when the captain had first brought it to him. I appreciated the gesture, which indicated he was doing the best he could for me, including not sparing himself. When he came to the end for the second time, he looked across the desk, and, shaking his head, sighed and smiled.

'Well . . .' he said.

I was silent.

'Won't do, I'm afraid.'

'No, sir?'

'Not as your written French stands.'

He took up a pencil and tapped it on the desk.

'We'd have liked to have you . . .'

'Yes, sir.'

'Masham agrees.'

'Masham' I took to be the I. Corps captain.

'But this translation . . .'

He spoke for a second as if I might have intended a deliberate insult to himself and his uniform by the botch I had made of it, but that he was prepared magnanimously to overlook that. Then, as if regretting what might have appeared momentary unkindness, in spite of my behaviour, he rose and shook hands again, gazing into the middle distance of the room. The vision to be seen there was certainly one of total failure.

'. . . not sufficiently accurate.'

'No, sir.'

'In fact, doesn't begin to be.'

'I see, sir.'

'You understand me?'

'Of course, sir.'

'A pity.'

We stared at each other.

'Otherwise I think you would have done us well.'

Major Finn paused. He appeared to consider this hypothesis for a long time. There did not seem much more to be said. I hoped the interview would end as quickly as possible.

'Perfectly suitable . . .' he repeated.

His voice was far away now. There was another long pause. Then a thought struck him. His face lighted up.

'Perhaps it's only written French you're shaky in.'

He wrinkled his broad, ivory-coloured forehead.

'Now let us postulate the 9th Regiment of Colonial Infantry are on the point of mutiny,' he said. 'They may be prepared to abandon Vichy and come over to the Allies. How would you harangue them?'

'In French, sir?'

'Yes, in French.'

He spoke eagerly, as if he expected something enjoyably dramatic.

'I'm afraid I should have to fall back on English, sir.'

His face fell again.

'I feared that,' he said.

Failure was certainly total. I had been given a second chance, had equally bogged it. Major Finn stroked the enormous bumpy contours of his nose.

'Look here,' he said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make a note of your name.'

'Yes, sir?'

'There may be certain changes taking place in the near future. Not here, elsewhere. But don't count on it. That's the best I can say. I don't question anything General Liddament suggests. It's just the language.'

'Thank you, sir.'

He smiled.

'You're on leave, aren't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Wouldn't mind some leave myself.'

'No, sir?'

'And my respects to General Liddament.'

'I'll convey them, sir.'

'A great man.'

I made a suitable face and left the room, disappointed and furious with myself. The fact that such an eventuality was in some degree to be expected made things no better. To have anyone in the army—let alone a general—show interest in your individual career is a rare enough experience. To fall at the language hurdle—just the field in which someone like myself, anyway in the eyes of General Liddament, might be expected to show reasonable proficiency—seemed to let down the General too. There would be little hope of his soliciting further candidatures in my interest. Why should he? I wondered why I had never taken the trouble in the past to learn French properly; as a boy, for instance, staying with the Leroys at La Grenadière, or in the course of innumerable other opportunities. At the same time, I was aware that a liaison officer at battalion level would be required to show considerable fluency. Perhaps it was just Fate. As for having a note made of my name, that was to be regarded as a polite formula on the part of Major Finn—an unusually likeable man—an echo of civilian courtesies from someone who took a pride in possessing good manners as well as a VC; a gesture to be totally disregarded for all practical purposes.

I returned to the captain's room. Pennistone was still there. He was about to leave, standing up, wearing his cap.

'Well then,' he was saying. 'On the first of next month Szymanski ceases to serve under the Free French authority, and comes under the command of the Polish Forces in Great Britain. That's settled at last.'

Masham, the I. Corps captain, turned to me. I explained the deal was off. He knew, of course, already.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Thanks for looking in. I hear you and David know each other.'

After taking leave of him, Pennistone and I went out together into the street. He asked what had happened. I outlined the interview with Major Finn. Pennistone listened with attention.

'Finn seems to have been well disposed towards you,' he said.

'I liked him—what's his story?'

'Some fantastic episode in the first war, when he got his VC. After coming out of the army, he decided to go into the cosmetics business—scent, face powder, things like that, the last trade you'd connect him with. He talks very accurate French with the most outlandish accent you ever heard. He's been a great success with the Free French—liked by de Gaulle, which is not everyone's luck.'

'Surprising he's not got higher rank.'

'Finn could have become a colonel half-a-dozen times over since rejoining the army,' said Pennistone. 'He always says he prefers not to have too much responsibility. He has his VC, which always entails respect—and which he loves talking about. However, I think he may be tempted at last to accept higher rank.'

'To what?'

'Very much in the air at the moment. All I can say is, you may be more likely to hear from him than you think.'

'Does he make money at his cosmetics?'

'Enough to keep a wife and daughter hidden away somewhere.'

'Why are they hidden away?'

'I don't know,' said Pennistone, laughing. 'They just are. There are all kinds of things about Finn that are not explained. Keeping them hidden away is part of the Finn system. When I knew him in Paris, I soon found he had a secretive side.'

'You knew him before the war?'

'I came across him, oddly enough, when I was in textiles, working over there.'

'Textiles are your job?'

'I got out in the end.'

'Into what?'

Pennistone laughed again, as if that were an absurd question to ask.

'Oh, nothing much really,' he said. 'I travel about a lot—or used to before the war. I think I told you, when we last met, that I'm trying to write something about Descartes.'

All this suggested—as it turned out rightly—that Pennistone, as well as Finn, had his secretive side. When I came to know him better, I found what mattered to Pennistone was what went on in his head. He could rarely tell you what he had done in the past, or proposed to do in the future, beyond giving a bare statement of places he had visited or wanted to visit, books he had read or wanted to read. On the other hand, he was able to describe pretty lucidly what he had thought—philosophically speaking—at any given period of his life. While other people lived for money, power, women, the arts, domesticity, Pennistone liked merely thinking about things, arranging his mind. Nothing else ever seemed to matter to him. It was the aim Stringham had announced now as his own, though Pennistone was a very different sort of person from

Stringham, and better equipped for perfecting the process. I only found out these things about him at a later stage.

'Give me the essential details regarding yourself,' Pennistone said. 'Unit, army number, that sort of thing—just in case anything should crop up where I myself might be of use.'

I wrote it all down. We parted company, agreeing that Nietzschean Eternal Recurrences must bring us together soon again.

Even by the time I reached the Café Royal that evening, I was still feeling humiliated by the failure of the Finn interview. The afternoon had been devoted to odd jobs, on the whole tedious. The tables and banquettes of the large tasteless room looked unfamiliar occupied by figures in uniform. There was no one there I had ever seen before. I sat down and waited. Lovell did not arrive until nearly half-past seven. He wore captain's pips. It was hard not to labour under a sense of being left behind in the military race. I offered congratulations.

'You don't get into the really big money until you're a major,' he said. 'That should be one's aim.'

'Vaulting ambition.'

'Insatiable.'

'Where do you function?'

'Headquarters of Combined Operations,' he said, 'that curious toy fort halfway down Whitehall. It's a great place for Royal Marines. A bit of luck your being on leave, Nick. One or two things I want to talk about. First of all, will you agree to be executor of my will?'

'Of course.'

'Perfectly simple. Whatever there is—which isn't much, I can assure you—goes to Priscilla, then to Caroline.'

'That doesn't sound too complicated.'

One never knows what may happen to one.'

'No, indeed.'

The remark echoed Sergeant Harmer's views. There was a pause. I had the sudden sense that Lovell was going to broach some subject I should not like. This apprehension turned out to be correct.

'Another small matter,' he said.

'Yes?'

'It would interest me to hear more of this fellow Stevens. You seem to be mainly responsible for bringing him into our lives, Nick.'

'If you mean someone called Odo Stevens, he and I were on a course together at Aldershot about a year ago. I didn't know he was in our lives. He isn't in mine. I haven't set eyes on him since then.'

I had scarcely thought of Stevens since he had been expelled from the course. Now the picture of him came back forcibly. Lovell's tone was not reassuring. It was possible to guess something of what might be happening.

'You introduced him into the family,' said Lovell.

He spoke calmly, not at all accusingly, but I recognised in his eye the intention to stage a dramatic announcement.

'One weekend leave from Aldershot Stevens gave me a lift in his very brokendown car as far as Frederica's. Then he took me back on Sunday night. Isobel was staying there. It was just before she had her baby. In fact, the birth started that night. Stevens got RTU-ed soon after we got back on the course. I haven't seen or heard of him since.'

'You haven't?'

'Not a word.'

'Priscilla was at Frederica's then.'

'I remember.'

'She met Stevens.'

'She must have done.'

'She's been with him lately up in a hotel in Scotland,' said Lovell, 'living more or less openly, so there's no point in not mentioning it.'

There was nothing to be said to that. Stevens had certainly struck up some sort of an acquaintance with Priscilla on that occasion at Frederica's. I could recall more. Some question of getting a piece of jewellery mended for her had arisen. Such additional consequences as Lovell outlined were scarcely to be foreseen when I took Stevens to the house. Nevertheless, it was an unfortunate introduction. However, this merely confirmed stories going round. No doubt Stevens, by now, was a figure with some sort of war career behind him. That could happen in the matter of a few weeks. That Stevens might be the 'commando', or whatever shape Priscilla's alleged fancy-man took, had never suggested itself to me. Lovell lit a cigarette. He puffed out a cloud of smoke. His evident inclination to adopt a stylised approach—telling the story as we might have tried to work it out together in a film script years before—was some alleviation of immediate embarrassments caused by the disclosure. The dramatic manner he had assumed accorded with his own conception of how life should be lived. I was grateful for it. By this means things were made easier.

'When did all this start?'

'Pretty soon after they first met.'

'I see.'

'I was down at that godforsaken place on the East Coast. There was nowhere near for her to live. It wasn't my fault we weren't together.'

'Is Stevens stationed in Scotland?'

'So far as I know. He did rather well somewhere—was it the Lofoten raid? That sort of thing. He's a hero on top of everything else. I suppose if I were to do something where I could get killed, instead of composing lists of signal equipment and suchlike, I might make a more interesting husband.'

'I don't think so for a moment.'

In giving this answer, I spoke a decided opinion. To assume such a thing was a typical instance of Lovell's taste, mentioned earlier, for the obvious. It was a supposition bound to lead to a whole host of erroneous conclusions—that was how the conjecture struck me—regarding his own, or anyone else's, married life.

'You may be right,' he said.

He spoke as if rather relieved.

'Look at it the other way. Think of all the heroes who had trouble with their wives.'

'Who?'

'Agamemnon, for instance.'

'Well, that caused enough dislocation,' said Lovell. 'What's Stevens like, apart from his heroism?'

'In appearance?'

'Everything about him.'

'Youngish, comes from Birmingham, traveller in costume jewellery, spot of journalism, good at languages, short, thickset, very fair hair, easy to get on with, keen on the girls.'

'Sounds not unlike me,' said Lovell, 'except that up to date I've never travelled in costume jewellery—and I still rather pride myself on my figure.'

'There is a touch of you about him, Chips. I thought so at Aldershot.'

'You flatter me. Anyway, he seems more of a success than I am with my own wife. If he is keen on the girls, I suppose making for Priscilla would be a matter of routine?'

'So I should imagine.'

'You liked him?'

'We got on pretty well.'

'Why was he Returned-to-Unit?'

'For cutting a lecture.'

Lovell seemed all at once to lose interest in Stevens and his personality. His manner changed. There could be no doubt he was very upset.

'So far as I can see there was nothing particularly wrong with our marriage,' he said. 'If I hadn't been sent to that God-awful spot, it would have gone on all right. At least that's how things appeared to me. I don't particularly want a divorce even now.'

'Is there any question of a divorce?'

'It isn't going to be much fun living with a woman who's in love with someone else.'

'Lots of people do it, and *vice versa*.'

'At best, it's never going to be the same.'

'Nothing ever remains the same. Marriage or anything else.'

'I thought your theory was that everything did always remain the same?'

'Everything alters, yet does remain the same. It might even improve matters.'

'Do you really think so?'

'Not really.'

'Neither do I,' said Lovell, 'though I see what you mean. That's if she's prepared to come back and live with me. I'm not even sure of that. I think she wants to marry Stevens.'

'She must be mad.'

'Mad she may be, but that's the way she's talking.'

'Where's Caroline?'

'My parents are looking after her.'

'And Priscilla herself?'

'Staying with Molly Jeavons—though I only found out that by chance yesterday. She's been moving about among various relations, is naturally at times rather vague about her whereabouts, so far as keeping me informed is concerned.'

'You've dished all this up with her?'

'On my last leave—making it a charming affair.'

'But lately?'

'Since then, we've been out of touch more than once. We are at this moment, until I found, quite by chance, she was at the Jeavonses'. I'm hoping to see her tonight. That's why I can't dine with you.'

'You and Priscilla are dining together?'

'Not exactly. You remember Bijou Ardglass, that gorgeous mannequin, one-time girl-friend of Prince Theodoric? I ran into her yesterday on my way to Combined Ops. She's driving for the Belgians or Poles, one of the Allied contingents—an odd female organisation run by Lady McReith, whom Bijou was full of stories about. Bijou asked me to a small party she is giving for her fortieth birthday, about half-a-dozen old friends at the Madrid.'

'Bijou Ardglass's fortieth birthday.'

'Makes you think.'

'I only knew her by sight, but even so—and Priscilla will be there?'

'Bijou found her at Aunt Molly's. Of course Priscilla told Bijou I was on the East Coast. I was when we last exchanged letters. I explained to Bijou I'd just been posted to London at short notice—which was quite true—and hadn't managed to get together with Priscilla yet.'

'You haven't called up Priscilla at the Jeavonses'?'

'I thought it would be best if we met at Bijou's party—without Priscilla knowing I was going to be there. I have a reason for that. The Madrid was the place we celebrated our engagement. The Madrid might also be the place where we straightened things out.'

That was just like Lovell. Everything had to be staged. Perhaps he was right, and everything does have to be staged. That is a system that can at least be argued as the best. At any rate, people must run their lives on their own terms.

'I mean it's worth making an effort to patch things up,' he said, 'don't you think, Nick?'

He asked the question as if he had no idea what the answer would be, possibly even expecting a negative rather than affirmative one.

'Yes, of course—every possible effort.'

'You can imagine what all this is like going on in one's head, round and round for ever, while you're trying to sort out a lot of bloody stuff about radios and landing-craft. For instance, if she goes off with Stevens, think of all the negotiations about Caroline, all that kind of thing.'

'Chips—Hugh Moreland has appeared at the door on the other side of the room. Is there anything else you want to say that's urgent?'

'Nothing. I've got it all off my chest now. That was what I needed. You understand?'

'Of course.'

'The point is, you agree it's worth taking trouble to get on an even keel again?'

'Can't say it too strongly.'

Lovell nodded several times.

'And you'll be my executor?'

'Honoured.'

'I'll write to the solicitors then. Marvellous to have got that fixed. Hullo, Hugh, how are you? Ages since we met.'

Dressed in his familiar old blue suit, looking more than ever as if he made a practice of sleeping in it, dark grey shirt and crimson tie, Moreland, hatless, seemed an improbable survival from pre-war life. He was flushed and breathing rather hard. This gave the impression of poorish health. His face, his whole person, was thinner. The flush increased when he recognised Lovell, who must at once have recalled thoughts of Priscilla. Even after this redness had died down, a certain discoloration of the skin remained, increasing the suggestion that Moreland was not well. There was a moment of awkwardness, in spite of Lovell's immediate display of satisfaction that they should have met again. This was chiefly because Moreland seemed unwilling to commit himself by sitting at our table; an old habit of his, one of those characteristic postponements of action for which he was always laughing at himself, like his constitutional inability in all circumstances to decide from a menu what he wanted to eat.

'I shall be taken for a spy if I sit with you both,' he said. 'Somehow I never expected you'd really be wearing uniform, Nick, even though I knew you were in the army. I must tell you of rather a menacing thing that happened the other day. Norman Chandler appeared on my doorstep to hear the latest musical gossip. He's also become an officer, and we went off to get some lunch at Foppa's, where neither of us had been since the beginning of the war. The downstairs room was shut, because the window had been broken by a bomb, so we went upstairs, where the club used to be. There we found a couple of seedy-looking characters who said the restaurant was closed. We asked where Foppa was to be found. They said they didn't know. They weren't at all friendly. Positively disagreeable. Then I suddenly grasped they thought we were after Foppa for being an Italian—wanted to intern him or something. An army type and a member of the Special Branch. It was obvious as soon as one thought of it.'

'The Special Branch must have changed a lot if they now dress like you, Hugh.'

'Not more than army officers, if they now look like Norman.'

'Anyway, take a seat,' said Lovell. 'What are you going to drink? How's your war been going, Hugh? Not drearier than mine, I feel sure, if you'll excuse the self-pity.'

Moreland laughed, now more at ease after telling the story about Chandler and himself; Foppa's restaurant, even if closed, providing a kind of frame to unite the three of us.

'I seem to have neutralised the death-wish for the moment,' he said. 'Raids are a great help in that. I was also momentarily cheered just now by finding the man with the peg-leg and patch over one eye still going. He was behind the London Pavilion this evening, playing *Softly Awakes My Heart*. Rather an individual version. One of the worst features of the war is the dearth of itinerant musicians, indeed of vagrants generally. For example, I haven't seen the cantatrice on crutches for years. As I seem equally unfitted for warlike duties, I've thought of filling the gap and becoming a street musician myself. Unfortunately, I'm such a poor executant.'

'There's a former music critic in our Public Relations branch,' said Lovell. 'He says the great thing for musicians now is the RAF band.'

'Doubt if they'd take me,' said Moreland, 'though the idea of massed orchestras of drum and fife soaring across the sky is attractive. Which is your PR man's paper?'

Lovell mentioned the name of the critic, who turned out to be an admirer of Moreland's work. The two of them began to discuss musical matters, of which Lovell possessed a smattering, anyway as far as personalities were concerned, from days of helping to write a column. No one could have guessed from Lovell's manner that inwardly he was in a state of great disturbance. On the contrary, it was Moreland who, after a preliminary burst of talkativeness, reverted to an earlier uneasiness of manner. Something was on his mind. He kept shifting about in his seat, looking towards the door of the restaurant, as if expecting an arrival that might not be exactly welcome. This apparent nervousness brought to mind the unaccustomed tone of his postcard. It looked as if something had happened, which he lacked the will to explain.

'Are you dining with us?' he suddenly asked Lovell.

There was no reason why that enquiry should not be made. The tone was perfectly friendly. All the same, a touch of abruptness added to this sense of apprehension.

'Chips is going to the Madrid—I didn't realise places like that still functioned.'

'Not many of them do,' said Lovell. 'In any case I'm never asked to them. I've no doubt it will be a very sober affair compared with the old days. The only thing to be said is that Max Pilgrim is doing a revival there of some of his old songs—*Tess of Le Touquet*, *Heather, Heather, she's under the weather*, all those.'

'Max is our lodger now,' said Moreland unexpectedly.

'He may be looking in here later after his act. He's been with ENSA entertaining the forces—by his own account enjoying a spot of entertainment himself—and has been released to do this brief season at the Madrid as a kind of rest.'

I was curious to know who was included when Moreland spoke of 'our' lodger. A question on this subject might be more tactfully put after Lovell's withdrawal. It sounded as if someone had taken Matilda's place. Lovell spoke a word or two about the party ahead of him. He seemed unwilling to leave us.

'I've never been to the Madrid as a client,' said Moreland. 'I once went there years ago, so to speak to the stage door, to collect Max after his act, because we were having supper together. I remember his talking about your friend Bijou Ardglass then. Wasn't she mistress of some Balkan royalty?'

'Theodoric,' said Lovell, 'but they can't have met for years. That Scandinavian princess he married keeps Theodoric very much in order. They were both lucky to get away when they did. He's always been very pro-British and would have been in a bad way had the Germans got him when they overran the country. There's a small contingent of his own people over here now. They were training in France when the war came, and crossed at the time of Dunkirk. I say, I hope there'll be something to drink tonight. The wine outlook becomes increasingly desperate since France went. One didn't expect to have to fight a war on an occasional half-pint of bitter, and lucky if you find that. Well, it's been nice seeing you both. I'll keep in touch, Nick, about those various points.'

We said goodbye to him. Lovell left for the Madrid. Moreland showed signs of relief that he was no longer with us. At first I thought this was still, as it were, on account of Priscilla; or, like some people—amongst whom several of his own relations were included—he simply found Lovell's company tedious. As it turned out, both possibilities were incorrect. Quite another matter was on Moreland's mind. This was only revealed when I suggested it was time to order dinner. Moreland hesitated.

'Do you mind if we wait a minute or two longer?' he said. 'Audrey thought she'd probably get away in time to join us for some food.'

'Audrey who?'

'Audrey Maclintick—you know her.'

He spoke sharply, as if the question had been a silly one to ask.

'Maclintick's wife—the one who went off with the violinist?'

'Yes—Maclintick's widow, rather. I always assume everyone is familiar with the rough outlines of my own life, such as they are. I suppose, as a gallant soldier, you live rather out of the world of rank and fashion. Audrey and I are running steady now.'

'Under the same roof?'

'In my old flat. I found I could get back there, owing to the blitz and it being left empty, so took the opportunity to move in again.'

'And Max Pilgrim is your lodger?'

'Has been for some months.'

Moreland had been embarrassed by having to explain so specifically that he was now living with Mrs Maclintick, but seemed glad this fact was made plain. There had been no avoiding a pointblank enquiry about the situation; nor was all surprise possible to conceal. He must certainly have been conscious that, to any friend not already aware he and Mrs Maclintick had begun to see each other frequently, the news must come as an incalculable reversal of former circumstances and feelings.

'Life became rather impossible after Matilda left me,' he said.

He spoke almost apologetically, at the same time seemed to find relief in expressing how the present situation had come about. The statement that life for him had become 'impossible' after Matilda's departure was easy to believe. Without Matilda, the organisation of Moreland's day was hard to imagine. Formerly she had arranged almost all the routine of those affairs not immediately dictated by his profession. In that respect, unless she had greatly changed, Mrs Maclintick could hardly be proving an adequate substitute. On the one or two occasions when, in the past, I had myself encountered Mrs Maclintick, she had appeared to me, without qualification, as one of the least sympathetic of women. So far as that went, in those days she had been in the habit of showing towards Moreland himself sentiments not much short of active dislike. He had been no better disposed to her, though, as an old friend of Maclintick's, always doing his best to keep the peace between them as husband and wife. When she had left Maclintick for Carolo, Moreland's sympathies were certainly on Maclintick's side. In short, this was another of war's violent readjustments; possibly to be revealed under close investigation as more logical than might appear at first sight. Indeed, as Moreland began to expand the story, as so often happens, the unthinkable took on the authoritative tone of something that had to be.

'After Audrey bolted with Carolo, they kept company till the beginning of the war—surprising in a way, knowing them both, it went on so long. Then he left her for a girl in a repertory company. Audrey remained on her own. She was working in a canteen when we ran across each other—still is. She's coming on from there tonight.'

'I never heard a word about you and her.'

'We don't get on too badly,' said Moreland. 'I haven't been specially well lately. That bloody lung. Audrey's been very good about looking after me.'

He still seemed to feel further explanation, or excuse, was required; at the same time he was equally anxious not to appear dissatisfied with the new alignment.

'Maclintick doing himself in shook me up horribly,' he said. 'Of course, there can be no doubt Audrey was partly to blame for that, leaving him flat as she did. All the same, she was fond of Maclintick in her way. She often talks of him. You know you get to a stage, especially in wartime, when it's a relief to hear familiar things talked about, whatever they are, and whoever's saying them. You don't care what line the conversation takes apart from that. For instance, Maclintick's unreadable book on musical theory he was writing. It was never finished by him, much less published. His last night alive, as a final gesture against the world, Maclintick tore the manuscript into small pieces and stopped up the lavatory with it. That was just before he turned the gas on. You'd be surprised how much Audrey knows about what Maclintick said in that book—on the technical side, I mean, which she's no training in or taste for. In an odd way, I like knowing about all that. It's almost as if Maclintick's still about—though if he were, of course, I shouldn't be living with Audrey. Here she is, anyway.'

Mrs Maclintick was moving between the tables, making in our direction. She wore a three-quarter length coat over trousers, a rather notably inelegant form of female dress popular at that moment in circumstances where no formality was required. I remembered that Gypsy Jones—La Passionaria of Hendon Central, as Moreland himself had called her—had heralded in her own person the advent of this mode, when Widmerpool and I had seen her addressing a Communist anti-war meeting from a soapbox at a street corner. The clothes increased Mrs Maclintick's own air of being a gipsy, one in fact, rather than just in name. Moreland's nostalgia for vagrancy was recalled, too, by her appearance, which immediately suggested telling fortunes if her palm was crossed with silver, selling clothes-pegs, or engaging in any other traditional Romany activity. By way of contrast with this physical exterior, she entirely lacked any of the ingratiating manner commonly associated with the gipsy's role. Small, wiry, aggressive, she looked as ready as ever for a row, her bright black eyes and unsmiling countenance confronting a world from which perpetual hostility was not merely potential, but presumptive. Attack, she made clear, would be met with counter-attack. However, in spite of this embattled appearance, discouraging to anyone who had ever witnessed her having a row with Maclintick, she seemed disposed at this particular moment to make herself agreeable; more agreeable, at any rate, than on earlier occasions when we had run across each other.

'Moreland told me you would be here,' she said. 'We don't get out to this sort of place much nowadays—can't afford it—but when we do we're glad to meet friends.'

She spoke as if I had a trifle blatantly imposed myself on a party of their own, rather than herself converged on a meeting specially arranged between Moreland and myself. At the same time her tone was not antagonistic; indeed, by her pre-war standards, in as much as I knew them, it was positively amiable. It occurred to me she perhaps saw her association with Moreland as a kind of revenge on Maclintick, who had so greatly valued him as a friend. Now, Maclintick was underground and Moreland belonged to her. Moreland himself, whose earlier state of nerves had certainly been provoked by the prospect of having to present himself and Mrs Maclintick as a ménage, now looked relieved, the immediate impact manoeuvred without disaster. Characteristically, he began to embark on one of those dissertations about life in which he was habitually inclined to indulge after some awkwardness had arisen. It had been just the same when he used to feel with Matilda that the ice was thin for conversational skating and would deliberately switch from the particular to the general.

'Since war prevents any serious work,' he said, 'I have been trying to think out a few things. Make my lymphatic brain function a little. All part of my retreat from perfectionism. Besides, one really must hold one or two firm opinions on matters before one's forty—a doom about to descend before any of us know where we are. I find war clears the mind in a few respects. At least that can be said for it.'

I was reminded how Stringham, too, had remarked that he was thinking things out, though it was hard to decide whether 'perfectionism' played much part in Stringham's problems. Perhaps it did. That was one explanation. In Moreland's case, there could be no doubt Mrs Maclintick herself was an element in this retreat. In her case, indeed, so far as Moreland was concerned, withdrawal from perfectionism had been so unphased as to constitute an operation reasonably to be designated a rout. Perhaps Mrs Maclintick herself, even if the awareness remained undefined in her mind, felt she must be regarded as implicit in this advertised new approach—therefore some sort of protest should be made—because, although she spoke without savagery, her next words were undoubtedly a call to order.

'The war doesn't seem to clear your mind quite enough, Moreland,' she said. 'I only wish it stopped you dreaming a bit. Guess where that lost ration card of yours turned up, after I'd looked for it up hill and down dale. *In the toilet.* Bettter than nowhere, I suppose. Saved me from standing in a queue at the Town Hall for a couple of hours to get you another one—and when was I going to find time for that, I wonder.'

She might have been addressing a child. Since she herself had never given birth—had, I remembered, expressed active objection to being burdened with offspring—Moreland may to some extent have occupied a child's role in her eyes; possibly even in her needs, something she had sought in Maclintick and never found. Moreland, so far as it went, seemed to accept this status, receiving the complaint with a laugh, though no denial of its justice.

'I must have dropped it there before fire-watching,' he said. 'How bored one gets on those nights. It's almost worse, if there isn't a raid. I began to plan a work, last time, called *The Fire-watcher's March,* drums, you know, perhaps triangle and oboe. I was feeling particularly fed up that night, not just displeased with the war, or certain social or political conditions from which one suffers, but tired of the whole thing. That is one of the conceptions most difficult for stupid people to grasp. They always suppose some ponderable alteration will make the human condition more bearable. The only hope of survival is the realisation that no such thing could possibly happen.'

'Never mind what goes through your head when you're fire-watching, Moreland,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'You order some dinner. We don't want to starve to death while you hold forth. It won't be much when it comes, if I'm any prophet.'

These words were another reminder of going out with Moreland and Matilda, though Matilda's remonstrance would have been less downright. The plea for food was reasonable enough. We got hold of a waiter. There was the usual business of Moreland being unable to decide, even from the limited choice available, what he wanted to eat. In due course dinner arrived. Moreland, now back on his accustomed form, discoursed about his work and people we knew. Mrs Maclintick, grumbling about domestic difficulties, showed herself in general amenable. The evening was turning out a success. One change, however, was to be noticed in Moreland's talk. When he dwelt on the immediate past, it was as if all that had become very distant, no longer the matter of a year or two before. For him, it was clear, a veil, a thick curtain, had fallen between 'now' and 'before the war'. He would suddenly become quite worked up about people we had known, parties we had been to, subjects for amusement we had experienced together, laughing at moments so violently that tears ran down his cheeks. One felt he was fairly near to other, deeper emotions, that the strength of his feelings was due to something in addition to a taste for mulling over moments in retrospect enjoyable or grotesque.

'You must admit funny things did happen in the old days,' he said. 'Maclintick's story about Dr Trelawney and the red-haired succubus that could only talk Hebrew.'

'Oh, don't go on about the old days so,' said Mrs Macklintick. 'You make me feel a hundred. Try and live in the present for a change. For instance, it might interest you to know that a one-time girl friend of yours is about to sit down at a table over there.'

We looked in the direction she had indicated by jerking her head. It was perfectly true. Priscilla Lovell and an officer in battle-dress were being shown to a table not far from our own. The officer was Odo Stevens. For a moment they were occupied with a waiter, so that a brief suspension of time was offered to consider how best to deal with this encounter, superlatively embarrassing, certainly soon unavoidable. At first it struck me as a piece of quite undeserved, almost incredible ill chance that they should turn up like this; but, on consideration, especially in the light of what Lovell himself had told me, there was nothing specially odd about it. Probably Stevens was on leave. This was an obvious enough place to dine, though certainly not one to choose if you wanted to be discreet.

'Adulterers are always asking the courts for discretion,' Peter Templer used to say, 'when, as a rule, discretion is the last thing they've been generous with themselves.'

If Priscilla thought her husband still stationed on the East Coast, she would of course not expect to meet him here. On the face of it, there was no reason why she should not dine with Stevens, if he happened to be passing through London. A second's thought showed that what seemed a piece of preposterous exhibitionism only presented that appearance on account of special knowledge acquired from Lovell. All the same, if Priscilla were dining here, that meant she had cut the Bijou Ardglass party. So unpredictably do human beings behave, she might even plan to take Stevens on there later.

'Is that her husband with her?' asked Mrs Maclintick. 'I've never had the pleasure of meeting him. I suppose you look on him as the man who cut you out, Moreland?'

I was surprised she knew about Moreland's former entanglement with Priscilla. No doubt Maclintick had spoken of it in the past. As Moreland himself had remarked, she and Maclintick must, at least some of the time, have enjoyed a closer, more amicable existence together than their acquaintances inclined to suppose. The Maclinticks could even have met Moreland and Priscilla at some musical event. Anyway, Mrs Maclintick had turned out to know Priscilla by sight, had evidently gathered scraps of her story, at least so far as Moreland was concerned. That was all. She could not also be aware of other implications disturbing to myself. So far as Mrs Maclintick's knowledge went, therefore, Priscilla's presence might be regarded as merely personally displeasing, in her capacity as a former lover of Moreland's. However, so developed was Mrs Maclintick's taste for malice, like everyone of her kind, that she seemed to know instinctively something inimical to myself, too, was in the air. Moreland, on the other hand, having talked with Lovell only a short time before, could not fail to suspect trouble of one sort or another was on foot. Never very good at concealing his feelings, he went red again. This change of colour was no doubt chiefly caused by Mrs Maclintick's not too delicate reference to himself, but probably he guessed something of my own sentiments as well.

'The girl's Nick's sister-in-law,' he said. 'You seem to have forgotten that. I don't know who the army type is.'

'Oh, yes, she's your sister-in-law, isn't she,' said Mrs Macklintick. 'Now I remember. Not bad looking. Got herself up for the occasion too, hasn't she?'

Mrs Maclintick did not elaborate why she thought Priscilla's clothes deserved this comment, though they were certainly less informal than her own outfit. Priscilla's appearance, at its most striking, made her not far short of a 'beauty'. She looked striking enough now, though not in the best of humours. Her fair hair was longer than at Frederica's, her face thinner. There was about her that taut, at the same time supple air, the yielding movement of body women sometimes display when conducting a love affair, like the physical pose of an athlete observed between contests. She had a high colour. Stevens, apparently in the best of spirits, was talking noisily. No escape was offered, even though they were the last people I wanted to run into at that moment. It seemed wise to prepare the ground with some explanation of why these two might reasonably be out together. This was perhaps instinctive, rather than logical, because Lovell himself had spoken as if the whole world knew about the affair.

'The man's called Odo Stevens. I was on a course with him.'

'Oh, you know him, do you?' said Mrs Maclintick. 'He looks a bit . . .'

She did not finish the sentence. Although her comment was never revealed, one had the impression she grasped pretty well the essential aspects of Odo Stevens, even if only the superficial ones. No great psychological powers were required to make a reasonably accurate guess at these, anyway for immediate practical purposes, whatever might be found deeper down. At that moment Stevens caught sight of us. He waved. Then, at once, he spoke to Priscilla, who herself looked in our direction. She too waved, at the same time began to say something to Stevens. Whatever that was, he disregarded it. Jumping up, he came towards our table. The only hope now was that Mrs Maclintick's uncompromising manner might save the situation by causing Stevens to feel himself unwelcome; if not drive him off entirely, at least discourage a long conversation. She could easily make matters more bizarre than embarrassing. I felt suddenly grateful for her presence. However, as things fell out, Mrs Maclintick was not placed in the position of exercising an active role. This was on account of Stevens himself. I had completely underestimated the change that had taken place in him. Never lacking in self-confidence, at Aldershot he had at the same time been undecided how best to present himself; how, so to speak, to get the maximum value from his own personality. He held various cards in his hand—as I had tried to explain to Lovell—most of them good ones. At different times he would vary the line he took: rough diamond: ambitious young provincial salesman: journalist on the make: soldier of fortune: professional womaniser. Those were just a few of them, all played with a reasonable lightness of touch. Stevens was certainly aware, too, of possibility to charm by sheer lack of any too exact a definition of personality or background. Some of this vagueness of outline may have had a fascination for Priscilla. Now, however, he had enormously added to the effectiveness of his own social attack, immediately giving the impression, as he approached our table, that he was prepared to take on this, or any other party of people, off his own bat. He himself was going to do the entertaining. No particular co-operation from anyone else was required. He had put up an additional pip since we last met, but, although still only a lieutenant, he wore the mauve and white ribbon of an MC, something of a rarity in acquisition at this comparatively early stage of the war.

'Well, old cock,' he said. 'Fancy meeting you here. This is a bit of luck. What are you up to? On leave, or stationed in London?'

Before I could answer, Priscilla herself came up to the table. She had followed Stevens almost at once. There was not much else for her to do. Even if she might have preferred to postpone a meeting, in due course inevitable, or, like myself, hoped to reduce contacts to no more than a nod or brief word at the end of the evening, Stevens had given her no chance to impede his own renewal of acquaintance. His principle was to work on impulse. Nothing could have prevented him from making the move he had. Now that had taken place, she no doubt judged the best tactical course was to ally herself with this explosive greeting; as good a way of handling the situation as any other, if it had to be handled at all. Besides, Priscilla may have felt that, by joining us, she could keep an eye on Stevens; modify, if necessary, whatever he might say.

'Yes, why are you here, Nick?' she asked, speaking challengingly, as if I, rather than her, found myself in doubtful company. 'I thought you were miles away across the sea. And Hugh—how marvellous to see you again after so long. I was listening to something of yours in a BBC programme last week.'

She was perfectly self-possessed. If aware of rumours afloat about herself and Stevens—of which she could hardly be ignorant, had she bothered to give a moment's thought to the matter—Priscilla was perfectly prepared to brazen these out. The two of them could not know, of course, how narrowly they had missed Lovell himself. Perhaps, again, neither cared. Lovell's taste for drama would certainly have been glutted, had they arrived an hour or so earlier. In the group we now formed, Moreland was the one who seemed most embarrassed. Conventionally speaking, he had not risen to the occasion very successfully. His highly developed intuitive faculties had instantly registered something was amiss; while the mere fact he had himself once been in love with Priscilla was, in any case, enough to agitate him, when unexpectedly confronted with her. No doubt he was also piqued at her coming on him in circumstances which must reveal sooner or later he and Mrs Maclintick were making a life together. He muttered something or other about whatever composition Priscilla had heard on the radio, but seemed unable to pursue any coherent conversation. Mrs Maclintick stared at Stevens without friendliness, though a good deal of curiosity, a reception that seemed perfectly to satisfy him.

'Look here,' he said. 'Are you all having a very special private party? If not, couldn't we come and sit with you? This is the chance of a lifetime to make a jolly evening of my last night in London for a long time—who knows, perhaps for ever. I'm on embarkation leave, you know, have to catch a train back to my unit tonight.'

He began addressing this speech to me, but, halfway through, turned towards Mrs Maclintick, as if to appeal to her good nature. She did not offer much encouragement; at the same time issued no immediate refusal.

'Anything you like,' she said. 'I'm too tired to care much what happens. Been on my feet all day doling out shepherd's pie made of sausage meat and stale swiss roll all minced up together. But don't expect Moreland to pay. I've let him have enough out of the house-keeping money to cover our share of dinner—and an extra round of drinks if we can get that.'

Moreland made some sort of protest at this, half amused, half ashamed. Stevens, obviously assessing Mrs Maclintick's measure at a glance (just as Stringham had, at the party years before after Moreland's symphony), laughed loudly. She glared at him for treating her self-pity so lightly, but, although fierce in expression, her stare was not entirely one of dislike.

'We'll be absolutely self-supporting, I promise that,' said Stevens. 'I've only got a quid or two left myself, but Priscilla cashed a cheque earlier in the day, so we'll have to prise it out of her if necessary.'

'You may not find that so easy,' said Priscilla, laughing too, though perhaps not best pleased at this indication of being permanently in the company of Stevens. 'In the end Nick will probably have to fork out, as a relation. Will it really be all right if we join you, Nick?'

Although she said this lightly, in the same sort of vein used by Stevens himself, she spoke now with less assurance than he. Certainly she would, in any case, have preferred no such suggestion to be made. Once put, she was not going to run counter to it. She was determined to support her lover, show nothing was going to intimidate her. No doubt she had hoped to spend the evening tête-à-tête with him, especially if this were his last night in England. Even apart from that, there was, from her own point of view, nothing whatever to be said for deliberately joining a group of people that included a brother-in-law. On the other hand, she had perhaps already learnt the impossibility of dissuading Stevens from doing things the way he wanted them done. Perhaps, again, that was one of the attractions he exercised, in contrast with Lovell, usually amenable in most social matters. Stevens clearly possessed one of those personalities that require constant reinforcement for their egotism and energy by the presence and attention of other people round them, an audience to whom they can 'show off'. Such men are attractive to women, at the same time hard for women to keep at heel. For my own part, I would much rather have prevented the two of them from sitting with us, but, short of causing what might almost amount to a 'scene', there seemed no way of avoiding this. Even assuming I made some more or less discouraging gesture, that was likely to prove not only rather absurd, but also useless from Lovell's point of view; perhaps even undesirable where Lovell's interests were in question.

'I mean you look a bit uncertain, Nick?' said Priscilla, laughing again.

Obviously the thoughts going through my head were as clear as day to her.

'Don't be silly.'

'Half a minute,' said Stevens, 'I'll try and find a waiter and get another chair. We can't all cram together on the banquette.'

He went off. Mrs Maclintick began some complicated financial computation with Moreland. This was going to hold the attention of the pair of them for a minute or two. Priscilla had sat down, and, perhaps because she felt herself more vulnerable without Stevens, had her head down, fumbling in her bag, as if she wanted to avoid my eye. I felt some statement should be made which might, at least to some small extent, define my own position. It was now or never. Any such 'statement' was, I thought, to be conceived of as the term is made use of by the police, for the description of an accident or crime, a brief summary of what happened, how and why it took place or was committed.

'I had a drink with Chips this evening.'

She looked up.

'*Chips?*'

'Here—just before dinner. He thought he might see you at Bijou Ardglass' party at the Madrid.'

That information would at least prevent her from taking Stevens to the restaurant, had the thought been in her mind, though, at the same time, could prejudice any faint chance of herself looking in at the Ardglass party after Stevens had left to catch his train. Such a possibility had to be faced. A chance must be taken on that. It was, in any case, unlikely she would go later to the Madrid. Everything would close down by midnight at the latest, probably before that.

'Oh, but is Chips in London?'

She was plainly surprised.

'At Combined Ops.'

'On the Combined Ops staff?'

'Yes.'

'That was only a possibility when I last heard.'

'It's happened.'

'Chips thought the move wouldn't be for a week or two, even if it came off. His last letter only reached me this morning. It chased all over the country after me. I'm at Aunt Molly's.'

'I'll give you the Combined Ops number and extension.'

'I had to put Bijou off,' she said quite calmly. 'I'll get in touch with Chips tomorrow.'

'He thought you might be at the Jeavonses'.'

'Why didn't he ring up then?'

'He hoped he was going to see you at the Madrid—make a surprise of it.'

She did not rise to that.

'The Jeavons house is more of a shambles than ever,' she said. 'Eleanor Walpole-Wilson is there—Aunt Molly usen't to like her, but they're great buddies now—and then there are two Polish officers whose place was bombed and had nowhere to go, and a girl who's having a baby by a Norwegian sailor.'

'Who's having a baby by a Norwegian sailor?' asked Stevens. 'No one we know, I hope.'

He had come back to the table at that moment. Such as it was, my demonstration had been made, was now, of necessity, over. There was nothing more to be said. The situation could only be accepted, until, in one field or another, further action might be required. That, at least, was so far as I myself was concerned. Recognition of this as a fact seemed unavoidable. The return of Stevens brought about a reshuffle of places, resulting in Mrs Maclintick finding herself next him on the banquette with me on the other side of her. Priscilla and Moreland were opposite. This seating had been chiefly organised by Stevens himself, possibly with no more aim than a display of power. I congratulated him on his MC.

'Oh, that?' he said. 'Pretty hot stuff to have one of those, isn't it? I really deserved it—we both did—for putting up with that Aldershot course where we first met. It was far more gruelling than anything expected of me later—those lectures on the German army. Christ, I dream about them. Are you at the War House or somewhere?'

'On leave—going down to the country tomorrow.'

'Hope you have as much fun on it as I've had on mine,' he said.

He seemed totally unaware that, among members of Priscilla's family—myself, for example—conventional reservations might exist regarding the part he was at that moment playing; that at least they might not wish to hear rubbed in what an enjoyable time he had been having as her lover. All the same, shamelessness of any kind, perhaps rightly, always exacts a certain respect. Lovell himself was no poor hand at displaying cheek. As usual, a kind of poetic justice was observable in what was happening.

'I suppose your destination is secret?'

'Don't quote me, but there's been a tropical issue.'

'Middle East?'

'That's my opinion.'

'Might be the Far East.'

'You never know. I think the other myself.'

Until then Moreland had been sitting in silence, apparently unable, or unwilling, to cope with the changed composition of the party at the table. This awkwardness with new arrivals had always been a trait of his, and probably had little or nothing to do with the comparatively unfamiliar note struck by the personality and conversation of Stevens. A couple of middle-aged music critics he had known all his life might have brought about just the same sort of temporary stoppage in Moreland's conversation. Later, he would recover; talk them off their feet. Now, this change took place, he spoke with sudden animation.

'My God, I wish I could be transplanted to the Far East without further delay,' he said. 'I'd be prepared to be like Brahms and play the piano in a brothel—even play Brahms's own compositions in a brothel, part of the *Requiem* would be very suitable—if I could only be somewhere like Saigon or Bangkok, leave London and the blackout behind.'

'A naval officer I talked to on a bus the other day, just back from Hong-Kong, reported life there as bloody amusing,' said Stevens. 'But look, Mr Moreland, there's something I must tell you before we go any further. Of course, I wanted to see Nicholas again, that was why I came over, but another pretty considerable item was that I had recognised you. I saw a chance of telling you personally what a fan of yours I am. Hearing your *Tone Poem Vieux Port* performed at Birmingham was one of the high spots of my early life. I was about sixteen, I suppose. You've probably forgotten Birmingham ever had a chance of hearing it, or you yourself ever came there. I haven't. I've always wanted to meet you and say how much it thrilled me.'

This was an unexpected trump card for Stevens to play. Moreland, always modest about his own works, showed permissible signs of pleasure at this sudden hearty praise from such an unexpected source. Music was an entirely new line from Stevens, so far as I knew him, until this moment. Obviously it constituted a weapon in his armoury, perhaps a formidable one. He had certainly opened up operations on an extended front since our weeks together at Aldershot. Mrs Maclintick broke in at this point.

'*Vieux Port*'s the one Maclintick always liked,' she said. 'He used to go on about that piece of music until I told him never to mention the thing to me again.'

'When it was performed at Birmingham, Maclintick was about the only critic who offered any praise,' said Moreland. 'Even that old puss Gossage was barely civil. The rest of the critics buried my music completely and me with it. I feel now like Nero meeting in Hades the unknown mourner who strewed flowers on his grave.'

'You're not in your grave yet, Moreland,' said Mrs Maclintick, 'nor even in Hades, though you always talk as if you were. I never knew such a morbid man.'

'I meant the grave of my works rather than my own,' said Moreland. 'That's what it looked like that year at Birmingham. Anyway, not being dead's no argument against feeling like Nero. Quite the reverse.'

'Not much hope of a Roman orgy here,' said Stevens. 'Even the food's hard to wallow in, don't you agree, Mrs Maclintick?'

He turned his attention to her, in the manner of his particular brand of narcissism, determined to make a conquest, separate and individual, of everyone sitting at the table.

'From the way you talk,' he said, 'you don't sound as great a Moreland fan as you should be. Fancy saying you got tired of hearing *Vieux Port* praised. I'm surprised at you.'

'I'm a fan all right,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'Not half, I am. You should see him in bed in the morning before he's shaved. You couldn't help being a fan then.'

There was some laughter at that, in which Moreland himself joined loudly, though he would probably have preferred his relationship with Mrs Maclintick to have been expressed less explicitly in the presence of Priscilla. At the same time, Mrs Maclintick's tone had been not without affection of a kind. The reply she had made, whether or not with that intention, hindered Stevens from continuing to discuss Moreland's music more or less seriously, an object he seemed to have in view. However, this did not prevent him from increasing, if only in a routine manner, his own air of finding Mrs Maclintick attractive, a policy that was beginning to make a good impression on her. This behaviour, however light-hearted, was perhaps displeasing to Priscilla, no doubt unwilling to admit to herself that, for Stevens, one woman was, at least up to a point, as good as another; anyway when sitting in a restaurant. She may reasonably have felt that no competition should be required of her to keep him to herself. There was, of course, no question of Stevens showing any real interest in Mrs Maclintick, but, in circumstances prevailing, Priscilla probably regarded all his attention as belonging to herself alone. Whether or not this was the reason, she had become quite silent. Now she interrupted the conversation.

'Listen . . .'

'What?'

'I believe there's a blitz on.'

We all stopped talking for a moment. A faint suggestion of distant gunfire merged into the noise of traffic from the street, the revving up of a lorry's engine somewhere just outside the back of the building. No one else at the other tables round about showed any sign of noticing indications of a raid.

'I don't think so,' said Moreland. 'Living in London all the time, one gets rather a good ear for the real thing.'

'Raids when I'm on leave make me bloody jumpy,' said Stevens. 'Going into action you've got a whole lot of minor responsibilities to keep your mind off the danger. A gun, too. In an air-raid I feel they're after me, and there's nothing I can do about it.'

I asked how much hand-to-hand fighting he had been engaged in.

'The merest trifle.'

'What was it like?'

'Not too bad.'

'Hard on the nerves?'

'Difficult to describe,' he said. 'You feel worked up just before, of course, rather like going to school for the first time or the morning of your first job. Those prickly sensations, but exciting too.'

'Going back to school?' said Moreland. 'You make warfare sound most disturbing. I shouldn't like that at all.

In London, it's the sheer lack of sleep gets one down. However, there's been quite a let-up the last day or two. Do you have raids where you are, Nick?'

'We do.'

'I thought it was all very peaceful there.'

'Not always.'

'I have an impression of acute embarrassment when bombed,' said Moreland. 'That rather than gross physical fear—at present anyway. It's like an appalling display of bad manners one has been forced to witness. The utter failure of a party you are giving—a friend's total insensitiveness about some delicate matter—suddenly realising you've lost your note-case, your passport, your job, your girl. All those things combined and greatly multiplied.'

'You didn't like it the other night when the glass shattered in the bathroom window,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'You were trembling like a leaf, Moreland.'

'I don't pretend to be specially brave,' said Moreland, put out by this comment. 'Anyway, I'd just run up three flights of stairs and nearly caught it in the face. I was just trying to define the sensation one feels—don't you agree, Nick, it's a kind of embarrassment?'

'Absolutely.'

'Depends on such a lot of different things,' said Stevens. 'People you're with, sleep, food, drink, and so on. This show I was in——'

He did not finish the sentence, because Priscilla interrupted. She had gone rather white. For a second one saw what she would be like when she was old.

'For God's sake don't talk about the war all the time,' she said. 'Can't we sometimes get away from it for a few seconds?'

This was quite different from her earlier detached tone.

She seemed all at once in complete despair. Stevens, not best pleased at having his story wrecked, mistook the reason, whatever it was, for Priscilla's sudden agitation. He thought she was afraid, altogether a misjudgment.

'But it isn't a blitz, sweetie,' he said. 'There's nothing to get worked up about.'

Although, in the light of his usual manner of addressing people, he might easily have called Mrs Maclintick 'sweetie', this was, in fact, the first time he had spoken to Priscilla with that mixture of sharpness and affection that can suddenly reveal an intimate relationship.

'I know it isn't a blitz,' she said. 'We long ago decided that. I was just finding the conversation boring.'

'All right. Let's talk of something else,' he said.

He spoke indulgently, but without grasping that something had gone badly wrong.

'I've got rather a headache.'

'Oh, sorry, darling. I thought you had the wind up.'

'Not in the least.'

'Why didn't you say you had a head?'

'It's only just started.'

She was looking furious now, furious and upset. I knew her well enough to be fairly used to Priscilla's quickly changing moods, but her behaviour was now inexplicable to me, as it obviously was to Stevens. I imagined that, having decided a mistake had been made in allowing him to join our table, she had now settled on a display of bad temper as the best means of getting him away.

'Well, what would you like to do?' he said. 'We've got nearly an hour still. Shall I take you somewhere quieter? It is rather airless and noisy in here.'

He seemed anxious to do anything he could to please her. Up till now they might have been any couple having dinner together, no suggestion of a particularly close bond, Stevens's ease of manner concealing rather than emphasising what was happening. Now, however, his voice showed a mixture of concern and annoyance that gave more away about the pair of them. This change of tone was certainly due to incomprehension on his part, rather than any exhibitionistic desire to advertise that Priscilla was his mistress; although he might well have been capable of proclaiming that fact in other company.

'Where?' she said.

This was not a question. It was a statement to express the truth that no place existed in this neighbourhood where they could go, and be likely to find peace and quiet.

'We'll look for somewhere.'

She fixed her eyes on him. There was silence for a moment.

'I think I'll make for home.'

'But aren't you coming to see me off—you said you were.'

'I've got a splitting headache,' she said. 'I've suddenly begun to feel perfectly awful, too, for some reason. Simply dreadful.'

'Not up to coming to the station?'

'Sorry.'

She was nearly in tears. Stevens plainly had no idea what had gone wrong. I could not guess either, unless the comparative indifference of his mood—after what had no doubt been a passionate interlude of several days—had upset her. However, although young, and, until recently, probably not much accustomed to girls of Priscilla's type, he was sufficiently experienced with women in general to have certain settled principles in dealing with situations of this kind. At any rate, he was now quite decisive.

'I'll take you back then.'

Faced with the prospect of abandoning a party where he had begun to be enjoyably the centre of attention, Stevens spoke without a great deal of enthusiasm, at the same time with complete sincerity. The offer was a genuine one, not a polite fiction to be brushed aside on the grounds he had a train to catch. He intended to go through with the proposal. Certainly it was the least he could do, but, at the same time, considering Priscilla's demeanour and what I knew of his own character, even this minimum was to display magnanimity of a sort. He accepted her sudden decision with scarcely any demur. Priscilla seemed to appreciate that.

'No.'

She spoke quite firmly.

'Of course I will.'

'You've got all your stuff here. You can't lug it back to Kensington.'

'I'll pick it up here again after I've dropped you.'

'You can't do that.'

'Of course I can.'

'No . . .' she said. 'I'd much rather you didn't . . . I don't quite know . . . I just feel suddenly rather odd . . . I can't think what it is . . . I mean I'd rather be alone . . . Must be alone . . .'

The situation had become definitely very painful. Even Mrs Maclintick was silenced, awed by this interchange. Moreland kept on lighting cigarettes and stubbing them out. It all seemed to take hours of time.

'I'm going to take you back.'

'No, really no.'

'But——'

'I can take you back, Priscilla,' I said. 'Nothing easier.'

That settled things finally.

'I don't want anybody to take me back,' she said. 'I'll say goodbye now.'

She waved her hand in the direction of Stevens.

'I'll write,' she said.

He muttered something about getting a taxi for her, began to try and move out from where he was sitting. People leaving or arriving at the next table penned him in. Priscilla turned and made quickly for the glass doors. Just before she went through them, she turned and blew a kiss. Then she disappeared from sight. By the time Stevens had extracted himself, she was gone. All the same, he set off across the room to follow her.

'What a to-do all of a sudden,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'Did she behave like this when you knew her, Moreland?'

I thought it possible, though not very likely, that Priscilla had gone to look for Lovell at the Madrid. That surmise belonged to a way of life more dramatic than probable, the sort of development that would have greatly appealed to Lovell himself; in principle, I mean, even had he been in no way personally concerned. However, for better or worse, things like that do not often happen. At the same time, even though sudden desire to make it up with her husband might run contrary to expectation, I was no nearer conjecturing why Priscilla had gone off in this manner, leaving Stevens cold. The fact she might be in love with him was no reason to prevent a sudden display of capricious temper, brought on, likely as not, by the many stresses of the situation. Stevens himself was no doubt cynical enough in the way he was taking the affair, although even that was uncertain, since Lovell had supposed marriage could be in question. Lovell might be right. Stevens's false step, so far as Priscilla was concerned, seemed to be marked by the moment he had suggested her fear about the supposititous air-raid warning. That had certainly made her angry. Even allowing for unexpected nervous reactions in wartime, it was much more likely she heard an air-raid warning—where none existed—because of her highly strung state, rather than from physical fear. Stevens had shown less than his usual grasp in suggesting such a thing. Possibly this nervous state stemmed from some minor row; possibly Priscilla's poorish form earlier in the evening suggested that she was beginning to tire of Stevens, or feared he might be tiring of her. On the other hand, the headache, the thought of her lover's departure, could equally have upset her; while the presence of the rest of the party at the table, the news that her husband was in London, all helped to discompose her. Reasons for her behaviour were as hard to estimate as that for giving herself to Stevens in the first instance. If she merely wanted amusement, while Lovell's physical presence was removed by forces over which he had no control, why make all this trouble about it, why not keep things quiet? Lovell, at worst, appeared a husband preferable to many. Even if less indefatigably lively than Stevens, he was not without his own brand of energy. Was 'trouble', in fact, what Priscilla required? Was her need—the need of certain women—to make men unhappy? There was something of the kind in her face. Perhaps she was simply tormenting Stevens now for a change; so to speak, varying the treatment. If so, she might have her work cut out to disturb him in the way she was disturbing Lovell; had formerly disturbed Moreland. The fact that he was able to look after himself pretty well in that particular sphere was implicit in the manner Stevens made his way back across the room. He looked politely worried, not at all shattered.

'Did she get a taxi?'

'She must have done. She'd disappeared into the blackout by the time I got to the door on the street. There were several cabs driving away at that moment.'

'She did take on,' said Mrs Maclintick.

'It's an awful business,' said Stevens. 'The point is I'm so immobile myself at this moment. There's a lot of junk in the cloakroom here, a valise, God knows what else—odds and ends they wanted me to get for the Mess—all of which I've got to hump to the station before long.'

He looked at his watch; then sat down again at the table.

'Let's have some more to drink,' he said, 'that's if we can get it.'

For a short time he continued to show some appearance of being worried about Priscilla, expressing anxiety, asserting she had seemed perfectly all right earlier that evening. He reproached himself for not being able to do more to help her get home, wanting our agreement that there was anyway little or nothing he could have done. After repeating these things several times, he showed himself finally prepared to accept the fact that what had happened was all in the day's work where women were concerned.

'I'll ring up when I get to the station,' he said.

Priscilla's behaviour had positively stimulated Mrs Maclintick, greatly cheered her up.

'Whatever's wrong with the girl?' she said. 'Why does she want to go off like that? I believe she didn't approve of me wearing these filthy old clothes. Got to, doing the job I do. No good dressing up as if you were going to a wedding. You know her, Moreland. What was it all about?'

'I haven't the least idea,' said Moreland sharply.

He showed no wish to discuss Priscilla's behaviour further. If, once or twice that evening, he had already brought a reminder of his behaviour when out with Matilda, now, by the tone he used, he recalled Maclintick out with Mrs Maclintick. She may have recognised that herself, because she pursed her lips.

'Wonder what's happened to Max,' she said. 'He should have been along by now. That turn must be over. It's a short one anyway, and he comes on early at the Madrid.'

'Probably gone to bed,' said Moreland.

Mrs Maclintick agreed that must have happened.

'More sense than sitting about in a place like this,' she added, 'especially if you've got to get up early in the morning like I have.'

'That's not Max Pilgrim you're talking about?' asked Stevens.

'He's our lodger,' said Moreland.

Stevens showed interest. Moreland explained he had known Pilgrim for years.

'I've always hoped to see him do his stuff,' said Stevens. 'There was a chance at this revival of his old songs at the Madrid—I suppose that's what he was coming on here from. I read about it in the paper and wanted to go, but Priscilla wouldn't hear of it. I can see now she hasn't been herself all day. I ought to have guessed she might be boiling up for a scene. You should know how girls are going to behave after you've been with them for a bit. I see I was largely to blame. She said she'd seen Pilgrim before and he bored her to hell. I told her I thought his songs marvellous. In fact I used to try and write stuff like that myself.'

I asked if he had ever sold anything of that sort to magazines.

'Only produced it for private consumption,' he said, laughing. 'The sole verses I ever placed was sentimental stuff in the local press. They wouldn't have liked my Max Pilgrim line, if it could be called that.'

'Let's hear some of it,' said Moreland.

He had evidently taken a fancy to Stevens, who possessed in his dealings that energetic, uninhibited impact which makes its possessor master of the immediate social situation; though this mastery always requires strong consolidating forces to keep up the initial success. Mr Deacon used to say nothing spread more ultimate gloom at a party than an exuberant manner which has roused false hopes. Stevens did not do that. He could summon more than adequate powers of consolidation after his preliminary attack. The good impression he had made on Moreland was no doubt helped, as things stood, by Priscilla's departure. Moreland wanted to forget about her, start off on a new subject. Stevens was just the man for that. Mention of his verse offered the channel. There were immediate indications that Stevens would not need much pressing about giving an example of his own compositions.

'For instance, I wrote something about my first unit when I was with them,' he said.

'Recite it to us.'

Stevens laughed, a merely formal gesture of modesty. He turned to me.

'Nicholas,' he said, 'were you ever junior subaltern in your battalion?'

'For what seemed a lifetime.'

'And proposed the King's health in the Mess on guest nights?'

'Certainly.'

'*Mr Vice, the Loyal Toast*—then you rose to your feet and said: *Gentlemen, the King.*'

‘Followed by *The Allied Regiments*—such-and-such a regiment of Canada and such-and-such a regiment of Australia.’

‘Do you mean to say this actually happened to you yourself, Nick?’ asked Moreland. ‘You stood up and said *Gentlemen, the King*?’

He showed total incredulity.

‘I used to love it,’ said Stevens. ‘Put everything I had into the words. It was the only thing I liked about the dump. I only asked all this because I wrote some lines called *Guest Night*.’

‘Shoot them off,’ said Moreland.

Stevens cleared his throat, then, without the least self-consciousness, began his recitation in a low, dramatic voice:

‘On Thursday it’s a parade to dine,
The Allied Regiments and the King
Are pledged in dregs of tawny wine,
But now the Colonel’s taken wing.

Yet subalterns still talk and tease
(Wide float the clouds of Craven A
Stubbed out in orange peel and cheese)
Of girls and Other Ranks and pay.

If—on last night-scheme—B Coy broke
The bipod of the borrowed bren:
The Sergeants’ Mess is out of coke:
And Gordon nearly made that Wren.

Along the tables of the Mess
The artificial tulips blow,
Tired as a prostitute’s caress
Their crimson casts no gladdening glow.

Why do those phallic petals fret
The heart, till coils—like Dannert wire—
Concentrically expand regret
For lost true love and found desire?

While Haw-Haw, from the radio,
Aggrieved, insistent, down the stair,
With distant bugles, sweet and low,
Commingles on the winter air.'

Stevens ceased to declaim. He smiled and sat back in his seat. He was certainly unaware of the entirely new conception of himself his own spoken verses had opened up for me. Their melancholy revealed quite another side of his nature, one concealed as a rule by aggressive cheerfulness. This melancholy was no doubt a logical counterpart, the reverse surface of the coin, one to be expected from high spirits of his own particular sort, bound up as they were with a perpetual discharge of personality. All the same, one never learns to expect the obvious. This contrast of feeling in him might have been an element that attracted Priscilla, something she recognised when they first met at Frederica's; something more fundamentally melodramatic, even, than Lovell himself could achieve. We all expressed appreciation. Moreland was, I think, almost as surprised as myself.

'Not much like Max's stuff though,' he said.

'All the same, Max Pilgrim was the source.'

'Nor very cheerful,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'I do believe you're as morbid as Moreland is himself.'

Although she spoke in her accustomed spirit of depreciation, Stevens must have achieved his aim in making more or less of a conquest, because she smiled quite kindly at him after saying that. Moved by her complaisance, or, more likely, by the repetition of his own lines, his face registered self-pity.

'I wasn't feeling very cheerful at the time,' he said. 'That unit I went to as a one-pipper fairly got me down.'

Then, immediately, one of those instantaneous changes of mood, that were so much a part of him, took place.

'Would you like to hear one of the bawdy ones?' he asked.

Before anyone could reply, another officer, a big captain with a red face and cropped hair, like Stevens also wearing battle-dress, passed our table. Catching sight of Stevens, this man began to roar with laughter and point.

'Odo, my son,' he yelled. 'Fancy seeing your ugly mug here.'

'God, Brian, you old swine.'

'I suppose you've been painting the town red, and, like me, have got to catch the night train back to the bloody grind again. I've been having a pretty wet weekend, I can tell you.'

'Come and have a drink, Brian. There's lots of time.'

'Not going to risk being cashiered for WOASAWL.'

'What on earth's that he said?' asked Mrs Maclintick.

'While-On-Active-Service-Absent-Without-Leave,' said Stevens, characteristically not allowing her even for a second out of his power by disregarding the question. 'Oh, come on, Brian, no hurry yet.'

The red-faced captain was firm.

'Got to find a taxi, for one thing. Besides, I've baggage to pick up.'

Stevens looked at his watch.

'I've got baggage too,' he said, 'a valise and a kit bag and some other junk. Perhaps you're right, Brian, and I'd do well to accompany you. Anyway it would halve the taxi fare.'

He rose from the table.

'Then I'll be bidding you all goodbye,' he said.

'Do you really have to go?' said Mrs Maclintick. 'We're just beginning to get to know you. Are you annoyed about something, like the girl you were with?'

In the course of her life she could rarely have gone further towards making an effort to show herself agreeable. It was a triumph for Stevens. He laughed, conscious of this, pleased at his success.

'Duty calls,' he said. 'I only wish I could stay till four in the morning, but they're beginning to shut down here as it is, even if I hadn't a train to catch.'

We said goodbye to him.

'Wonderful to have met you, Mr Moreland,' said Stevens. 'Here's to the next performance of *Vieux Port* on the same programme as your newest work—and may I be there to hear. Goodbye, Nicholas.'

He held out his hand. From being very sure of himself, he had now reverted a little to that less absolute confidence of the days when I had first known him. He was probably undecided as to the most effective note to strike in taking leave of us. It may at last have dawned on him that all the business of Priscilla could include embarrassments of a kind to which he had hitherto given little or no thought. The hesitation he showed possibly indicated indecision as to whether or not he should make further reference to her sudden withdrawal from the party. If, for a second, he had contemplated speaking of that, he must have changed his mind.

'We'll be meeting again,' he said.

'Goodbye.'

'And Happy Landings.'

'Come on, Odo, you oaf,' said the red-faced captain, 'cut out the fond farewells, or there won't be a cab left on the street. We've got to get cracking. Don't forget there'll be all that waffle with the RTO.'

They went off together, slapping each other on the back.

'He's a funny boy,' said Mrs Maclintick.

Stevens had made an impression on her. There could be no doubt of that. The way she spoke showed it. Although his presence that night had been unwelcome to myself—and the other two at first had also displayed no great wish to have him at the table—a distinct sense of flatness was discernible now Stevens was gone. Even Moreland, who had fidgeted when Mrs Maclintick had expressed regrets at this departure, seemed aware that the conviviality of the party was reduced by his removal. I said I should have to be making for bed.

'Oh, God, don't let's break it all up at once,' Moreland said. 'We've only just met. Those others prevented our talking of any of the things we really want to discuss—like the meaning of art, or how to get biscuits on the black market.'

'They won't serve any more drink here.'

'Come back to our place for a minute or two. There might be some beer left. We'll get old Max out of bed. He loves a gossip.'

'All right—but not for long.'

We paid the bill, went out into Regent Street. In the utter blackness, the tarts, strange luminous form of nocturnal animal life, flickered the bulbs of their electric torches. From time to time one of them would play the light against her own face in self-advertisement, giving the effect of candles illuminating a holy picture in the shadows of a church.

'Ingenious,' said Moreland.

'Don't doubt Maclintick would have found it so,' said Mrs Maclintick, not without bitterness.

A taxi set down its passengers nearby. We secured it. Moreland gave the address of the flat where he used to live with Matilda.

'I've come to the conclusion the characteristic women most detest in a man is unselfishness,' he said.

This remark had no particular bearing on anything that had gone before, evidently giving expression only to one of his long interior trains of thought.

'They don't have to put up with much of it,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'It's passed me by these forty years, but perhaps I'm lucky.'

'How their wives must have hated those saintly kings in the Middle Ages,' Moreland said. 'Still, as you truly remark, Audrey, one's speaking rather academically.'

The taxi had already driven off, and Moreland was putting the key in the lock of the front-door of the house, when the Air-raid Warning began to sound.

'Just timed it nicely,' Moreland said. 'That's the genuine article, not like the faint row when we were at dinner. No doubt at all allowed to remain in the mind. Are the flat's curtains drawn? I was the last to leave and it's the sort of thing I always forget to do.'

'Max will have fixed them,' said Mrs Maclintick.

We climbed the stairs, of which there were a great number, as they occupied the top floor flat.

'I hope Max is all right,' she said. 'I never like the idea of him being out in a raid. There's bound to be trouble if he spends the night in a shelter. He's always talking about giving the Underground a try-out, but I tell him I won't have him doing any such thing.'

If Moreland was one of Mrs Maclintick's children, clearly Max Pilgrim was another. We entered the flat behind her. Moreland did not turn on the switch until it was confirmed all windows were obscured. In the light, the apartment was revealed as untidier than in Matilda's day, otherwise much the same in outward appearance and decoration.

'Max . . .' shouted Mrs Maclintick.

She uttered this call from the bedroom. A faint answering cry came from another room further up the short passage. Its message was indeterminate, the tone, high and tremulous, bringing back echoes of a voice that had twittered through myriad forgotten night-clubs in the small hours.

'We've got a visitor, Max,' shouted Mrs Maclintick again.

'I hope there'll turn out to be some beer left,' said Moreland. 'I don't feel all that sure.'

He went into the kitchen. I remained in the passage. A door slowly opened at the far end. Max Pilgrim appeared, a tall willowy figure in horn-rimmed spectacles and a green brocade dressing gown. It was years since I had last seen him, where, I could not even remember, whether in the distance at a party, or, less likely, watching his act at some cabaret show. For a time he had shared a flat with Isobel's brother, Hugo, but we had not been in close touch with Hugo at that period, and had, as it happened, never visited the place. There had been talk of Pilgrim giving up his performances in those days and joining Hugo in the decorating business. Even at that time, Pilgrim's songs had begun to 'date', professionally speaking. However, that project had never come off, and, whatever people might say about being old-fashioned, Pilgrim continued to find himself in demand right up to the outbreak of war. Now, of course, he expressed to audiences all that was most nostalgic. Although his hair was dishevelled—perhaps because of that—he looked at this very moment as if about to break into one of his songs. He moved a little way up the passage, then paused.

'Here you are at last, my dears,' he said. 'You don't know how glad I am to see you. You must forgive what I'm looking like, which must be a perfect sight. I took off my slap before going to bed and am presenting you with a countenance natural and unadorned, something I'm always most unwilling to do.'

He certainly appeared pale as death. I had thought at first he was merely looking much older than I remembered. Now I accepted as explanation what he had said about lack of make-up. I noticed, too, that his right hand was bandaged. The voice was fainter than usual. He looked uncertainly at me, disguised in uniform. I explained I was Hugo's brother-in-law; that we had met once or twice in the past. Pilgrim took my right hand in his left.

'My dear . . .'

'How are you?'

'I've been having a most unenjoyable evening,' he said.

He did not at once release my hand. For some reason I felt a sudden lack of ease, an odd embarrassment, even apprehension, although absolutely accustomed to the rather unduly fervent social manner he was employing. I tried to withdraw from his grasp, but he held on tenaciously, almost as if he were himself requiring actual physical support.

'We hoped you were coming on from the Madrid to join us at dinner,' I said. 'Hugh tells me you were doing some of the real old favourites there.'

'I was.'

'Did you leave the Madrid too late?'

Then Max Pilgrim let go my hand. He folded his arms. His eyes were fixed on me. Although no longer linked to him by his own grasp, I continued to feel indefinably uncomfortable.

'You knew the Madrid?' he asked.

'I've been there—not often.'

'But enjoyed yourself there?'

'Always.'

'You'll never do that again.'

'Why not?'

'The Madrid is no more,' he said.

'Finished?'

'Finished.'

'The season or just your act?'

'The place—the building—the tables and chairs—the dance-floor—the walls—the ceiling—all those gold pillars. A bomb hit the Madrid full pitch this evening.'

'Max . . .'

Mrs Maclintick let out a cry. It was a reasonable moment to give expression to a sense of horror. Moreland had come into the passage from the kitchen, carrying a bottle of beer and three glasses. He stood for a moment, saying nothing; then we all went into the sitting-room. Pilgrim at once took the armchair. He nursed his bound hand, rocking himself slowly forward and back.

'In the middle of my act,' he said. 'It was getting the bird in a big way. Never experienced the like before, even on tour.'

'So there *was* a blitz earlier in the evening,' said Moreland.

'There was,' said Pilgrim. 'There certainly was.'

No one spoke for some seconds. Pilgrim continued to sit in the chair, looking straight in front of him, holding his wounded hand with the other. I knew there was a question I ought to ask, but felt almost physically inhibited from forming the words. In the end, Mrs Maclintick, not myself, put the enquiry.

'Anybody killed?'

Pilgrim nodded.

'Many?'

Pilgrim nodded again.

'Helped to get some of them out,' he said.

'There were a lot?'

'Of course it's a ghastly muddle on these occasions,' he said. 'Frenzied. Like Dante's Inferno. All in the black-out too. The wardens and I carried out six or seven at least. Must have. They'd all had it. I knew some of them personally. Nasty business, I can assure you. I suppose a few got away with it—like myself. They tried to persuade me to go with them and have some treatment, but after I'd had my hand bound up, all I wanted was home, sweet home. It's only a scratch, so I came back and tucked up. But I'm glad you're all here. Very glad.'

There was no escape now. So far as possible, certainty had to be established. An effort must be made.

'Bijou Ardglass was there with a party.'

Pilgrim looked at me with surprise.

'You knew that?' he said.

'Yes.'

'Were you asked? If so, you were lucky to have another engagement.'

'They were—'

'Bijou's table was just where it came through the ceiling.'

'So—'

'I'm afraid it was Bijou's last party.'

Pilgrim glanced away, quickly passing the bandaged hand across his eyes. It was an instinctive, not in the least dramatised, gesture.

'But the rest of them?'

'No one survived from that corner. That was where the worst of the damage was done. My end of the room wasn't so bad. That's why I'm here now.'

'You're sure all the Ardglass party—'

'They were the ones I helped carry out,' said Pilgrim.

He spoke quite simply.

'Chips Lovell—'

'He'd been at the table.'

Moreland looked across at me. Mrs Maclintick took Pilgrim's arm.

'How did you get back yourself, Max?' she asked.

'I got a lift on one of the fire-engines. Can you imagine?'

'Here,' said Moreland. 'Have some beer.'

Pilgrim took the glass.

'I'd known Bijou for years,' he said. 'Known her when she was a little girl with a plait trying to get a job in the chorus. Wasn't any good for some reason. Can't think why, because she had the Theatre in her blood both sides. Do you know, Bijou's father played Abanazar in *Aladdin* when my mother was Principal Boy in the same show? Anyway, it all turned out best for Bijou in the end. Did much better as a mannequin than she'd ever have done on the boards. Met richer men, for one thing.'

There was a pause. Moreland cleared his throat uncomfortably. Mrs Maclintick sniffed. In the far distance, unexpectedly soon, the All Clear droned. It was followed, an instant later, by a more local siren.

'That one didn't take long,' Moreland said.

'Another tip-and-run raider,' said Pilgrim. 'The fashion of the moment.'

'It was a single plane caught the Madrid?'

'That's it.'

'I'll make some tea,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'Do us good.'

'Just what I need, Audrey, my dear,' said Pilgrim, sighing. 'I couldn't think what it was. Now I know it's tea—not beer at all.'

He drank the beer all the same. Mrs Maclintick went off to the kitchen. It became clear that an unpleasant duty must be performed. There was no avoiding it. Priscilla would have to be told about the Madrid as soon as possible. If I called up the Jeavonses' house right away, the telephone, with any luck, would be answered by Molly Jeavons herself. I could tell her what had happend. She could break the news. So far as that went, even to make the announcement to Molly would be bad enough. It might be hard on her to have to tell Priscilla, but at least Molly was, by universal consent, a person adapted by nature to such harrowing tasks; warm-hearted, not over sensitive, grasping immediately the needs of the bereaved, saying just what was required, emotional yet never incapacitated by emotion. Molly, if I were lucky, would do the job. There was always the chance Priscilla herself might be at the other end of the line. That was a risk that had to be taken into consideration. In a cowardly way, I delayed action until Mrs Maclintick had returned with the tea. After finishing a cup, I asked if I might use the telephone.

'By the bed,' said Moreland.

Pilgrim began to muse aloud.

'Strange those young Germans up there trying to kill me,' he murmured to himself. 'Ungrateful too. I've always had such good times in Berlin.'

The bedroom was more untidy than would ever have been allowed in Matilda's day. I sat on the edge of the bed and dialled the Jeavons number. There was no buzz. I tried again. After several unsuccessful attempts, none of which even achieved the 'number unobtainable' sound, I rang the Exchange. There were further delays. Then the operator tried the Jeavons number. That, too, was unproductive. No sound of ringing came. The line was out of order. I gave it up and returned to the sitting room.

'I can't get through. I'll have to go.'

'Stay the night, if you like,' said Mrs Maclintick. 'You can sleep on the sofa. Maclintick often did in our Pimlico place. Spent almost more time there than he did in bed.'

The offer was unexpected, rather touching in the circumstances. I saw she was probably able to look after Moreland better than I thought.

'No—thanks all the same. As I failed on the telephone, I'll have to go in person.'

'Priscilla?' said Moreland.

'Yes.'

He nodded.

'What a job,' he said.

Max Pilgrim gathered his dressing gown round him. He yawned and stretched.

'I wonder when the next one will arrive,' he said. 'Worse than waiting for the curtain to go up.'

I said goodnight to them. Moreland came to the door.

'I suppose you've really got to do this?' he said.

'Not much avoiding it.'

'Glad it's not me,' he said.

'You're right to be.'

There seemed no more taxis left in London. I walked for a time, then, totally unlooked for at that hour, a bus stopped by the place I was passing. Without any very clear idea of doing more than move in a south-westerly direction, I boarded it, in this way travelled as far as a stop in the neighbourhood of Gloucester Road. Here the journey had to be resumed on foot. The pavements were endless, threading a way down them like those interminable rovings pursued in dreams. Cutting through several side turnings, I at last found myself among a conjunction of dark red brick Renaissance-type houses. In one of these the Jeavonses had lived for twenty years or more, an odd centre of miscellaneous hospitality to which Chips Lovell himself had first taken me. In the lower reaches of their street, two fire-engines were drawn up. By the light of electric torches, firemen and air-raid wardens were passing in and out of one of the front-doors. This particular house turned out to be the Jeavonses'. In the dark, little was to be seen of what was happening. Apart from these dim figures going to and fro, like the trolls in *Peer Gynt*, nothing seemed abnormal about the façade. There was no sign of damage to the structure. One of the wardens, in helmet and overalls, stopped by the steps and lit a cigarette.

'Did this house get it?'

'About an hour ago,' he said, 'that last tip-and-run raider.'

'Anybody hurt?'

He took the cigarette from his mouth and nodded.

'I know the people—are they about?'

'You know Mr Jeavons and Lady Molly?'

'Yes.'

'You've only just arrived here?'

'That's it.'

'Mr Jeavons and me are on the same warden-post,' he said. 'They've taken him down there. Giving him a cup of tea.'

'Was he injured?'

'It was her.'

'Badly?'

The warden looked at me as if I should not have asked that question.

'You hadn't heard?' he said.

'No.'

'Didn't survive.'

He went on speaking at once, as if from a kind of embarrassment at having to announce such a thing.

'She and the young lady,' he said. 'It was all at the back of the house. You wouldn't think there was a jot of damage out here in front, but there's plenty inside, I can tell you. Dreadful thing. Used to see a lot of them. Always very friendly people. Got their newspapers from me, matter of fact. If you know them, there's a lady inside can tell you all about it.'

'I'll go in.'

He threw away the stub of his cigarette and trod on it.

'So long,' he said.

'So long.'

He was right about there being a mess inside. A woman in some sort of uniform was giving instructions to the people clearing up. She turned out to be Eleanor Walpole-Wilson.

'Eleanor.'

She looked round.

'Hullo, Nick,' she said. 'Thank goodness you've come.'

She did not seem at all surprised to see me. She came across the hall. Now in her middle thirties, Eleanor was less unusual in appearance than as a girl. No doubt uniform suited her. Though her size and shape had also become more conventional, she retained an air of having been never properly assimilated to either sex. At the same time, big and broad-shouldered, she was not exactly a 'mannish' woman. Her existence might have been more viable had that been so.

'You've heard what's happened?' she said abruptly.

Her manner, too, so out of place in ordinary social relations, had equally come into its own.

'Molly's . . .'

'And Priscilla.'

'God.'

'One of the Polish officers too—the nice one. The other's pretty well all right, just a bang over the head. That wretched girl who got into trouble with the Norwegian has been taken to hospital. She'll be all right, too, when she's recovered from the shock. I don't know whether she'll keep the baby.'

It was clear all this briskness was specifically designed to carry Eleanor through. She must have been having a very bad time indeed.

'A man at the door—one of the wardens—said Ted was down at the post.'

'He was there when it happened. They may have taken him on to the hospital by now. How did you hear about it? I didn't know you were in London.'

'I'm passing through on leave.'

'Is Isobel all right?'

'She's all right. She's in the country.'

Just for the moment I felt unable to explain anything very lucidly, to break through the barricade of immediate action and rapid talk with which Eleanor was protecting herself. It was like trying to tackle her in the old days, when she had been training one of her dogs with a whistle, and would not listen to other people round her. She must have developed early in life this effective method of shutting herself off from the rest of the world; a weapon, no doubt, against parents and early attempts to make her live a conventional sort of life. Now, while she talked, she continued to move about the hall, clearing up some of the debris. She was wearing a pair of green rubber gloves that made me think of the long white ones she used to draw on at dances.

'We shall have to have a talk as to who must be told about all this—and in what order. Are you in touch with Chips?'

'Eleanor—Chips has been killed too.'

Eleanor stopped her tidying up. I told her what had happened at the Madrid. She began to take off the green gloves. People were passing through the passage all the time. Eleanor put the rubber gloves on the top of the marquetry cabinet Molly's sister had left her when she died, the one Ted Jeavons had never managed to move out of the hall.

'Let's go upstairs and sit down for a bit,' she said. 'I've had just about as much as I can take. We can sit in the drawing room. That was one of the rooms that came off least badly.'

We went up to the first floor. The drawing room, thick in dust and fallen plaster, had a long jagged fissure down one wall. There were two rectangular discoloured spaces where the Wilson and the Greuze had hung. These pictures had presumably been removed to some safer place at the outbreak of war. So, too, had a great many of the oriental bowls and jars that had formerly played such a part in the decoration. They might have been valuable or absolute rubbish; Lovell had always insisted the latter. The pastels, by some unknown hand, of Moroccan types remained. They were hanging at all angles, the glass splintered of one bearing the caption *Rainy Day at Marrakesh*. Eleanor and I sat on the sofa. She began to cry.

'It's all too awful,' she said, 'and I was so fond of Molly. You know, she usen't to like me. When Norah and I first shared a flat together, Molly didn't approve. She put out a story I wore a green pork-pie hat and a bow tie. It wasn't true. I never did. Anyway, why shouldn't I, if I wanted to? There I was in the country breeding labradors and bored to death, and all my parents wanted was for me to get married, which I hadn't the least wish to do. Norah came to stay and suggested I should join her in taking a flat. There it was. Norah was always quite good at getting jobs in shops and that sort of thing, and I found all the stuff I knew about dogs could be put to some use too when it came to the point. Besides, I'd always adored Norah.'

I had sometimes wondered how Eleanor's ménage with Norah Tolland had begun. No one ever seemed to know. Now it was explained.

'Where's Norah now?'

'In Scotland, driving for the Poles.'

She dried her eyes.

'Come on,' she said. 'We must get out some sort of plan. No good just sitting about. I'll find a pencil and paper.'

She began to rummage in one of the drawers.

'Here we are.'

We made lists of names, notes of things that would have to be done. One of the wardens came up to say that for the time being the house was safe to stay in, they were going home.

'Where are you spending the night, Nick?'

'A club.'

'There might be someone who could take you part of the way. The chief warden's got a car.'

'What about you?'

'I shall be all right. There's a room fitted up with a bed in the basement. Ted used it sometimes, if he had to come in very late.'

'Will you really be all right?'

She dismissed the question of herself rather angrily. The ARP official with the car was found.

'Goodbye, Eleanor.'

I kissed her, which I had never done before.

'Goodbye, Nick. Love to Isobel. It was lucky I was staying here really, because there'll be a lot that will have to be done.'

The fire-engines had driven away. The street was empty. I thought how good Eleanor was in a situation like this. Molly had been good, too, when it came to disaster. I wondered what would happen to Ted. The extraordinary thing about the outside of the house was that everything looked absolutely normal. Some sort of a notice about bomb damage had been stuck on the front-door by the wardens; otherwise there was nothing to indicate the place had been subjected to an attack from the air, which had killed several persons. This lack of outward display was comparable with the Madrid's fate earlier that evening, when a lot of talking in a restaurant had been sufficient to drown the sound of the Warning, the noise of the guns.

This must be what Dr Trelawney called 'the slayer of Osiris and his grievous tribute of blood'. I wondered if Dr Trelawney himself had survived: when Odo Stevens would receive the news: whether the Lovells' daughter, Caroline, would be brought up by her grandparents. Reflecting on these things, it did not seem all that long time ago that Lovell, driving back from the film studios in that extraordinary car of his, had suggested we should look in on the Jeavonses', because 'the chief reason I want to visit Aunt Molly is to take another look at Priscilla Tolland, who is quite often there.'

3

The first meal eaten in Mess after return from leave is always dispiriting. Room, smell, food, company, at first seemed unchanged; as ever, unenchanting. On taking a seat at table I remembered with suddenly renewed sense of internal discomfort that Stringham would be on duty. In the pressure of other things that had been happening, I had forgotten about him. However, when the beef appeared, it was handed round by a red-haired gangling young soldier with a hare-lip and stutter. There was no sign of Stringham. The new waiter could be permanent, or just a replacement imported to F Mess while Stringham himself was sick, firing a musketry course, temporarily absent for some other routine reason. Opportunity to enquire why he was gone, at the same time to betray no exceptional interest in him personally, arose when Soper complained of the red-haired boy's inability to remember which side of the plate, as a matter of common practice, were laid knife, fork and spoon.

'Like animals, some of them,' Soper said. 'As for getting a message delivered, you're covered with spit before he's halfway through.'

'What happened to the other one?'

If asked a direct question of that sort, Soper always looked suspicious. Finding, after a second or two, no grounds for imputing more than idle curiosity to this one, he returned a factual, though reluctant, reply.

'Went to the Mobile Laundry.'

'For the second time of asking, Soper,' said Macfie, 'will you pass the water jug?'

'Here you are, Doc. Those tablets come in yet?'

Macfie was gruff about the tablets, Soper persuasive. The Cipher Officer remarked on the amount of flu about. There was general agreement, followed by some discussion of prevalent symptoms. The subject of Stringham had to be started up again from scratch.

'Did you sack him?'

'Sack who?'

'The other Mess waiter.'

'What's he got to do with you?'

'Just wondered.'

'He was transferred to the Laundry from one day to the next. Bloody inconvenient for this Mess. He'd have done the job all right if Biggy hadn't been on at him all the time. I complained to the DAAG about losing a waiter like that, but he said it had got to go through.'

Biggs, present at table, but in one of his morose moods that day, neither denied nor confirmed his own part in the process of Stringham's dislodgement. He chewed away at a particularly tough piece of meat, looking straight in front of him. Soper, as if Biggs himself were not sitting there, continued to muse on the aversion felt by Biggs for Stringham.

'That chap drove Biggy crackers for some reason,' he said. 'Something about him. Wasn't only the way he talked. Certainly was a dopey type. Don't know how he got where he was. Had some education. I could see that. You'd think he'd have found better employment than a Mess waiter. Got a bad record, I expect. Trouble back in Civvy Street.'

That Stringham had himself engineered an exchange from F Mess to avoid relative persecution at the hands of Biggs was, I thought, unlikely. In his relationship with Biggs, even a grim sort of satisfaction to Stringham might be suspected, one of those perverse involutions of feeling that had brought him into the army in the first instance. Such sentiments were hard to unravel. They were perhaps no more tangled than the rest of the elements that made up Stringham's life—or anybody else's life when closely examined. Not only had he disregarded loopholes which invited avoidance of the Services—health, and, at that period, age too—but, in face of much apparent discouragement from the recruiting authorities, had shown uncharacteristic persistence to get where he was. One aspect of this determination to carry through the project of joining the army was no doubt an attempt to rescue a self-respect badly battered during the years with Miss Weedon; however much she might also have accomplished in setting Stringham on his feet. An innate restlessness certainly played a part too; taste for change, even for adventure of a sort; all perhaps shading off into a vague romantic patriotism that especially allured by its own ironic connotations, its very lack, so to speak, of what might be called contemporary intellectual prestige.

'Awfully chic to be killed,' he had said.

Death was a prize, at least on the face of it, that war always offered. Lovell's case had demonstrated how the unexpected could happen within a few hours to those who deplored a sedentary job. Thinking over Stringham's more immediate situation, it seemed likely that, hearing of a vacancy in the ranks of the Mobile Laundry, he had decided on impulse to explore a new, comparatively exotic field of army life in his self-imposed military pilgrimage. Bithel could even have marked down Stringham as a man likely to do credit to the unit he commanded. That, I decided, was even more probable. These speculations had taken place during one of the Mess's long silences, less nerve-racking than those at the general's table, but also, in most respects, even more dreary. Biggs suddenly, unexpectedly, returned to the subject.

'Glad that bugger's gone,' he said. 'Got me down. It's a fact he did. I've got worries enough as it is, without having him about the place.'

He spoke as if it were indeed a great relief to him. I had to admit to myself that Stringham's physical removal was a great relief to me too. This sense of deliverance, of moral alleviation, was at the same time tempered with more than a trace of guilt, because, so far as potential improvement in his state was in question, Stringham had left F Mess without the smallest assistance from myself. I dispelled such twinges of conscience by reflecting that the Mobile Laundry, at least while Bithel remained in command, led for the moment a raggle-taggle gipsy life, offering, at least on the face of it, a less thankless daily prospect than being a Mess waiter. If absorbed into the Divisional Concert Party, he might even bring off a vocalist's stage debut, something he used to talk of on the strength of having been briefly in the choir at school. In short, the problem seemed to me to resolve itself—after an honourable, even quixotic gesture on Stringham's part—to finding the least uncongenial niche available in the circumstances. That supposition was entirely my own. It was probably far removed from Stringham's personal ambitions, if these were at all formulated.

'What's on your mind, Biggy?' said Soper. 'You're not yourself today.'

'Oh, stuff it up,' said Biggs, 'I've got a pile of trouble. Those lawyers are going to skin me.'

When I saw Widmerpool that afternoon I spoke about Stringham going to the Mobile Laundry.

'It was my idea to send him there.'

'A very good one.'

'It seemed the solution.'

Widmerpool did not elaborate what he had done. I was surprised, rather impressed, by the speed with which he had taken action, especially after earlier remarks about leaving Stringham where he was. It looked as if Widmerpool had thought things over and decided there was something to be said for trying to make Stringham's existence more agreeable, however contrary that might be to a rule of life that taught disregard for the individual. I felt I had for once misjudged Widmerpool, too readily accepted the bleak façade displayed, which, anyway in Stringham's case, might screen a complex desire to conceal good nature, however intermittent.

General Liddament had to be faced on the subject of my own missed Free French opportunities. The matter was not one of sufficient importance—at the General's end—to ask for an interview through Greening, so I had to wait until the Divisional Commander was to be found alone. As I rarely saw him during daily routine, this took place once again on an exercise. Defence Platoon duties usually brought me to breakfast first on those mornings, even before Cocksidge, otherwise in the vanguard of the rest of the staff. The General varied in his habits, sometimes early, sometimes late. That morning, he had appeared at table before Cocksidge himself, who, as it turned out later, had been delayed by breaking a bootlace or cutting his rubber-like face shaving. When the General had drunk some tea, I decided to tackle him.

'I saw Major Finn in London, sir.'

'Finn?'

'Yes, sir.'

'How was he?'

'Very well, sir. Sent his respects. He said my French was not up to liaison work at battalion level.'

'Ah.'

That was General Liddament's sole comment. He drank more tea in huge gulps, while he studied a map. The fact that Cocksidge entered the room a minute or two later did not, I think, affect the conversation in any way; I mean so far as further discussion of my own affairs by the General might have taken place. That was already at an end. Cocksidge was quite overcome by finding the Divisional Commander already almost at the end of breakfast.

'Excuse me, sir,' he said, 'but I do believe they've given you the chipped cup. I'll change it at once, sir. I wonder how often I've spoken to the Mess Sergeant about that cup, sir, and told him never to give it to a senior officer, and above all not yourself, sir. I'll make sure it never happens again, sir.'

Military action in Syria had been making it clear why there had been call for more British liaison officers with the Free French overseas. I thought of the 9th Regiment of Colonial Infantry being harangued by someone with better command of the language—and more histrionic talent—than myself. Then the Germans attacked in Crete. The impression was that things were not going too well there. Meanwhile, the Division continued to train; policies, units, began to take more coherent shape, to harden: new weapons were issued: instructors improved. The Commanding Officer of the Reconnaissance Unit remained unappointed. I asked Widmerpool if he had progressed further in placing his own candidate. The question did not please him.

'Difficulties have arisen.'

'Someone else getting the command?'

'I can't quite understand what is happening,' said Widmerpool. 'There has been no opportunity to go into the matter lately. This Diplock case has been taking up so much of my time. The more I investigate, the more incriminated Diplock seems to be. There's going to be hell to pay. Hogbourne-Johnson is behaving very badly, making himself offensive to me personally, and doing his best to shield the man and cause obstruction. That is quite useless. I am confident I shall be able to show that Diplock's behaviour has been not merely irregular, but criminal. Pedlar is almost equally unwilling to believe the worst, but at least Pedlar approaches the matter with a reasonably open mind, even if a slow one.'

'Does the General know about Diplock?'

'Hogbourne-Johnson says there is not sufficient evidence yet to lay before him.'

In the matter of Diplock, I believed Widmerpool to be on the right track. Few things are more extraordinary in human behaviour than the way in which old sweats like this chief clerk Warrant Officer will suddenly plunge into serious misdoing—usually on account of a woman. Diplock might well have a career of petty dishonesty behind him, but this looked like something far more serious.

'Talking of the Recce Unit,' said Widmerpool, 'there's still some sorting out to be done about the officer establishment. At least one of the captaincies assigned to that unit, before it came into existence, is still—owing to some whim of the General's—in use elsewhere as a local rank. That is one of the things I want you to go into among the stuff I am leaving tonight.'

'Establishments without troops always make one think of *Dead Souls*. A military Chichikov could first collect battalions, then brigades, finally a Division—and be promoted major-general.'

I said that to tease Widmerpool, feeling pretty certain he had never read a line of Gogol, though he would rarely if ever admit to failure in recognising an allusion, literary or otherwise. On this occasion he merely nodded his head several times; then returned to the fact that, contrary to his usual practice, he would not be working after dinner that evening.

'For once I shall cut office hours tonight,' he said. 'I'm giving dinner to that fellow—for the moment his name escapes me—from the Military Secretary's branch, who is doing a tour of duty over here.'

'Is this in the interests of the Recce Unit appointment?'

Widmerpool winked, a habit of his only when in an exceptionally good temper.

'More important than that,' he said.

'Yourself?'

'Dinner may put the finishing touches to something.'

'Promotion?'

'Who knows? It's been in the air for some time, as a matter of fact.'

Widmerpool rarely allowed himself a night off in this manner. He worked like an automaton. Work, civil or military, was his sole interest. If it came to that, he never gave his assistant a night off either, if he could help it, because everyone who served under him was expected to do so to the fullest extent of his powers, which was no doubt reasonable enough. The result was that a great deal of work was completed in the DAAG's office, some useful, some less useful. On the whole the useful work, it had to be admitted, made up for a fair percentage of time and energy wasted on Widmerpool's pet projects, of which there were several. I was thinking of such things while stowing away papers in the safe that night, preparatory to leaving Headquarters for bed. I shut the safe and locked it. The time was ten o'clock or thereabouts. The telephone bell began to ring.

'DAAG's office.'

'Nick?'

The voice was familiar. All the same, I could not immediately place it. No officer at Div HQ used just that intimate inflexion when pronouncing my name.

'Speaking.'

'It's Charles.'

That took me no further. So far as I could remember, none of the local staff were called 'Charles'. It must be someone recently arrived in the place, who knew me.

'Charles who?'

'Private Stringham, sir—pardon the presumption.'

'Charles—yes—sorry.'

'Bit of luck catching you in.'

'I'm just leaving, as a matter of fact. How did you know I was here?'

'I rang up F Mess first—in the character of General Fauncefoot-Fritwell's ADC.'

'Who on earth is General Fauncefoot-Fritwell?'

'Just a name that occurred to me as belonging to the sort of officer of senior rank who would own an ADC—so don't worry if Captain Biggs, who I think answered the telephone, mentions the General to you. He will say there was no message. Captain Biggs, if it was indeed he, sounded quite impressed, even rather frightened. He told me you were probably still working, unless on your way back now. I must say, you officers are kept at it.'

'But, Charles, what is all this about?'

I thought he must be drunk, and began to wonder how best to deal with him. This was just the sort of embarrassment Widmerpool had envisaged. It could be awkward. I experienced one of those moments—they cropped up from time to time—of inwardly agreeing there was something to be said for Widmerpool's point of view. However Stringham sounded perfectly sober; though to sound sober was not unknown as one of the characteristics he was apt to display after a great deal to drink. That was especially true of the period immediately preceding his going under entirely. I felt apprehensive.

'Yes, I must come to the point, Nick,' he said. 'I'm getting dreadfully garrulous in old age. It's barrack-room life. Look, forgive me for ringing up at this late hour, which I know to be contrary to good order and discipline. The fact is I find myself with a problem on my hands.'

'What's happened?'

'You know my officer, Mr Bithel?'

'Of course.'

'You will therefore be aware that—like my former unregenerate self—he is at times what our former mentor, Mr Le Bas, used to call a devotee of Bacchus?'

'Bithel's drunk?'

'Got it in one. Rather overdone the Dionysian rites.'

'Passed out?'

'Precisely.'

'Whereabouts?'

'I've just tripped over his prostrate form on the way back to bed. When I was suddenly, quite unexpectedly, whisked away from F Mess, and enlisted under Mr Bithel's gallant command, he behaved very kindly to me on arrival. He has done so ever since. I therefore feel grateful towards him. I thought—to avoid further danger to himself, physical or moral—you might have some idea of the best way of getting him back without undue delay to wherever he belongs. Otherwise some interfering policeman, civil or military, will feel it his duty to put the Lieutenant in the cooler. I'm not sure where he's housed. G Mess, is it? Anyway, I can't manage him all on my own-io, as the Edwardian song used to say. I wondered if you had any suggestions.'

This emergency had noticeably cheered Stringham. That was plain, even on the telephone. There was only one thing to do.

'I'll come along. What about yourself? Are you all right for time?'

'I'm on a late pass.'

'And where are you exactly?'

Stringham described a spot not far from where we had met in the street on that earlier occasion. The place was about ten minutes' walk from Headquarters; rather more from G Mess, where Bithel slept.

'I'll stand guard over Mr B. until you arrive,' Stringham said. 'At the moment he's propped up out of harm's way on the steps of a bombed house. Bring a torch, if you've got one. It's as dark as hell and stinks of something far worse than cheese.'

By some incredibly lucky concatenation of circumstances, Bithel had managed, though narrowly, to escape court-martial over the affair of the bouncing cheque that had worried him the night of the biggish raid of several weeks before. However, Widmerpool had now stated categorically he was on the point of removing Bithel from the Mobile Laundry command as soon as he could negotiate that matter satisfactorily with the authority to whom the Laundry was ultimately responsible. That might be a judgment from which there was no appeal, but, even so, gave no reason to deny a hand in getting Bithel as far as his own bed that night, rather than leave him to be picked up by the Provost Marshal or local constabulary. It was even possible that definite official notification of his final sacking might have brought about this sudden alcoholic downfall; until now kept by Bithel within reasonable bounds. He would certainly be heartbroken at losing the command of the Mobile Laundry, of which he was, indeed, said to have made a fair success. If this intimation had reached him, he might be additionally upset because dismissal would almost certainly mark the first stage of final ejection from the army. Bithel was proud of being in the army; it also brought him a livelihood. Apart from any of that, Stringham had to be backed up in undertaking Bithel's rescue. That was how things looked. I made a last inspection of the office to make sure no papers had been left outside the safe that should have been locked away, then left Headquarters.

Outside in the street, it was impossible to see a yard ahead without a torch. In spite of that, I found the place without much difficulty. Stringham, hands in his pockets, was leaning against the wall of a house that had been burnt out by an incendiary bomb a week or two before. He was smoking a cigarette.

'Hullo, Nick.'

'Where's Bithel?'

'At the top of these steps. I pulled him up there out of the way. He seemed to be coming-to a moment ago. Then he sank back again. Let's go and have a look at him.'

Bithel was propped up under a porch against the front-door of the house, his legs stretched down the steps, head sunk on one shoulder. This was all revealed by a flash of the torch. He was muttering a little to himself. We examined him.

'Where's he got to go?' asked Stringham.

'G Mess. That's not too far from here.'

'Can we carry him feet first?'

'Not a very tempting prospect in the blackout. Can't we wake him up and force him to walk? Everyone must realize they have to make a special effort in wartime. Why should Bithel be absolved from that?'

'How severe you always are to human weakness, Nick.'

We shook Bithel, who was again showing slight signs of revival, at least in so much that protests were wrung from him by this rough treatment.

'. . . Don't shake us, old man . . . don't shake us like that . . . whatever are you doing it for? . . . makes me feel awful . . . I'll throw up . . . I will really . . .'

'Bith, you've got to pull yourself together, get back to your billet.'

'What's that you're saying . . .'

'Can you stand up? If so, we'll hold you on either side.'

'. . . Can't remember your name, old man . . . didn't see you in that last pub . . . couldn't see any officers there . . . rather glad of that . . . prefer talking to those young fellows without a lot of majors poking their noses in . . . keep in touch with the men . . . never go far wrong if you do that . . . take an interest in them off duty . . . then it got late . . . couldn't find the way home . . .'

'It *is* late, Bith. That's why we've got to take you back to bed. It's Nick Jenkins. We're going to pilot you to G Mess.'

'Nick Jenkins . . . in the Regiment together. . . . Do you remember . . . *Mr Vice—the Loyal Toast* . . . then, you . . .'

'That's it.'

'*The King* . . .'

Bithel shouted the words, turning on one elbow and making as if to raise a glass in the air.

'*The King*, Bith.'

'Loved the old Regiment. . . . Give you *The Regiment* . . . no heelers. . . . Age shall not . . . something . . . nor the years condemn . . .'

'Come on, Bith, make an effort.'

'. . . at the going down of the sun . . . that's it . . . we shall remember them . . .'

He suddenly began to sing in a thin piping voice, not unlike Max Pilgrim's.

> 'Fol-low, fol-low, we will fol-low Davies—
> We will follow Davies, everywhere he leads . . .'

'Bith.'

'Remember how we went romping all over the house that Christmas night after dinner . . . when the Mess was in those former bank premises . . . trailing along behind Colonel Davies . . . under the tables . . . over the chairs . . . couldn't do it this moment for five pounds . . . God, I do really believe I'm going to throw up . . .'

We got him to his feet with a tremendous heave. This sudden change of posture was too much for Bithel, who had rightly judged his own digestive condition. After much vomiting, he seemed appreciably more sober. We had allowed him to sink on all fours to the ground while relieving his stomach. Now we raised him again on his feet to prepare for the journey back to G Mess.

'If you can walk, Bith, we'll take you home now. Stringham, one of your own chaps, is here to help.'

'String . . .'

'Here, sir,' said Stringham, who had begun to laugh a lot. 'Stringham of the Mobile Laundry, present and correct.'

The name, coupled with that of his command, faintly animated Bithel. Perhaps it suggested to him the title of one of those adventure stories he had enjoyed as a boy; certainly the picaresque operation of a Mobile Laundry would have made an enthralling Henty volume.

'That 'varsity man the DAAG sent to me?'

'That's the one, sir.'

'Only good turn Major Widmerpool's ever done me . . .'

Stringham was now laughing so much we had to lower Bithel to the ground again.

'I know just how you're feeling, sir,' said Stringham. 'Nobody better.'

'Stringham's a 'varsity man, like yourself, Nick. . . . Did you know that? . . . good type . . . got some fine boys in the Laundry . . . proud to command them . . . Sergeant Ablett . . . splendid type. . . . You should hear him sing *The Man who broke the Bank at Monte Carlo* . . . brings back the old music halls . . . but Stringham's the only 'varsity man . . .'

The access of emotion that had now descended on Bithel was in danger of changing once more to stupor. He began to breathe heavily. We tried to lift him again from the pavement.

'One of the things I like about him,' said Stringham, 'is the fact there's so little difference when he's sober. Drink doesn't make him turn nasty. On the contrary. How well one knows the feeling of loving the whole world after downing a few doubles. As I no longer drink, I no longer love the whole world—nor, if it comes to that, even a small part of it.'

'All the same, you took the trouble to be a Good Samaritan on this occasion.'

'After all, he is my Commanding Officer—and has been very gracious to me. I still have some gratitude, even if no general goodwill towards mankind. I like gratitude, because it's the rarest of virtues and a very difficult one to cultivate. For example, I never feel nearly grateful enough to Tuffy. In some respects, I'm ashamed to say I'm even conscious of a certain resentment towards her. Tonight's good deed was just handed me on a plate. Such a conscience have I now developed, I even feel grateful to Widmerpool. That does me credit, doesn't it? Do you know, Nick, he went out of his way to get me moved from F Mess to the Mobile Laundry—just as an act of pure kindness. Who'd have thought that of Widmerpool? I learnt the fact from Mr Bithel himself, who was equally surprised at the DAAG finding suitable personnel for him. I must say I was at once attracted by the idea of widening my military experience. Besides, there are some real treasures in the Laundry. I don't know how I can show Widmerpool gratitude. Keep out of the way, I suppose. The one thing I can't understand is Mr Bithel's obsession with university life. I explained to him, when he brought up the subject, that my own college days had been among the most melancholic of a life not untinged by shadow.'

All the time Stringham had been speaking, we were trying to galvanise Bithel from his spell of total collapse into a state of renewed awareness. We achieved this, finally bringing him into actual motion.

'Now, if you'll guide us, Nick, we'll have the Lieutenant tucked up between sheets in no time.'

Once we had Bithel traversing the pavement between us, the going was quite good in spite of Stygian darkness. In fact, we must have been within a hundred and fifty yards of G Mess before anything inopportune occurred. Then was disaster. The worst happened. Stringham and I were rounding a corner, Bithel mumbling incomprehensibly between us, when a figure, walking hurriedly from the other direction, collided violently with our party. The effect of this strong oncoming impact was for Stringham to let go of Bithel's arm, so that, taken by surprise and unable to support the full weight alone, I too became disengaged from Bithel, who sank heavily to the ground. The person who had obstructed us also stumbled and swore, a moment later playing a torch on my face, so that I could not see him or anything else.

'What the hell is happening?'

The voice was undoubtedly Widmerpool's, especially recognisable when angry. His quarters were also in this neighbourhood. He was on his way back to B Mess after dinner with his acquaintance from the Military Secretary's branch. This was a most unfortunate encounter. The only thing to do was to fabricate as quickly as possible some obvious excuse for Bithel's condition, and hope for the best.

'This officer must have tripped in the black-out,' I said.

'He had knocked himself out. We're taking him back to his billet.'

Widmerpool played his torch on each of us in turn.

'Nicholas . . .' he said, 'Bithel . . . Stringham . . .'

He spoke Stringham's name with surprise, not much approval. Since identities were now revealed, there was now no hope of proceeding without further explanation.

'Charles Stringham found Bithel lying stunned. He got in touch with me. We're taking him back to G Mess.'

That might have sounded reasonably convincing, if only Bithel himself had kept quiet. However, the last fall seemed, if not to have sobered him, at least to have shaken off the coma into which he had sunk at an earlier stage. Now, without any help from the rest of us, he picked himself up off the pavement. He took Widmerpool by the arm.

'Ought to go home . . .' he said. 'Ought to go home . . . had too much of that bloody porter . . . sickly stuff when you mix it with gin-and-italian . . . never do if we run into the APM . . .'

Then he began to sing again, though in a lower key than before.

'Fol-low, fol-low, we will follow Davies . . .'

The words of the rest of the song were drowned at that moment by the sudden note of the Air-raid Warning. For me, the ululating call registered a routine summons not to be disregarded. Bithel's troubles, however acute, must now be accepted as secondary to overseeing that the Defence Platoons reported for duty, without delay mounted their brens for aircraft action. A chance remained that this diversion might distract Widmerpool's attention from the business of getting Bithel home. There was no reason for Widmerpool to hang about in the streets after the Warning had gone. His orderly mind might indicate that correct procedure for him was to take shelter. However, he made no such move, only disengaging himself from Bithel by pushing him against the wall. He must have grasped the situation perfectly, seen at once that the first thing to do was to get Bithel himself out of the way. Certainly he retained no doubts as to why Bithel had been found lying on the pavement, but accepted at the same time the fact that there was no point in making a fuss then and there. Disciplinary action, if required, was to be attended to later. This was neither the time nor the place.

'I'll have to leave him on your hands now. I've got to get those bren posts distributed forthwith.'

'Yes, get off to the Defence Platoon right away,' said Widmerpool. 'Look sharp about it. Stringham and I will get this sot back to bed. I'll see this is the last time the army's troubled with him. It will only be a matter of expediting matters already in hand. Take one side, Stringham.'

Bithel was still leaning against the wall. Stringham once more took him by the arm. At the same time, he turned towards Widmerpool.

'It's interesting to recall, sir,' he said, 'the last time we met, I myself was the inert frame. It was you and Mr Jenkins who so kindly put me to bed. It shows that improvement is possible, that roles can be reversed. I've turned over a new leaf. Stringham is enrolled in the ranks of the sober, as well as the brave.'

I did not wait to hear Widmerpool's reply. The guns had started up. A helmet had to be collected before doing the rounds of the sections. After acquiring the necessary equipment, I set about my duties. The Defence Platoon got off the mark well that night.

'They always come a Wednesday,' said Sergeant Harmer. 'Might as well sit up for them.'

As blitzes went, that night's was not too bad a one. They went home early. We were in bed by half-past twelve.

'No more news about me, I suppose, sir?' asked Corporal Mantle, before he marched away his section.

I told him I would have another word with the DAAG. As it happened, the following morning had to be devoted to Defence Platoon affairs, so I did not see Widmerpool until the afternoon. I was not sorry about that, because it gave a time for cooling off. After the Bithel affair, an ill humour, even a downright row, was to be expected. However, this turned out to be a wrong appraisal. When I arrived in the room Widmerpool gave the impression of being more than usually pleased with himself. He pushed away the papers in front of him, evidently intending to speak at once of what had happened the night before, rather than get through the afternoon's routine, and institute a disagreeable post mortem on the subject at the end of the day's work, a rather favourite practice of his when he wanted to make a fuss about something.

'Well,' he said.

'Did you deal with Bithel?'

'I did.'

'What happened?'

I meant, by that question, to ask what had taken place over the next hundred yards or so of pavement leading to G Mess, how Bithel had been physically conveyed to his room. Widmerpool chose to understand the enquiry as referring to the final settlement of Bithel as a local problem.

'I had a word with A & Q this morning,' he said.

'Bithel's been sent on immediate leave. He will shortly be removed from the army.'

'By court-martial?'

'Unnecessary—purely administrative relegation to civilian life will save both time and trouble.'

'That can be done?'

'Bithel himself agrees it is the best way.'

'You've seen him?'

'I sent for him first thing this morning.'

'How was he feeling?'

'I have no idea. I am not concerned with the state of his health. I simply offered him the alternative of court-martial or acceptance of the appropriate report declaring him unsuitable for retention as an officer. The administrative documents releasing him from the army in the shortest possible period of time are now in motion. He wisely concurred, though not without an extraordinary scene.'

'What sort of scene?'

'Tears poured down his cheeks.'

'He was upset?'

'So it appeared.'

The episode plainly struck Widmerpool as of negative interest. That he should feel no pity for Bithel was reasonable enough, but it was a mark of his absolute lack of interest in human beings, as such, that the several implications of the interview—its sheer physical grotesqueness, for example, in the light of what Bithel must have drunk the night before—had made no impression on him he thought worth repeating. On the other hand, the clean-cut line of action he had taken emphasised his ability in dealing decisively with a problem of the kind Bithel raised by his very existence. Widmerpool's method was a contrast with that of my former Company Commander, Rowland Gwatkin, earlier confronted with Bithel in another of his unsatisfactory incarnations. When Bithel had drunk too much at the Castlemallock Gas School, Gwatkin had profitlessly put him under close arrest. Then he had omitted to observe the required formalities in relation to army arrest, with the result that the whole procedure collapsed. That, it was true, had not been entirely Gwatkin's fault; nevertheless, from Gwatkin's own point of view, the action had totally miscarried. With Widmerpool, on the other hand, there was no melodrama; only effective disposal of the body. The Bithel problem was at an end. If Bithel handicapped the war effort further, that would be in a civilian capacity.

'A pity the Warning went off like that last night,' said Widmerpool, speaking rather savagely. 'We could have frog-marched the brute back to his billet. I've seen it done with three.'

'Who will command the Laundry?'

'Another officer is already under orders. He will arrive this evening—may even have got here by now. I shall want to see him. There's a slight flap on, as a matter of fact.'

'What kind?'

'The Mobile Laundry have been ordered to stand in readiness to move at forty-eight hours' notice. This needs immediate attention with a new officer taking over only tonight. I was expecting the order in a week or two's time, not quite so soon as it has come. As usual, things will have to be done in a hurry.'

'Bithel was going anyway?'

'Of course—but only to the ITC. Now he will leave the army.'

'Is the Div moving?'

'The Laundry's orders have nothing to do with this formation, as such. There's been a call for Mobile Laundries. Between ourselves, I have reason to suppose this one is for the Far East, but naturally the destination is secret—and you are certainly not to mention that I hold that opinion.'

'You've known for some time they were going to move?'

'It came through to me when you were on leave.'

'You knew when you transferred Stringham?'

'That was precisely why I posted him to the Laundry.'

'So he'll go to the Far East?'

'If that's where the Laundry's bound.'

This was certainly arbitrary treatment of an old acquaintance.

'Will he want to go?'

'I have no idea.'

Widmerpool looked at me blankly.

'I suppose he could get out of it on grounds of age.'

'Why should he want to get out of it?'

'Well, he doesn't look as if his health is too good. As you said the other day, he's put away a good deal of drink in his time.'

'But it was you who suggested shifting him from his job as Mess Waiter,' said Widmerpool, not without impatience. 'That's one of the reasons I acted in the matter. I thought it over and decided, on balance, that you were right in feeling Stringham should not be there—in fact should not be at these Headquarters at all. Now you seem dissatisfied at what has happened. Why should it be your job—still less mine—to keep Stringham wrapped in cotton-wool? In any case, you surely don't envisage him remaining here after he and two of Div HQ's officers, one of them its DAAG, have been collectively concerned in putting another officer to bed because he has been found drunk in the street. You assured me Stringham would not be an embarrassment to us. That is exactly what has taken place.'

'But Stringham is quite used to the idea of drunks being put to bed. As he said last night, the pair of us once had to put him to bed ourselves. It couldn't conceivably affect Stringham's behaviour that he helped with Bithel—especially as Bithel's gone.'

'That has nothing to do with it.'

'What has then?'

'Nicholas, have you never heard of the word discipline?'

'But nobody knows except us—or was Biggs or somebody about when you got Bithel to G Mess?'

'No one—as it fortunately turned out. But that makes no difference whatever. Stringham could certainly not remain here after an incident of that kind. I applaud my own forethought in making the arrangement about him I did. So far as these Headquarters are concerned, the further afield he is sent the better. Let me add that all this is entirely a matter of principle. Stringham's presence would no longer affect me personally.'

'Why not?'

'Because I am leaving this formation.'

That piece of information brought a new, disturbing element into the conversation. I was annoyed, even disgusted, by Widmerpool's attitude towards Stringham, this utter disregard for what might happen to him, posted away to God knows where. However, worse now threatened. Self-interest, equally unattractive in outer guise and inner essence, is, all the same, a necessity for individual survival. It should perhaps not be too much despised, if only for that reason. Despised or not, its activities are rarely far from the surface. Now, at Widmerpool's words about leaving, I was unwelcomely conscious of self-interested anxieties throbbing hurriedly into operation. What was Widmerpool's present intention towards myself, if he were to go elsewhere? Would my fate be as little of interest to him as Stringham's? That was my instant thought.

'You've got promotion?'

'In the sense of immediate accession of rank—no. With the connotation that my employment will now be established in a more lofty—an incalculably more lofty—sphere than a Divisional Headquarters—yes.'

'The War Office?'

Widmerpool raised his hand slightly, at the same time allowing a brief smile to lighten his face in indication of the superiority, stratospheric in degree, towards which he was about to soar beyond the range of any institution so traditionally prosaic, not to say sordid in function, as the War Office. He folded his arms.

'No,' he said, 'not the War Office, I am thankful to say.'

'Where, then?'

'The Cabinet Offices.'

'I'm rather vague about them.'

'An admission that does not surprise me.'

'It's the top thing of all?'

'You might describe it that way.'

'How else?'

'The Cabinet Offices comprise, in one aspect, the area of action where the Ministry of Defence—the Chiefs of Staff, if you prefer—are in immediate contact with each other and with the Government of this country—with the Prime Minister himself.'

'I see.'

'So you will appreciate the fact that my removal of Stringham from these Headquarters will not affect me in the smallest way.'

'You go at once?'

'I have only heard unofficially at present. I imagine it will be the matter of a week, perhaps less.'

'Have you any idea what will happen to me when you're gone?'

'None.'

There was something impressive in his total lack of interest in the fate of all persons except himself. Perhaps it was not the lack of interest in itself—common enough to many people—but the fact that he was at no pains to conceal this within some more or less hypocritical integument.

'I shall be left high and dry?'

'I certainly doubt if my successor will be allocated an assistant. My own particular methods, more energetic than most, led to an abnormal amount of work for a mere DAAG. Even so, there has been recent pressure from above to encourage me to dispense with your services.'

'You haven't anything in mind for me?'

'Nothing.'

'You said you might try and fix something.'

'I have no recollection of doing so—and, anyway, what could I fix?'

'So it will be the Infantry Training Centre?'

'I should imagine.'

'Not much of a prospect.'

'The army more often than not offers uninviting prospects,' said Widmerpool. 'Look at the months I have been stuck here, wasting my time, and, if I may say so, my abilities. We are not soldiers just to enjoy ourselves. We are waging a war. You seem aggrieved. Let me point out there is nothing startlingly brilliant in your own work—your industry and capabilities—to make me press for a good appointment for you. In addition to what can only be regarded as mediocre qualities as a staff officer, it was you, and no other, who saw fit to involve me in the whole Bithel–Stringham hash. That might well have turned out very awkwardly for me. No, Nicholas, if you examine your conscience, you will find you have very little to grumble at.'

He sighed, whether at my own ingratitude or human frailty in general, I was uncertain. Cocksidge appeared in the doorway.

'A & Q wants to see you, sir,' he said. 'Right away. Very urgent. He's got the DAPM with him.'

'Right.'

'I hear you may be leaving us, sir,' said Cocksidge.

He spoke more with unction than servility.

'It's got round, has it?' said Widmerpool approvingly.

I had the impression he had put the rumour round himself. He went off down the passage. Cocksidge turned towards me, at the same time sharply adjusting his manner from that of lower-middle-grade obsequiousness to a major and staff officer, to one more in keeping for employment towards a second-lieutenant not even a member of the staff.

'The night you were last Duty Officer, Jenkins, the Field Park Company received their routine telephone contact five minutes later than the time noted on your report.'

'It went out in the normal manner with the others.'

'What happened then?'

'I suppose the Sapper Duty Officer didn't note it down immediately or else his watch was wrong.'

'I shall have to look into this,' said Cocksidge.

He spoke threateningly, as if expecting further explanation. I remembered now I had indeed effected the Field Park contact a few minutes later than the others for some trivial reason. However, I stuck to my guns. The matter was not of the smallest practical importance. If Cocksidge wanted to make trouble, he would have to undertake researches at some considerable labour to himself. That was unlikely with such meagre advantages in view. He left the room, slamming the door behind him. The telephone bell rang.

'Major Farebrother, from Command, downstairs, sir. Wants to see the DAAG.'

'Send him up.'

This was the first time Sunny Farebrother had ever paid a visit to Divisional Headquarters. Recently, he and Widmerpool had been less in conflict, less even in direct contact. Either old enmities had died down, or, I supposed, other more important matters had been occupying both of them. The news about himself Widmerpool had just released, in his own case confirmed that view. Farebrother was likely to have been similarly engaged, unless he had greatly changed. At that moment he came through the door, stopping short for a second, while he saluted with parade ground formality. Military psychology could to some extent be gauged by this business of saluting when entering a room. Officers of field rank would sometimes omit the convention, if, on entering, they immediately sighted only a subaltern there. These officers, one noticed, were often wanting when more serious demands were made on their capacity. However, few, even of those who knew how to behave, brought out the movement with such a click and snap as Farebrother had done. When he had relaxed, I explained Widmerpool had been summoned by Colonel

Pedlar and might be away from the office for some little time.

'I'm in no particular hurry,' said Farebrother. 'I had another appointment in the neighbourhood and thought I would look in on Kenneth. I'll wait, if I may.'

He accepted a chair. His manner was kindly but cold. He did not recognise me. There was little reason why he should after nearly twenty years, when we had travelled together to London after staying with the Templers. I remembered the taxi piled high with miscellaneous luggage and sporting equipment, as our ways had parted at the station. There had been a gun-case, a cricket bat and a fishing rod; possibly two squash racquets.

'You must come and lunch with me one of these days,' he had said, giving one of his very open smiles.

He was surprisingly unchanged from that moment. A suggestion of grey threaded, here and there, neat light-coloured hair. This faint powdering of silver increased the air of distinction, even of moral superiority, which his outward appearance always conveyed. The response he offered—that he was a person of self-denying, upright life—had nearly been allowed to become tinged with a touch of self-righteousness. Any such outgrowth was kept within bounds by the soldierly spruceness of his bearing. I judged him now to be in his early fifties. Middle-age caused him to look more than ever like one's conception of Colonel Newcome, though a more sophisticated, enterprising prototype of Thackeray's old warrior. Sunny Farebrother could never entirely conceal his own shrewdness, however much he tried. He was a Colonel Newcome who, instead of collapsing into bankruptcy, had become, on retirement from the army, a brisk business executive; offered a seat on the East India Company's Board, rather than mooning round the precincts of the Charterhouse. At the same time, Farebrother would certainly know the right phrase to express appreciation of any such historic buildings or sentimental memories with which he might himself have been associated. One could be sure of that. He was not a player to overlook a useful card. Above all, he bestowed around him a sense of smoothness, ineffable, unstemmable smoothness, like oil flowing ever so gently from the spout of a vessel perfectly regulated by its pourer, soft lubricating fluid, gradually, but irresistibly, spreading; and spreading, let it be said, over an unexpectedly wide, even a vast area.

'What's your name?'

'Jenkins, sir.'

'Ah, we've spoken sometimes together on the telephone.'

Uniform—that of a London Territorial unit of Yeomanry cavalry—hardly changed Farebrother at all, unless to make him seem more appropriately clad. Cap, tunic, trousers, all battered and threadbare as his former civilian suits, had obviously served him well in the previous war. Frayed and shiny with age, they were far from making him look down-at-heel in any inadmissible way, their antiquity according a patina of impoverished nobility—nobility of the spirit rather than class—a gallant disregard for material things. His Sam Browne belt was limp with immemorial polishing. I recalled Peter Templer remarking that Farebrother's DSO had been 'rather a good one'; of the OBE next door to it, Farebrother himself had commented: 'told them I should have to wear it on my backside, as the only medal I've ever won sitting in a chair.' Whether or not he had in fact said any such thing, except in retrospect, he was well able to look after himself and his business in that unwarlike position, however assured he might also be in combat. It was not surprising Widmerpool hated him.

Leaning forward a little, puckering his face, as if even at this moment he found a sedentary attitude unsympathetic, he gazed at me suddenly as if he were dreadfully sorry about something.

'I've got some rather bad news for Kenneth, I'm afraid,' he said, 'but I expect I'd better keep it till he returns. I'd better tell him personally. He might be hurt otherwise.'

He spoke in a tone almost of misery. I thought the point had arrived when it should be announced that we had met before. Farebrother listened, with raised eyebrows and a beaming smile, while I briefly outlined the circumstances.

'That must have been seventeen or eighteen years ago.'

'Just after I'd left school.'

'Peter Templer,' he said. 'That's a curious coincidence.'

'You've heard about him lately?'

'I have, as a matter of fact. Of course I often used to run across him in the City before the war.'

'He's attached to some ministry now in an advisory capacity, isn't he?'

'Economic Warfare,' said Farebrother.

He fixed his very honest blue eyes on me. There was something a bit odd about the look.

'He told me he wasn't very happy where he was,' he said, 'and hearing I was making a change myself, thought I might be able to help.'

I did not see quite how Farebrother could help, but assumed that might be through civilian contacts, rather than from his own military status. Farebrother seemed to decide that he wanted to change the subject from Templer's immediate career, giving almost the impression that he felt he might himself have been indiscreet. He spoke quickly again.

'The old man died years ago, of course,' he said. 'He was an old devil, if ever there was one. Devil incarnate.'

I was a little surprised to hear Farebrother describe Peter Templer's father in such uncomplimentary terms, because, when we had met before, he had emphasised what a 'fine old man' he had thought Mr Templer; been positively sentimental about his good qualities, not to mention having contributed a laudatory footnote of personal memoir to the official obituary in *The Times*. I was more interested to talk of Peter than his father, but Farebrother would allow no further details.

'Said more than I should already. You surprised it out of me by mentioning the name so unexpectedly.'

'So you're leaving Command yourself, sir?'

'As I've begun being indiscreet, I'll continue on that line. I'm going to one of the cloak-and-dagger shows.'

From time to time one heard whispers of these mysterious sideshows radiating from out of the more normal activities of the Services. In a remote backwater like the Divisional Headquarters where I found myself, they were named with bated breath. Farebrother's apparent indifference to the prospect of becoming part of something so esoteric seemed immensely detached and nonchalant. Nevertheless, the manner in which he made this statement, in itself not in the least indiscreet, was at the same time perhaps a shade self-satisfied.

'Getting a step too,' he said. 'About time at my age.'

It was all at once clear as day that one of his reasons for coming round to Div HQ was to inform Widmerpool of this promotion to lieutenant-colonel. The discovery that we had known each other in the past had removed all coolness from Farebrother's manner. Now, he seemed, for some reason, even anxious to acquire me as an ally.

'How do you get on with our friend Kenneth?' he asked. 'A bit difficult at times? Don't you find that?'

I made no effort to deny the imputation. Widmerpool was grading low in my estimation at that moment. I saw no reason to conceal hard feelings about him. Farebrother was pleased at getting this affirmative reaction.

'I've no objection to a fellow liking to do things his own way,' he said, 'but I don't want a scrimmage about every new Army Council Instruction as soon as it appears. Don't you agree? In that sort of respect Kenneth doesn't know where to stop. Not only that, I found he's behaved rather badly behind my back with your Corps' MGA.'

It was news that Widmerpool's activities behind the scenes had taken him as far up in the hierarchy as so relatively august a personage as the Major-General in charge of Administration at Corps HQ.

'I mention that in confidence, of course,' said Farebrother, 'and for your own guidance. Kenneth can be a little thoughtless at times about his own subordinates. I daresay you've found that. Not that I would say a word against Kenneth as a man or a staff officer. In many ways he's wasted in this particular job.'

'He's leaving it.'

'He is?'

In spite of a conviction that Widmerpool's gifts were not being given sufficient scope, Farebrother did not sound altogether pleased to hear this matter was going to be put right. He asked the question with more open curiosity than he had showed until then.

'I don't think it's a secret.'

'Even if it is, it will go no further with me. What's ahead of him?'

'The Cabinet Offices, he told me, though I believe it's not official yet.'

Farebrother whistled, one of those crude expressions of feeling he would allow himself from time to time, which seemed hardly to accord with the dignity of the rest of his demeanour. I remembered him making a similar popping sound with his lips, at the same time snapping his fingers, when some beautiful woman's name had come into the conversation staying at the Templers'.

'The Cabinet Offices, by God,' he said. 'Has he been promoted?'

'I gather he goes there in his present rank, but thinks there's a good chance of going up pretty soon.'

'I see.'

Farebrother showed a little relief at Widmerpool's promotion being delayed, if only briefly. He had plainly been disturbed by what he had heard.

'*The Cabinet Offices*,' he repeated with emphasis. 'Well, that's very exalted. I only hope what I've come to tell him won't make any difference. However, as I said before, better not refer to that until I've seen him.'

He shook his head. Widmerpool came back to the room at that moment. He was fidgeting with the collar of his battle-dress, always a sign he was put out. It looked as if the interview with A & Q had not gone too well. Seeing Farebrother sitting there was not welcome to him either.

'Oh, hullo, Sunny,' he said, without much warmth.

'I came along to bid you farewell, Kenneth, and now I hear from Nicholas you're on the move like myself.'

Widmerpool showed a touch of surprise at Farebrother using my first name, then remembered we had formerly known each other.

'I forgot you'd both met,' he said. 'Yes, I'm going. Did Nicholas tell you where?'

'Scarcely revealed anything,' said Farebrother.

Not for the first time, I noted his caution, and was grateful for it, though Widmerpool seemed to want his destination known.

'The Cabinet Offices.'

Widmerpool could not conceal his own satisfaction.

'I say, old boy.'

The comparative enthusiasm Farebrother managed to infuse into this comment was something of a masterpiece in the exercise of dissimulation.

'It will mean work, morning, noon and night,' said Widmerpool. 'But there'll undoubtedly be interesting contacts.'

'There will, old boy, I bet there will—and promotion.'

'Possibly.'

'Quite soon.'

'Oh, you never know in the bloody army,' said Widmerpool, thought of his new job inducing a better humour, marked as usual by the assumption of his hearty military manner, 'but what's happening to you, Sunny, if you say you're going too?'

'One of these secret shows.'

'Baker Street?'

'I shouldn't be surprised.'

'Promotion too?'

Farebrother nodded modestly.

'That's the only reason I'm taking it. Need the pay. Much rather do something straightforward, if I had the choice.'

Widmerpool could not have been pleased to hear that Farebrother was about to become a lieutenant-colonel, while he himself, however briefly, remained a major. Indeed, it probably irritated him that Farebrother should be promoted at all. At the same time, a display of self-control rare with him, he contrived to show no concern, his manner being even reasonably congratulatory. This was no doubt partly on account of the satisfactory nature of his own promised change of employment, but, as he revealed on a later occasion, also because of the low esteem in which he held the organisation which Farebrother was about to join.

'A lot of scallywags, in my opinion,' he said later.

Farebrother was certainly acute enough to survey their respective future situations from much the same point of view, that is to say appreciating the fact that, although he might himself be now ahead, Widmerpool's potentialities for satisfying ambition must be agreed to enjoy a wider scope. Indeed, in a word or two, he openly expressed some such conclusion. Farebrother could afford this generosity, because, as it turned out, he had another trick up his sleeve. He brought this trump card out only after they had talked for a minute or two about their new jobs. Farebrother opened his attack by abruptly swinging the subject away from their own personal affairs.

'You've been notified Ivo Deanery's going to get the Recce Unit?' he asked suddenly.

Widmerpool was taken aback by this question. He began to look angry again.

'Never heard of him,' he said.

The answer sounded as if it were intended chiefly to gain time.

'Recently adjutant to my Yeomen,' said Farebrother. 'As lively a customer as you would meet in a day's march. Got an MC in Palestine just before the war.'

Widmerpool was silent. He did not show any interest at all in Ivo Deanery's juvenile feats of daring, whatever they might have been. I supposed he did not want to admit to Farebrother that he himself had been running a candidate for the Recce Unit's Commanding Officer; and that candidate, from what had been said, must have been unsuccessful.

'Knew you were interested in the Recce Regiment command,' said Farebrother, speaking very casually.

'Naturally.'

'I mean specially interested.'

'There was nothing special about it,' said Widmerpool.

'Oh, I understood there was,' said Farebrother, assuming at once a puzzled expression, as if greatly worried at Widmerpool's denial of special interest. 'In fact that was the chief reason I came round to see you.'

'Look here,' said Widmerpool, 'I don't know what you're getting at, Sunny. How could you be DAAG of a formation and not take a keen interest in who's appointed to command its units?'

He was gradually losing his temper.

'The MGA thinks you were a bit too interested,' said Farebrother, speaking now with exaggerated sadness. 'Old boy, there's going to be the hell of a row. You've put your foot in it.'

'What do you mean?'

Widmerpool was thoroughly disturbed now, frightened enough to control his anger. Farebrother looked interrogatively at me, then his eyes travelled back to Widmerpool. He raised his eyebrows. Widmerpool shook his head vigorously.

'Say anything you like in front of him,' he said. 'He knows I had a name in mind for the Recce Unit command. Nothing wrong with that. Naturally I regret my chap hasn't got it. That's all there is to it. What's the MGA beefing about?'

Farebrother too shook his head, but slowly and more lugubriously than ever.

'I understand from the MGA that you were in touch with him personally not long ago about certain matters with which I myself was concerned.'

Widmerpool went very red.

'I think I know what you mean,' he said, 'but they were just as much my concern as yours.'

'Wouldn't it have been better form, old boy, to have mentioned to me you were going to see him?'

'I saw no cause to do so.'

Widmerpool was not at all at ease.

'Anyway,' said Farebrother mildly, 'the MGA, rightly or wrongly, feels you misled him about various scraps of unofficial information you tendered, especially as he had no idea at the time that you were pressing in other quarters for a certain officer to be appointed to a command then still vacant.'

'How did he find that out?'

'I told him,' said Farebrother, simply.

'But look here . . .' said Widmerpool.

He was too furious to finish the sentence.

'The long and the short of it was the MGA said he was going to get in touch with your General about the whole matter.'

'But I behaved in no way incorrectly,' said Widmerpool. 'There is not the smallest reason to suggest . . .'

'Believe me, Kenneth, I'm absolutely confident you did nothing to which official exception could possibly be taken,' said Farebrother. 'On my heart. That's why I thought it best to put my own cards on the table. The MGA is sometimes hasty. As you know well, amateur soldiers like you and me tend to go about our business in rather a different way from the routine a Regular gets accustomed to. We like to get things done expeditiously. I just thought it was a pity myself you went and told the MGA all those things about me. That was why I decided he ought to know more about you and your own activities. I'm sure everything will be all right in the end, but I believed it right to warn you—as I was coming to say goodbye anyway—simply that my General might be getting in touch with your General about all this.'

Farebrother's quiet, reassuring tone did not at all soothe Widmerpool, who now looked more disturbed than ever. Farebrother rose to his feet. He squared his shoulders and smiled kindly, pleased, as well he might be, with the devastation his few minutes' conversation had brought about in the promotion of Widmerpool's plans. In his own way, as I learnt later, Farebrother was an efficient operator when he wanted something done; very efficient indeed. Widmerpool had made a mistake in trying to double-cross him in whatever matter the visit to the MGA had concerned. He should have guessed that Farebrother, sooner or later, would find out. Perhaps he had disregarded that possibility, ruling out the risk of Farebrother turning to a formidable weapon at hand. However, with characteristic realism, Widmerpool grasped that something must be done quickly, if trouble, by now probably inevitable, was to be reduced in magnitude. He was not going to waste time in recrimination.

'I'll come with you to the door, Sunny,' he said. 'I can explain all that business about going to the MGA. It wasn't really aimed at you at all, though now I see it must look like that.'

Farebrother turned towards me. He gave a nod.

'Goodbye, Nicholas.'

'Goodbye, sir.'

They left the room together. The situation facing Widmerpool might be disagreeable, almost certainly was going to be. One thing at least was certain: whomsoever he had been trying to jockey into the position of commanding the Recce Unit would have done the job as well, if not better, than anyone else likely to be appointed. Widmerpool's candidate—if only for Widmerpool's own purposes—would, from no aspect, turn out unsuitable. If his claims were pressed by Widmerpool, he would be a first-class officer, not a personal friend whose competence was no more than adequate. That had to be said in fairness to Widmerpool methods, though I had no cause to like them. So far as that went, Farebrother's man, Ivo Deanery, as it turned out, made a good job of the command too. He led the Divisional Recce Corps, with a great deal of dash, until within a few days of the German surrender; then was blown up when his jeep drove over a landmine. However, that is equally by the way. The immediate point was that Widmerpool, even if his machinations had not actually transgressed beyond what were to be regarded as the frontiers of discipline, could, at the same time, well have allowed himself liberties with the established scope permissible to an officer of his modest rank, which, if brought to light, would seriously affront higher authority. Probably his original contact with the Major-General at Corps had been on the subject of a petty contention with Farebrother; something better not arranged—certainly better not arranged behind Farebrother's back; at the same time trivial enough. Widmerpool had no scruples about conduct of that sort.

'No good being too gentlemanly,' he had once said.

The next stage might be guessed. Having gained access to the MGA on this pretext, opportunity had been found to link the subject in hand with matters relating to the Recce Unit. Possibly the MGA was even glad to be provided with one or other of those useful items of miscellaneous private information which Widmerpool was so pre-eminent in storing up his sleeve for use at just that sort of interview. Then, so it seemed, something had gone wrong. The MGA had allowed Farebrother to find out, or at least make a good guess, that Widmerpool had been brewing up trouble for him. Like so many individuals who believe in being 'ungentlemanly', Widmerpool did not allow sufficiently for the eventuality of other people practising the same doctrine. Indeed, he used to complain bitterly if they did. Farebrother was an example of a man equally unprejudiced by scruple. No doubt he had pointed out to the MGA that Widmerpool's suggested line included contrivances that, when examined in the light of day, revealed—perhaps only to an over-fastidious sense of how things should be done—shreds of what might be regarded as the impertinent intrigue of a junior officer. That, at least, seemed to have been just how the MGA had seen the matter. He had become angry. Now, as Farebrother said, there was going to be the hell of a row; this at a most awkward juncture in Widmerpool's career. He was evidently having a longish talk with Farebrother on the doorstep. Before he returned Greening looked in.

'DAAG about?'

'Just gone down the stairs to have a final word with his opposite number from Command. He'll be back in a second.'

'His Nibs wants Major Widmerpool at once.'

'Shall I tell him?'

'I'll wait. His Nibs is far from pleased. Absolutely cheesed off, in fact. I don't dare go back without my man —like the North-West Mounted Police.'

'What's happened?'

'No idea.'

It looked as if the trouble in question was about to begin. Greening and I had a game of noughts and crosses. Widmerpool returned. Greening delivered his summons. Widmerpool, who was looking worried already, gave a slight twitch, but made no comment. He and Greening went off together in the direction of the General's room. In the army, long tracts of time when nothing whatever seems to happen are punctuated by sudden unexpected periods of upheaval and change. That is traditional. We had been all at once sucked into one of those whirlpools. Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson was the next person to enter the room. This was a rare occurrence, of which the most likely implication was that some sudden uncontrollable rage was too great to allow him to remain inactive while Widmerpool was summoned by telephone to his own presence. He must have come charging up the passage to prevent it boiling over without release, thereby perhaps doing him some internal injury. However, that turned out to be a wrong guess. The Colonel was, on the contrary, in an unusually good humour.

'Where's the DAAG?'

'With the Divisional Commander, sir.'

Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson took the chair on which Farebrother had been sitting a moment before. To remain was as unexpected as arrival here. There could be no doubt he was specially pleased about something. It might well be he already knew Widmerpool was in hot water. He pulled at his short, bristly, dun-coloured moustache.

'Aren't you some sort of a literary bloke in civilian life?' he asked.

I agreed that was the case.

'The General said something of the kind the other day.'

Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson emitted that curious sound, a kind of hissing gulp issuing from the corner of his mouth, after this comment, apparently, on this occasion, to express the ease he himself felt in the presence of the arts.

'I once wrote rather a good parody myself,' he said.

'You did, sir?'

'On Omar Khayyám.'

I indicated respectful interest.

'Quite amusing, it was,' said Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, without apology.

I was about to entreat him to recite, if not all, at least a few quatrains of what promised to be an essay in pastiche well worth hearing, when Widmerpool's return prevented further exploration of the Colonel's Muse.

'Ah, Kenneth,' said Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, assuming his most unctuous manner, 'I was hoping you would spare me a moment of your valuable time.'

Widmerpool looked even less pleased to see Hogbourne-Johnson than at Farebrother's visit. He was by now showing a good deal of wear and tear from the blows raining down on him.

'Yes, sir?' he answered tonelessly.

'Mr Diplock . . .' said Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson. 'No, you need not go, Nicholas.'

He sat on the chair banging his knees with his clenched fists, taking his time about what he wanted to say. It looked as if he desired a witness to be present at what was to be his humiliation of Widmerpool over the Diplock affair.

Use of my own christian name indicated an exceptionally good humour.

'Yes, sir?' repeated Widmerpool.

'I'm afraid you're going to be proved to have made a big mistake, my son,' said Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson.

He snapped the words out like an order on the parade ground. Widmerpool did not speak.

'Barking up the wrong tree,' said Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson.

Widmerpool pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. Even in the despondent state to which he had been reduced, he was still capable of anger.

'You brought a series of accusations against an old and tried soldier,' said Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, 'by doing so causing a great deal of unpleasantness, administrative dislocation and unnecessary work.'

Widmerpool began to speak, but the Colonel cut him short.

'I had a long talk with Diplock yesterday,' he said, 'and I am now satisfied he can clear himself completely. With that end in view, I sanctioned a day's leave for him to collect certain evidences. Now, I understand you may be leaving us?'

'I . . .'

Widmerpool hesitated. Then he pulled himself together.

'Yes, sir,' he said. 'I'm certainly leaving the Division.'

'Before you go,' said Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, 'I consider it will be necessary for you to make an apology.'

'I don't yet know, sir,' said Widmerpool, 'the new facts which have come to light that should so much alter what appeared to be incontrovertible charges. I have been with A & Q earlier this afternoon, who told me you had made the arrangement you mention. He had informed the

DAPM, thinking Diplock should be kept under some general supervision.'

Even though he said that in a fairly aggressive tone, Widmerpool's manner still gave the impression that his mind was on other things. No doubt—his own fate in the balance—he found difficulty in concentrating on the Diplock case. It looked as if Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, like a cat with a mouse, wanted to play with Widmerpool for a while before releasing information, because, instead of communicating anything he might know that had fresh bearing on Diplock and his goings-on, he changed the subject.

'Then there's another matter,' he said. 'Certain moves made with regard to the Reconnaissance Battalion.'

'The General has just been speaking on that subject too,' said Widmerpool.

Hogbourne-Johnson was plainly surprised at this admission. His expression showed he had no knowledge of the disturbance proceeding, at a higher level than his own, on the subject of Widmerpool's Recce Unit intrigues.

'To you?'

'Yes,' said Widmerpool bluntly. 'The General told me a Major—now, of course, Lieutenant-Colonel—Deanery has been appointed to that command.'

If he had hoped to score off Widmerpool in the Recce Unit sphere, it seemed Hogbourne-Johnson had overreached himself. He reddened. No doubt he knew Widmerpool had been fishing in troubled waters, but was not up to date as to the outcome. If Widmerpool's candidate had been turned down, so too, it now appeared, had his own. This fact was most unacceptable to the Colonel. His manner changed from a peculiar assertive, sneering self-assurance, to mere everyday bad temper.

'Ivo Deanery?'

'A cavalryman.'

'That's the one.'

'He's got the command.'

'I see.'

For the moment, Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson had nothing to say. He was absolutely furious, but could not very well admit he had just heard news that showed his own secret plans, whatever they were, had miscarried. That Widmerpool, whom he had come to harass, should be the vehicle of this particular item of information must have been additionally galling. However, something much worse from Hogbourne-Johnson's point of view, also much more dramatic, happened a second later. The door opened and Keef, the DAPM, came into the room. He was excited about something. Clearly looking for Widmerpool, not at all expecting to find Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson there, Keef appeared taken aback. A gnarled, foxy little man—like most DAPMs, not a particularly agreeable figure—he was generally agreed to handle soundly his section of Military Police, always difficult personnel of whom to be in charge. Now, he hesitated for a moment, trying to decide, so it seemed, whether, there and then, to make some disclosure he had on his mind, or preferably concoct an excuse, and retire until such time as he could find Widmerpool alone. Keef must have come to the conclusion that immediate announcement of unwelcome tidings would be best, because, straightening himself almost to the position of attention, he addressed Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, as if it were Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson himself he had been looking for all the time. The reason for his momentary reluctance was revealed only too soon.

'Excuse me, sir.'

'Yes?'

'A serious matter has come through on the telephone, sir.'

'Well, what is it?'

'Diplock's deserted, sir.'

This message was so unexpected that Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, already sufficiently provoked by the appointment of Ivo Deanery to the command of the Recce Unit, could find no words at first to register the fact that he fully comprehended what Keef had to report. The awfulness of the silence that followed must have told on Keef's nerves. Still standing almost to attention, it was he who spoke first.

'Just come through, sir,' he repeated. 'A & Q issued an order to keep an eye on him, but it was too late. The man's known to have made his way across the Border. He's in neutral territory by this time.'

To have trusted Diplock, to have stood by him when accused of peculation, was, so far as I knew from my own experience of Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, the only occasion when he had ever shown a generous impulse. Of course that was speaking from scarcely any knowledge of him at all. In private life he may have displayed qualities concealed during this brief observation of his professional behaviour. Even if that were not so, and he were as unengaging to his friends and family as to his comrades in arms, even if, with regard to Diplock, his conduct had been dictated by egoism, prejudice, pig-headedness, the fact remained that he had believed in Diplock, had trusted him. He had, for example, called Widmerpool to order for describing the chief clerk as an old woman, simply because he respected the fact that Diplock, years before, had been awarded the Military Medal. Now he had been thoroughly let down. The climax had not been altogether deserved. Widmerpool had been wrong too. Diplock might be an old woman when he fiddled about with Army Forms; not when it came to evading his deserts. Still, that was another matter. It was Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson who had been betrayed. Possibly he felt that himself. He rose to his feet, in doing so managing to sweep to the floor some of the papers from the pile of documents on Widmerpool's table. Giving a jerk of his head to indicate Keef was to follow him, he left the room. Their steps could be heard thudding down uncarpeted passages. Widmerpool shut the door after them. Then he stooped and laboriously recovered several Summaries of Evidence from the floor. Anxiety about his own future was evidently too grave to allow any satisfaction at Hogbourne-Johnson's discomfiture. In fact, I had not seen Widmerpool so upset, so reduced to utter despair, since the day, long past, when he had admitted to paying for Gypsy Jones's 'operation'.

'There's been the devil of a row,' he said.

'What's happened?'

'The General's livid with rage.'

'About what Sunny Farebrother said?'

'That bloody MGA's given him a totally false picture of what I said.'

'What's the upshot?'

'General Liddament says he's going to make further enquiries. If he's satisfied I've behaved in a way of which he disapproves, he won't keep me on his staff. Of course I don't mind that, as I'm leaving anyway. What I'm worried about is he may take it into his head to ruin my chance of this much better job, when he gets official notification. He seemed to have forgotten that was in the air.'

'Does he know Hogbourne-Johnson was playing about with the same matter?'

'Of course not. Hogbourne-Johnson will be able to cover his tracks now.'

'And Diplock?'

'Oh, yes, Diplock,' said Widmerpool, cheering up a little. 'I'd forgotten about Diplock. Well, it was just as I said, though I'd never have guessed he'd go as far as to desert. Perhaps he wouldn't have deserted, if there hadn't been a frontier so conveniently near. This is all very worrying. Still, we must get on with some work. What have you got there?'

'The question of Mantle's name being entered for a commission has come up again.'

Widmerpool thought for a moment.

'All right,' he said, 'we'll by-pass Hogbourne-Johnson and send it in.'

He took the paper from me.

'And Stringham?'

'What about him?'

'If the Mobile Laundry are to be pushed off to the Far East, as you think——'

'Oh, bugger Stringham,' said Widmerpool, his mood suddenly changing. 'Why are you always fussing about Stringham? If he wants to get out of going overseas, he can probably do so at his age. That's his affair. Which reminds me, the officer replacing Bithel in charge of the Mobile Laundry should be reporting in an hour or so. I shall want you to take him round there and give him a preliminary briefing. I'll go into things myself in more detail later. He's called Cheesman.'

Nothing much else happened that afternoon. Widmerpool uttered one or two sighs to himself, but did not discuss his own predicament further. As he had said, there was nothing to be done. He could only wait and see how matters shaped. No one knew better than Widmerpool that, in the army, all things are possible. He might ride the storm. On the other hand, he could easily find himself packed off to a static appointment in West Africa, or another distant post unlikely to lead to the sort of promotion he had at present in mind. When Cheesman appeared later on, it was immediately clear that the Laundry, when proceeding overseas, was to have a very different commander from Bithel.

'I'm afraid I'm not quite so punctual as I intended, sir,' he said, 'but I'm anxious to get to work as soon as possible.'

Cheesman told me later he was thirty-nine. He looked quite ageless. Greying hair and wire spectacles suited his precise, rather argumentative manner of speech, in which he had not allowed the smallest trace of an army tone to alloy indefectibly civilian accents. Indeed, he spoke as if he had just arrived from a neighbouring firm to transact business with our own. He treated Widmerpool respectfully, as if a mere representative was meeting a managing director, but nothing in the least military supervened. Widmerpool might sometimes behave like this, but he also prided himself on the crispness of his own demeanour as a staff officer, and obviously did not greatly take to Cheesman. However, from whatever reports he had received about Cheesman's ability, he had evidently satisfied himself the job would be done in an efficient manner. After exchanging a few sentences regarding the taking-over of the Laundry, he told me to act as guide, after Cheesman's baggage had been delivered to G Mess. No doubt, in the prevailing circumstances, Widmerpool was glad to be left alone for a time to think things over.

'I'll have a word with you tomorrow, Cheesman,' he said, 'when you've a better idea of the Laundry's personnel and equipment, in relation to a move.'

'I shall be glad to have a look round, sir,' said Cheesman.

He and I set off together for the outer confines of the billeting area, where the Mobile Laundry had its being during spells at HQ. Cheesman told me he was an accountant in civilian life. He had done a good deal of work on laundry accounts at one time or another, accordingly, after getting a commission, had put in for a Mobile Laundry command.

'They seemed surprised I wanted to go to one,' he said. 'It struck me as only logical. The OC of my OCTU roared with laughter. He used to do that anyway when I spoke with him. He agreed I was too old for an infantry second-lieutenant and wanted me to go to the Army Pay Corps, or to train as a cipher officer, but in the end I got a Laundry. I hoped to command men. I was transferred to this one because my work seems to have been thought well of. I felt flattered.'

'You've got a first-rate sergeant in Ablett.'

'That's good news. My last one wasn't always too reliable.'

Sergeant Ablett was waiting for us. As Bithel had asserted in his drunken delirium, the Sergeant added to his qualities as an unusually efficient NCO those required for performing as leading comedian at the Divisional Concert, where he would sing forgotten songs, crack antediluvian jokes and dance unrestrainedly about the stage wearing only his underclothes. Ablett's was always the most popular turn. Now, however, this talent for vaudeville had been outwardly subdued, in its place assumed the sober, positively severe bearing of an old soldier, whose cleanshaven upper lip, faintest possible proliferation of side-whisker, perhaps consciously characterised a veteran of Wellington's campaigns. Contact was made between Cheesman and Ablett. It struck me that now would be a good opportunity to try and speak with Stringham.

'There's a man in your outfit I want a word with. May I do that while the Sergeant is showing you round?'

'By all means,' said Cheesman. 'Some personal matter?'

'He's a chap I know in civilian life.'

Cheesman was the sort of person to be trusted with that information. Anyway, the unit was moving. Sergeant Ablett summoned a corporal. I went off with him to find Stringham, leaving Cheesman to get his bearings.

'Last saw Stringy on his bed in the barrack room,' said the corporal, a genial bottle-nosed figure, who evidently did not take military formalities too seriously.

He went off through a door. I waited in a kind of yard, where the Mobile Laundry's outlandish vehicles were parked. In a minute or two the corporal appeared again. He was followed by Stringham, who looked as if the unexpected summons had made him uneasy. He was not wearing a cap. When he saw me, his face cleared. He came to attention.

'Thank you, Corporal.'

'You're welcome, sir.'

The bottle-nosed corporal disappeared.

'You gave me quite a turn, Nick,' Stringham said. 'I was lying on my bed musing about Tuffy and what a strange old girl she is. I was reading Browning, which always makes me think of her. Browning's her favourite poet. Did I tell you that? Of course I did, I'm getting hopelessly forgetful. He always makes me feel rather jumpy. That was why I got in a flap when Corporal Treadwell said I was wanted by an officer.'

'I've just brought your new bloke round who's taken Bithel's place.'

'Poor Bith. That was an extraordinary evening last night. What's happened to him?'

'Widmerpool's shot him out.'

'Dear me. Just as well, perhaps, for the army's sake, but I shall miss him. What's this one like?'

'He's called Cheesman. Should be easy to handle if you stay with him.'

'Why shouldn't I stay with him? I'm wedded to the Laundry by this time. I've really begun to know the meaning of *esprit de corps*, something lamentably lacking in me up to now.'

'I want to talk about all that.'

'*Esprit de corps?*'

'Can't we take a stroll for a couple of minutes while Cheesman deals with your Sergeant?'

'Ablett's a great favourite of mine too,' said Stringham. 'I'm trying to memorise some of his jokes for use at dinner parties after the war, if I'm ever asked to any again—indeed, if any are given *après la guerre*. Ablett's jokes have an absolutely authentic late nineteenth-century ring that fills one with self-confidence. Wait a moment, I'll get a cap.'

When he returned, wearing a side-cap, he carried in his hand a small tattered volume. We walked slowly up an endless empty street of small redbrick houses. The weather, for once, was warm and sunny. Stringham held up the book.

'Before we part, Nick,' he said, 'I must read you something I found here. I can't make out just what all of it means, but some has obvious bearing on army life.'

'Charles, you've got to do some quick thinking. The Mobile Laundry is due to move.'

'So we heard.'

'There've been rumours?'

'One always knows these things first in the ranks. That's one of the advantages. Where's it to be?'

'Of course that's being kept secret, but Widmerpool thinks—for what it's worth—the destination is probably the Far East.'

'We heard that too.'

'Then you know as much as me.'

'We seem to. Of course, security may be so good, it will really turn out to be Iceland. That sort of thing is always happening.'

'The point is, you could probably—certainly—get out of being sent overseas on grounds of age and medical category.'

'I agree I'm older than the rocks amongst which I sit, and have died infinitely more times than the vampire. Even so, I'd quite like to see the gorgeous East—even the Icelandic geysers, if it comes to that.'

'You'll go through with it?'

'Not a doubt.'

'I just thought I ought to pass on what was being said—strictly against all the rules.'

'That shan't go any further. Depend upon it. I suppose Widmerpool saw this coming?'

'So I gather.'

'And all that altruism about F Mess was to get me on the move?'

'That's about it.'

'He couldn't have done me a better turn,' said Stringham. 'The old boy's a marvellous example of one of the aspects of this passage I want to read you. Like everything that's any good, it has about twenty different meanings.'

He stopped and began turning the pages of the book he had brought with him. We stood beside a pillar-box. When he found the place, he began to read aloud:

> 'I shut my eyes and turned them on my heart.
> As a man calls for wine before he fights,
> I asked one draught of earlier, happier sights
> Ere fitly I could hope to play my part.
> Think first, fight afterwards—the soldier's art;
> One taste of the old time sets all to rights.'

'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came?'

'Childe Stringham—in this case.'

'I'm never sure what I feel about Browning.'

'He always gives the impression of writing about people who are wearing very expensive fancy dress. All the same, there's a lot in what he says. Not that I feel in the least nostalgic about earlier, happier sights. I can't offhand recall many. The good bit is about thinking first and fighting after.'

'Let's hope the High Command have taken the words to heart.'

'Odd that Browning should know that was so important.'

'Perhaps he should have been a general.'

'It ought to be equally borne in mind by all ranks. There might be an Order of the Day on the subject. Can't Widmerpool arrange that?'

'Widmerpool's leaving Div HQ too.'

'To become a colonel?'

'The Divisional Commander may bitch that up. He's tumbled on some of Widmerpool's intriguing and doesn't approve, but Widmerpool will go either way.'

'How very dramatic.'

'Isn't it.'

'Then what will happen to you?'

'God knows. The ITC, I imagine. Look, I shall have to go back to Cheesman soon, but I must tell you about the hell of a business on my leave the other day.'

I gave some account of the bombing of the Madrid and the Jeavons house.

'The Madrid, fancy that. I once took Peggy there in the early days of our marriage. The evening was a total frost. And then where I used to live in that top floor flat with Tuffy looking after me—where I learnt to be sober. Where Tuffy used to read Browning. Is it all in ashes?'

'Not in the least. The outside of the house looks just the same as usual.'

'Poor Lady Molly—she ought to have stayed doing that job at Dogdene.'

'Much too quiet for her.'

'Poor Ted, too. What on earth will he do with himself now? I used to enjoy occasionally sneaking off to the pub with Ted.'

'He's going on as before. Camping out in the house and carrying on as an air-raid warden.'

'I chiefly remember your sister-in-law, Priscilla, as making rather good going with some musician for whom my mother once gave an extraordinary party. Weren't you there, Nick? I associate that night with an odd little woman covered in frills like Little Bo-Peep. I made some sort of dive at her.'

'She was called Mrs Maclintick. She's now living with the musician for whom your mother gave the party—Hugh Moreland.'

'Moreland, that was the name. She's living with him, is she? What lax morals people have these days. The war, I suppose. I do my best to set an example, but no one follows me in my monastic celibacy. That was a strange night. Tuffy arrived to drive me home. It comes back to me fairly clearly, in spite of a great deal too much to drink. That's a taste of old times, if ever there was one. Makes one ready to fight anybody.'

'Charles, I shall have to get back to Cheesman. You've absolutely decided to stick to the Mobile Laundry, come what may?'

'*Quis separabit?*—that's the Irish Guards, isn't it? The Mobile Laundry shares the motto.'

'Are you returning to the billet?'

'I think I'll go for a stroll. Don't feel like any more poetry reading at the moment. Poetry always rather disturbs me. I think I shall have to give it up—like drink. A short walk will do me good. I'm off duty till nine o'clock.'

'Goodbye, Charles—if we don't meet before the Laundry moves.'

'Goodbye, Nick.'

He smiled and nodded, then went off up the street. He gave the impression of having severed his moorings pretty completely with anything that could be called everyday life, army or otherwise. I returned to Cheesman and Sergeant Ablett. They seemed to have got on well together and were still vigorously discussing vehicle maintenance.

'Find that man all right, sir?' asked the Sergeant.

'Had a word with him. Know him in civilian life.'

'Thought you might, sir. He could have been of use in the concert, but now it looks as if we're moving and there won't be any concert.'

'I expect you'll put on a show wherever you go. We shall miss your trouserless tap-dance next time, Sergeant.'

'That's always a popular item,' said Sergeant Ablett, without false modesty.

I took Cheesman back to G Mess. His mildness did not prevent him from being argumentative about every subject that arose.

'That's what you think,' he said, more than once, 'but there's another point of view entirely.'

This determination would be useful in running the Laundry, subject, like every small, more or less independent entity, to all sorts of pressures from outside.

'Wait a moment,' he said. 'Before I forget, I'd like to make a note of your name, and the Sergeant's, and the DAAG's.'

He loosened the two top buttons of his service-dress tunic to rummage for a notebook. This movement revealed that he wore underneath the tunic a khaki waistcoat cut like that of a civilian suit. I commented on the unexpectedness of this garment, worn with uniform and made of the same material.

'You're not the first person to mention that,' said Cheesman unsmilingly. 'I can't see why.'

'You just don't see waistcoats as a rule.'

'I've always worn one up to now. Why should I stop because I'm in the army?'

'No reason at all.'

'Even the tailor seemed surprised. He said: "We don't usually supply a vest with service-dress, sir." '

'It's a tailor's war, anyway.'

'What do you mean?'

'That's just a thing people say.'

'Why?'

'God knows.'

Cheesman looked puzzled, but pursued the matter no further.

'See you at Church Parade tomorrow.'

Sunday morning was always concerned with getting the Defence Platoon on parade, together with the Military Police and other miscellaneous troops who make up Divisional Headquarters. This parade was not without its worries, because the Redcaps, most of them ex-guardsmen, marched at a more leisurely pace than the Line troops, some of whom, Light Infantry or fusiliers, were, on the other hand, unduly brisk. Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson, whose sympathies were naturally with the 'Light Bobs' was always grumbling about its lack of progressional uniformity. That day all went well. After these details had been dismissed, I went to the DAAG's office to see if anything had to be dealt with before Monday. As it happened, I had spoken with none of the other officers after church. Widmerpool was not in his room, nor had he been present at the service. It was not uncommon for him to spend Sunday morning working, so that he might already have finished what he wanted to do and gone back to the Mess. Almost as soon as I arrived there the telephone bell rang.

'DAAG's office—Jenkins.'

'It's A & Q. Is the DAAG there?

'No, sir.'

'Has he been in this morning?'

'Not since I came here from Church Parade, sir.'

Colonel Pedlar sounded in an agitated state, it was hard to tell whether pleased or angry.

'Was the DADMS in church?'

'Yes, sir.'

I had noticed Macfie a few pews in front of where I was sitting.

'I can't get any reply from his room. Tell the man on the switch-board to try and find Major Widmerpool and Major Macfie and send them to me—and come along yourself.'

'Yes, sir.'

Colonel Pedlar was walking up and down his room.

'Have you told them to find the DADMS?'

'Yes, sir.'

'There's not much we can do until he arrives. A very unfortunate thing's happened. A tragedy, in fact. Most unpleasant.'

'Yes, sir?'

'The fact is the SOPT's hanged himself in the cricket pavilion.'

'That hut on the sports field, sir?'

'That's it. The one they lost the key of.'

Colonel Pedlar continued to stride backwards and forwards across his office.

'There's nothing much to be done until the DAAG and the DADMS arrive,' he said.

'When was this discovered, sir?'

'Only a short time ago—by a civilian who had to fetch some benches from the place.'

Colonel Pedlar stopped for a moment. Talking seemed to have relieved his feelings. Then he began to move again.

'What do you think of the news?' he asked.

'Well, it's rather awful, sir. Biggs was in my Mess—'

'Oh, I don't mean Biggs,' he said. 'Haven't you seen a paper or heard the wireless this morning? Germany's invaded Russia.'

An immediate, overpowering, almost mystic sense of relief took shape within me. I felt suddenly sure everything was going to be all right. This was something quite apart from even the most cursory reflection upon strategic implications involved.

'I give the Russians three weeks,' said Colonel Pedlar. 'If you haven't heard that the German army's attacked Russia, you probably don't know General Liddament has been given command of a Corps.'

'I didn't, sir.'

'He left this morning to take over at once.'

I had never known Colonel Pedlar so talkative. He was no doubt trying to keep his mind off Biggs by imparting all this information, while he wandered about the room.

'And we're going to lose our DAAG.'

'I'd heard he might be leaving, sir.'

'Though the posting hasn't come through yet.'

'No, sir.'

Colonel Pedlar ceased pacing up and down. He sat in his chair, holding his hand to his head.

'There was something else I wanted to talk to you about,' he said. 'Now what was it?'

I waited. The Colonel began looking among the papers on his table. More than ever his face was reminiscent of a dog sniffing about for a lost scent. Suddenly he picked it up and took hold of a scrap of paper.

'Ah, yes,' he said. 'About your own disposal.'

'Yes, sir?'

'You were going to the ITC.'

'Yes, sir.'

'But I've just had this. It should go through the DAAG, of course, but as you're here, you may as well see it.'

He handed across a teleprint message. It quoted my name, rank, number, instructing me to report to a room, number also quoted, in the War Office the following week.

'I don't know anything about this,' said Colonel Pedlar.

'Nor me, sir.'

'Anyway it solves the problem of what's going to happen to you.'

'Yes, sir.'

At that moment, Widmerpool and Macfie came into the room. Macfie looked as glum as ever, if possible, glummer, but Widmerpool's face showed he had received news of the General's promotion and departure. His manner to Colonel Pedlar indicated that too, when the Colonel began to outline the circumstances of the suicide.

'I don't think Jenkins needs to stay, does he?' Widmerpool asked brusquely.

'I hardly think he does,' said Pedlar. 'You may as well go now. Don't forget to take necessary action about that signal I passed you.'

I went back to F Mess. Soper was discussing with Keef what had happened. His heavy simian eyebrows contorted in agitation, he looked more than ever like a professional comedian.

'A fine kettle of fish,' he said. 'Never thought Biggy would have done that. In the cricket pav, of all places, and him so fond of the game. Worrying about that key did it. More than the wife business, in my opinion. Quite a change it will be, not having him grousing about the food every day.'

That same week the plane was shot down in which Barnby was undertaking a reconnaissance flight with the aim of reporting on enemy camouflage.

The Military Philosophers

for
Georgina

1

Towards morning the teleprinter's bell sounded. A whole night could pass without a summons of that sort, for here, unlike the formations, was no responsibility to wake at four and take dictation—some brief unidentifiable passage of on the whole undistinguished prose—from the secret radio *Spider*, calling and testing in the small hours. Sleep was perfectly attainable when no raid intervened, though recurrent vibration from one or both machines affirmed next door the same restlessness of spirit that agitated the Duty Officer's room, buzzing all the time with desultory currents of feeling bequeathed by an ever changing tenancy. Endemic as ghouls in an Arabian cemetery, harassed aggressive shades lingered for ever in such cells to impose on each successive inmate their preoccupations and anxieties, crowding him from floor and bed, invading and distorting dreams. Once in a way a teleprinter would break down, suddenly ceasing to belch forth its broad paper shaft, the column instead crumpling to a stop in mid-air like waters of a frozen cataract. Jammed works might at this moment account for the call. More probably the bell signified an item of news that could demand immediate action. I went through to investigate.

Grey untidy typescript capitals registered the information that small detachments of Poles were crossing the Russian frontier into Iran, just a few men at a time, but enough to suggest some sort of evacuation had begun. This was very much our concern. It had been long awaited. My first thought was to ring Colonel Finn at once at his flat, but, reconsidering matters, day nearly come, a copy of the cable would be on his desk when he arrived in a few hours' time. Nothing effective could be done until consultations had taken place. Besides, working late the night before—past eleven when last seen heavily descending the stairs with the tread of Regulus returning to Carthage—Finn deserved any repose he could get. I returned to bed. The teleprinters continued to clatter out their incantations, sullen and monotonous, yet not without a threat of sudden uncontrolled frenzy. However, shattered fragments of sleep were no longer to be reconstituted. After a while attempt had to be abandoned, the day faced. On the way to shave I paused in the room of the Section handling incoming signals. For the tour of duty one came under orders, whatever his rank, of their officer in charge for any given period, on this occasion a near-midget, middle-aged and two-pipped, with long arms and short legs attached to a squat frame, who had exacted regulation rights—waived by the easy-going—to assistance in his postal deliveries the evening before. As he had hurried fretfully down the long dark passages, apportioning hot news to swell the in-trays at break of day, he seemed one of the throng from the Goblin Market. Now, opening the door of their room, identification was more precise. The curtain had obviously just risen on the third drama of *The Ring*—Mime at his forge—the wizened lieutenant revealed in his shirtsleeves, crouched over a table; while he scoured away at some object in an absolute fever of energy.

'Good morning.'

There was no concealing a certain peevishness at interruption of the performance at such a crucial juncture, only a matter of seconds before the burst of guttural tenor notes opened the introductory lament:

'Labour unending
Toil without fruit!
The strongest sword
That ever I forged . . .'

However, he discontinued his thankless task for a brief space, though still clutching the polishing cloth in claw-like fingers. It was not, in fact, Siegfried's sword to which he was devoting so much attention (trading with the enemy, when one came to think of it), but that by now almost universally adopted—possibly Moghul—contribution to military tailoring, the Sam Browne belt, doubtless his own, the unbuckled brace of which waited treatment on another table.

'Can I see the cable about Poles leaving the USSR?'

The distribution marked at the foot would provide a forecast of immediate contacts on the subject. Rather grudgingly producing the night's harvest, he held the sheaf of telegrams close to his chest, like the cards of a cautious poker player, so that, as he thumbed them through, no other eye should violate their security. The required copy was at the bottom of the pile. Recipients noted, we had a further word together on the subject of the building's least uninviting washing place, agreeing in principle that no great diversity of choice was available. Shaking his head despairingly, either at the thought of rows of grubby basins or his own incessant frustration as swordsmith, or rather leather worker, Mime returned to the Sam Browne. The door closed on sempiternal burnishings. Outside in the corridor, diffused in clouds by the brooms of the cleaners' dawn patrol and smarting to the eye like pepper, rose the dust of eld. Messengers in shabby blue uniforms, a race churlish almost to a man, were beginning to shuffle about, yawning and snarling at each other. Theoretically, night duty continued until 9 a.m., but the Nibelung allowing fealty to himself and his clan by now sufficiently discharged, I dressed, and, not sorry to be released once again from this recurrent nocturnal vassalage, went out to find some breakfast. As well as stimulating teleprinter news, there were things to think over that had happened the previous day.

An unfriendly sky brooded over lines of overcrowded buses lumbering up Whitehall. Singapore had fallen five or six weeks before. Because of official apprehension of a lowering effect on public morale, Japanese excesses there had been soft-pedalled, though those in touch with documents of only relatively restricted circulation knew the sort of thing that had been going on. Withdrawal in Burma was about to take shape. In London the blitz, on the whole abated, would from time to time break out again like an incurable disease. The news about the Poles being at last allowed to leave Russia was good. Something cheering was welcome. The matter had particular bearing on my own changed circumstances.

Nine or ten months before, a posting had come to a small, rather closed community of the General Staff, the Section's establishment—including Finn himself, a lieutenant-colonel—something less than a dozen officers. Gazetted captain, after a brief period of probation, I had been transferred to the Intelligence Corps 'for purposes of administrative convenience'. Like most of those who could claim an earlier military incarnation, I continued to wear the badges, deemed for no particular reason to carry an enhanced prestige, of my former line regiment. Pennistone, for example, recently promoted major, would not even abandon his anonymous lion-and-unicorn under which he had first entered the army. I was Pennistone's assistant in Polish Liaison. The rest of the Section were concerned either with the other original Allies—Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Norway, Czechoslovakia—or the Neutrals—some of whom from time to time were metamorphosed into Allies or enemies—running to nearly twenty in number who boasted a military attaché.

A military attaché was the essential point. He provided the channel through which work was routed for all but three of the Allied forces. Exceptions were the Free French, the Americans, the Russians. Only matters innate to the particular appointment of military attaché as such—routine invitations to exercises and the like—involved Finn with this trio. They were, for their part, dealt with by special missions: Americans and Russians, on account of sheer volume of work involved; Free French, for the good reason they lacked an embassy to which a military attaché could be attached. The Vichy administration, unlike German-established puppet regimes in other occupied countries, was still recognized by Great Britain as the government of France, though naturally unrepresented diplomatically at the Court of St James's. Pennistone had explained much of this when we met a year before at the Free French Mission itself, where Finn, then a major, had interviewed me for a job to which I was not appointed. That interview had in due course brought me to the Section, though whether it would have done so had not Finn himself decided to accept the promotion he had so often in the past refused is another matter. Pennistone might have got me into the Section anyway. There seems no avoiding what has to be.

'Finn's good nature makes him vulnerable,' Pennistone said. 'But he can always fall back on his deafness and his VC.'

Finn was certainly prepared to use either or both these attributes to their fullest advantage when occasion required, but he had other weapons too, and took a lot of bypassing when it came to conflict. Quite why he had changed his mind about accepting promotion, no one knew. If, until that moment, he had preferred to avoid at his age (what that age was remained one of his secrets) too heavy responsibilities, too complex duties, he now found himself assailed by work as various as it was demanding. There was perhaps a parallel with Lance-Corporal Gittins, storeman in my former Battalion, a man of similarly marked character, who, no doubt to the end, preferred a job he liked and knew thoroughly to the uncertainty of rising higher. Possibly a surface picturesqueness about the duties, the people with whom he was now brought in contact, had tempted Finn more than he would have admitted. That would be easy, for Finn admitted to nothing but the deafness and the VC; not even the 'L' of his own initial, though he would smile if the latter question arose, as if he looked forward one day to revealing his first name at the most effective possible moment.

'Finn's extraordinary French is quite famous in Paris,' said Pennistone. 'He has turned it to great advantage.'

Pennistone, capable, even brilliant, at explaining philosophic niceties or the minutiae of official dialectic, was entirely unable to present a clear narrative of his own daily life, past or present, so that it was never discoverable how he and Finn had met in Paris in the first instance. Probably it had been in the days before Pennistone had abandoned commerce for writing a book about Descartes—or possibly Gassendi—and there had been some question of furnishing Finn's office with Pennistone's textiles. In peace or war, Finn was obviously shrewd enough, so he might have ferreted out Pennistone as assistant even had he not been already one of the Section's officers, but, on the contrary, concealed in the innermost recesses of the military machine. He enjoyed a decided prominence in Finn's councils, not by any means only because he spoke several languages with complete fluency.

'Why did Finn leave the City for the cosmetics business?'

'Didn't he inherit some family interest? I don't know. His daughter is married to a Frenchman serving with the British army—as a few are on account of political disinclinations regarding de Gaulle—but Finn keeps his wife and family hidden away.'

'Why is that?'

Pennistone laughed.

'My theory is because presence of relations, whatever they were like, would prejudice Finn's own operation as a completely uncommitted individual, a kind of ideal figure—anyway to himself in his own particular genre—one to whom such appendages as wives and children could only be an encumbrance. Narcissism, perhaps the best sort of narcissism. I'm not sure he isn't right to do so.'

I saw what Pennistone meant, also why he and Finn got on so well together, at first sight surprising, since Finn had probably never heard of Descartes, still less Gassendi. He was not a great reader, he used to say. Such panache as he felt required by his own chosen persona had immense finish of style, to which even the most critical could hardly take offence. Possibly Mrs Finn had proved the exception in that respect, lack of harmony in domestic life resulting. Heroes are notoriously hard to live with. When Finn conversed about matters other than official ones, he tended on the whole to offer anecdotal experiences of the earlier war, old favourites like the occasion when, during a halt on the line of march, he had persuaded the Medical Officer to pull a troublesome molar. Copious draughts of rum were followed by the convulsions as of earthquake. Finn would make appropriate gestures and mimings during the recital, quite horrifying in their way, and undeniably confirming latent abilities as an actor. The climax came almost in a whisper.

'The MO made a balls of it. The tooth was the wrong one.'

Had Finn, in fact, chosen the stage as career, rather than war and commerce, his personal appearance would have restricted him to 'character' parts. Superficial good looks were entirely absent. Short, square, cleanshaven, his head seemed carved out of an elephant's tusk, the whole massive cone of ivory left more or less complete in its original shape, eyes hollowed out deep in the roots, the rest of the protuberance accommodating his other features, terminating in a perfectly colossal nose that stretched directly forward from the totally bald cranium. The nose was preposterous, grotesque, slapstick, a mask from a Goldoni comedy. He had summoned me a day or two before the teleprinter news of the Polish evacuation.

'As David's still in Scotland,' he said. 'I want you to attend a Cabinet Offices meeting. Explain to them how one Polish general can be a very different cup of tea to another.'

The Poles were by far the largest of the Allied contingents in the United Kingdom, running to a Corps of some twenty thousand men, stationed in Scotland, where Pennistone was doing a week's tour of duty to see the army on the ground and make contact with the British Liaison Headquarters attached to it. The other Allies in this country mustered only two or three thousand bodies apiece, though some of them held cards just as useful as soldiers, if not more so: the Belgians, for example, still controlling the Congo, the Norwegians a large and serviceable merchant fleet. However, the size of the Polish Corps, and the fact that the Poles who had reached this country showed a high proportion of officers to that of 'other ranks', inclined to emphasise complexities of Polish political opinion. Some of our own official elements were not too well versed in appreciating the importance of this tricky aspect of all Allied relationships. At misunderstanding's worst, most disastrous, the Poles were thought of as a race not unlike the Russians; indeed, by some, scarcely to be distinguished apart. Even branches more at home in this respect than the

Censorship—to whom it always came as a complete and chaotic surprise that Poles wrote letters to each other expressing feelings towards the USSR that were less than friendly—were sometimes puzzled by internal Allied conflicts alien to our own, in many respects unusual, ideas about running an army.

'The Poles themselves have a joke about their generals being either social or socialist,' said Finn. 'Only wish it was as easy as that. I expect you've got the necessary stuff, Nicholas. If you feel you want to strengthen it, apply to the Country Section or our ambassador to them. This is one of Widmerpool's committees. Have you heard of Widmerpool?'

'Yes, sir, I——'

'Had dealings with him?'

'Quite often, I——'

'Some people find him . . .'

Finn paused and looked grave. He must have decided to remain imprecise, because he did not finish the sentence.

'Very active is Widmerpool,' he went on. 'Not everyone likes him—I mean where he is. If you've come across him already, you'll know how to handle things. Have all the information at your finger tips. Plenty of notes to fall back on. We want to deliver the goods. Possibly Farebrother will be there. He has certain dealings with the Poles in these secret games that take place. Farebrother's got great charm, I know, but you must resist it, Nicholas. Don't let him entangle us in any of his people's goings-on.'

'No, sir. Of course not. Is it Colonel Widmerpool?'

'He's a half-colonel—Good God, I've been keeping Hlava waiting all this time. He must come up at once. You'd better ring David in Scotland and tell him you're standing in for him at this Cabinet Office meeting. He may have something to add. Make a good impression, Nicholas. Show them we know our business.'

The fact was Finn was rather overawed by the thought of the Cabinet Offices. I was a little overawed myself. The warning about Farebrother, whose name I had already heard mentioned several times as a lieutenant-colonel in one of the secret organizations, expressed a principle of Finn's, almost an obsession, that his own Section should have as distant relations as possible with any of the undercover centres of warfare. He considered, no doubt with reason, that officers concerned in normal liaison duties, if they swam, even had an occasional dip, in waters tainted by the varied and dubious currents liable to be released, sometimes rather recklessly, from such dark and mysterious sources, risked undermining confidence in themselves *vis-à-vis* the Allies with whom they daily worked. Secret machinations of the most outlandish kind might be demanded by total war; they were all the same to be avoided—from the security point of view and every other—by those doing a different sort of job. That was Finn's view. You could take it or leave it as a theory. For his own staff, it had to be observed. All contact with clandestine bodies could not, of course, be prevented, because, where any given Ally was concerned, common areas of administration were bound to exist between routine duties and exceptional ones; for example, transfer of individual or group in circumstances when the change had to be known to the Liaison Officer. Even so, Finn's Section saw on the whole remarkably little of those tenebrous side-turnings off the main road of military operations, and he himself would always give a glance of the deepest disapproval if he ran across any of their representatives, male or female, in uniform or *en civile*, frequenting our room, which did occasionally happen.

The meeting was to take place in one of the large buildings at the Parliament Square end of Whitehall. I had set off there the previous morning, aware of certain trepidations. After the usual security guards at the entrance, Royal

Marines were on duty, either because the Ministry of Defence had been largely shaped in early days by a marine officer, because their bifarious nature was thought appropriate to inter-service affairs, or simply because a corps organized in small detachments was convenient for London. The blue uniforms and red capbands made me think of Chips Lovell.

'I know it's a tailor's war,' he had said, 'but I can't afford that blue get-up. They'll have to accept me for what I am in khaki.'

I asked for Colonel Widmerpool.

'Aye, aye, sir.'

This old-fashioned naval affirmative, recalling so many adventure stories read as a boy, increased a sensation of going between decks in a ship. I followed the marine down flight after flight of stairs. It was like the lower depths of our own building, though more spacious, less shabby. The marine, who had a streaming cold in his head, showed me into a room in the bowels of the earth, the fittings and decoration of which were also less down-at-heel than the general run of headquarters and government offices. A grave grey-haired civilian, evidently a chief clerk, was arranging papers down each side of a long table. I explained my business.

'Colonel Widmerpool will be here shortly,' he said. 'He is with the Minister.'

He spoke with severity, as if some regulation had already been transgressed by too early arrival, which had made it necessary to reveal Widmerpool's impressive engagement. I hung about. The chief clerk, like a verger arranging service papers in a cathedral before a wedding, set out a further selection of documents, adjusting them in some very exact relation to those already on the table. A naval captain and RAF wing-commander came in together, talking hard. Ignoring the chief clerk and myself, they sat down at the far end of the long table, produced more papers from briefcases and continued their conversation. They were followed in a minute by a youngish lieutenant-colonel, with the air of a don in uniform, who this time muttered a faint 'good morning' in my direction, then joined the sailor and airman in whatever they were discussing. It was impossible to remain unaware of an atmosphere of exceedingly high pressure in this place, something much more concentrated, more intense, than that with which one was normally surrounded. This was not because work was unplentiful or disregarded in our own building; nor—some of it—lacking in immediacy or drama. However much those characteristics might there obtain, this ethos was something rather different. In this brightly lit dungeon lurked a sense that no one could spare a word, not a syllable, far less gesture, not of direct value in implementing the matter in hand. The power principle could almost be felt here, humming and vibrating like the drummings of the teleprinter. The sensation that resulted was oppressive, even a shade alarming. I was still kicking my heels, trying to rationalize the sense of tension, when the same marine who had escorted myself, blowing his nose hard, ushered in Sunny Farebrother.

Farebrother came through the door looking as quietly distinguished as ever. He was wearing on his threadbare tunic the badge of a parachutist. This qualification was held desirable for those who, in the course of their administrative duties, had to arrange the 'dropping' of others, usually into destinations of excessive danger. Its acquisition was not to be sneezed at for a man in his fifties. It bore out the rumour that Farebrother's DSO in the previous war had been a 'good one'. I was glad to see someone I knew already, but Farebrother's arrival did not in other respects make the atmosphere of the room substantially more cordial; if anything, the reverse. In fact none of the people at the table even looked up. Farebrother himself was obviously on his best behaviour. He addressed himself to the other half-colonel.

'Hullo, Reggie.'

After this ranging shot, he greeted the rest in a manner precisely to indicate appreciation that the sailor was a rung above him, the airman at the same level, both employed in other arms of the Services, therefore unlikely to have immediate bearing on his own interests and promotion. Farebrother's capacity for conveying such subtleties of official relationship was unrivalled. On this occasion, his civilities were scarcely returned. He seemed to expect no more, accepting his status as small fry in the eyes of people such as these. The others continued their discussion. He came across to me.

'So you've had a move up too, Nicholas.'

'Not long after your own, sir.'

'Have you taken David Pennistone's place? I expected him to be your Section's representative here.'

Pennistone regarded himself as rather an authority on Sunny Farebrother, often laughing about that 'charm' against which Finn had warned me.

'Farebrother himself refers to it,' Pennistone said. 'The other day he remarked that some general had "ordered me to use my famous charm". The extraordinary thing is that he has got a way of getting round people, in spite of boasting about it himself. He does put himself over. A remarkable fellow in his way. Ambitious as hell, stops at nothing. I always enjoy his accounts of his own small economies. "Found a place off Baker Street where you can get a three-course luncheon for three-and-six—second helpings, if you ask—a man of my build needs proper nourishment. It's becoming hard to get nowadays, especially at a reasonable price."'

This taste for saving money, usually to be thought of as a trait threatening to diminish an air of distinction, never seemed to detract from Farebrother's. His blue eyes always smiled out bravely on the world. Parsimony, like the dilapidation of his uniform, the one product of the other, positively enhanced his personality—his 'charm' perhaps—even when you knew he was well off. Indeed, Pennistone, like others before him, took the view that Farebrother was decidedly rich.

'And then when he puts on his holy face and tone of voice,' said Pennistone. 'A sacred subject is mentioned—the Prime Minister, religion, some high decoration—Sunny sucks in his cheeks and drops his eyes.'

Farebrother pointed to the strip lighting with which the underground room was equipped.

'Wish I could afford to install something like that in my peacetime office,' he said. 'What you need, if you're going to get any work done. Can't tell whether it's three o'clock in the morning, or three o'clock in the afternoon. No disturbance from time. I expect you know we're going to meet an old friend here this morning?'

'Kenneth Widmerpool?'

Farebrother laughed. Concealing as a rule his likes and dislikes about most people, he scarcely attempted to hide his hatred of Widmerpool, whom it must have been galling to find once more his equal in rank, after temporarily outstripping him; not to mention the fact that Widmerpool's appointment was of such undeniably superior standing to Farebrother's.

'Oh, Kenneth, of course,' he said. 'No, I didn't mean him. This is certainly Kenneth's bower, a very cosy one, don't you think? No—Peter Templer. I was talking to him yesterday about some matter in which his Ministry was concerned, and he told me the usual man's sick and he himself would be representing Economic Warfare here this morning.'

Templer came into the room at that moment, followed by another civilian. Sir Magnus Donners—who continued to hold his place in the Cabinet, in spite of a concerted attack for several months from certain sections of the Press—had probably had some hand in finding this job for him in MEW. Catching sight of me, Templer nodded and gave a slight smile, but did not come over and speak. Instead, he sat down with the party at the table, where he too began to produce papers. He seemed to know them all.

'I must have a word with Peter,' said Farebrother.

He went across to Templer and said something. At Stourwater, where I had last seen him, I had been struck by a hardness, even brutality of expression that had changed someone I had once known well. That look had seemed new to Templer, perhaps to be attributed to lack of concord with his second wife, Betty, then showing herself an unassimilable member of Sir Magnus's houseparty; indeed, so near the borderline of sanity that it seemed unwise ever to have brought her into those formidable surroundings. Templer had not lost this rather grim appearance. If anything, it had increased. He was thinner, more resembling himself in his younger days in that respect. To go through his papers he had put on spectacles, which I had never before seen him wear. While I was wondering whether I too ought to go and sit at the table, Widmerpool himself entered the room.

'My apologies, gentlemen.'

Holding up a sheaf of documents in both hands, at the same time making jocular movements with his head and arms in the direction of the small crowd awaiting him, he looked very pleased with himself; like a dog delighted to show ability in carrying a newspaper in his mouth.

'You must excuse me,' he said. 'I was kept by the Minister. He absolutely refused to let me go.'

Grinning at them all through his thick lenses, his tone suggested the Minister's insistence had bordered on sexual importunity.

'Let us be seated.'

Everyone except Farebrother and myself was already sitting down. Widmerpool turned towards me, somewhat abating the geniality of his manner.

'I was not informed by Finn that you were coming here in Pennistone's place, Nicholas. He should have done so.'

'I have the necessary stuff here.'

'I hope you have. Finn is rather slack about such notifications. There are security considerations here of which he may not appreciate the complexity. However, let us begin. This Polish business should not take too long. We must be brisk, as a great many more important matters have to be got through this morning.'

The other civilian, who had entered the room with Templer, turned out to be the Foreign Office representative on this particular committee, a big fat man with a small mouth and petulant manner. He had brought a paper with him which he now read aloud in the tone of one offering up an introductory prayer. There was some general talk, when he had finished, of Pilsudski's *coup d'état* of 1926, from which so many subsequent Polish complications of political relationship had arisen. I consulted my notes.

'The broad outline is that those senior officers who stem from the Carpathian Brigade of Legions tend to be nationalist and relatively right-wing, in contrast with those of the First Brigade—under Pilsudski himself and Sosnokowski—on the whole leftish in outlook.'

'The First Brigade always regarded itself as the *élite*,' said Widmerpool.

He had evidently read the subject up, at least familiarized himself with its salient points. Probably the knowledge was fairly thorough, as his capacity for work was enormous.

'General Sikorski himself was entirely eclipsed after the coup. Henceforth he lived largely abroad. Since taking over, he has shown himself very reasonable, even well disposed, towards most of his former political opponents.'

'Though by no means immune to French flattery,' said Widmerpool.

'Let's hear something about General Anders,' said the sailor.

'He's GOC Polish troops in Russia, I understand. How's he doing at that job?'

'Efficiently, it's thought—insomuch as he's allowed to function with a free hand.'

'Where will Anders fit in, if he comes over here? Will there be friction with the present chap?'

'Up to now, Anders has not been a figure of anything like comparable political stature to Sikorski. There seems no reason to suppose he wishes to compete with him at that level. Unlike Sikorski—although he actively opposed Pilsudski in 'twenty-six—Anders never suffered in his career. In fact he was the first colonel to be promoted general after the change of régime.'

'Anders is a totally different type from Sikorski,' said Widmerpool. 'Rather a swashbuckler. A man to be careful of in certain respects. Ran a racing stable. Still, I'm no enemy to a bit of dash. I like it.'

Widmerpool removed his spectacles to emphasize this taste for ardour in living.

'The Russians kept him in close confinement for two years.'

'So we are aware.'

'Sometimes in atrocious conditions.'

'Yes, yes. Now, let's get on to lesser people like their Chief of Staff, Kielkiewicz, and the military attaché, Bobrowski . . .'

Clarification of the personalities of Polish generals continued for about an hour. The various pairs of hands lying on the table formed a pattern of contrasted colours and shapes. Widmerpool's, small, gnarled, with cracked nails, I remembered from school. Farebrother's, clasped together, as if devotionally, to match his expression, were long fingered, the joints immensely nobbly, rather notably clean and well looked after, but not manicured like Templer's. Those of the Foreign Office representative were huge, with great bulbous fingers, almost purple in colour, like lumps of meat that had been chopped in that shape to make into sandwiches or hot-dogs. The soldier and sailor both possessed good useful hands of medium size, very reasonably clean; the airman's, small again, rather in the manner of Widmerpool's, nails pared very close, probably with a knife.

'That seems to be about all we want to know,' said Widmerpool. 'Is that agreed? Let us get on to more urgent matters. The extraneous personnel can go back to their own work.'

Farebrother, apparently anxious to get away quickly, rose, said some goodbyes and left. Templer also wanted to be on his way.

'I was told you wouldn't need me either after the first session, Kenneth,' he said. 'None of the stuff you're moving on to will concern my people directly and we'll get copies of the paper. There's a particular matter back at the office I'd like to liquidate, if I could be excused—and Broadbent will be back tomorrow.'

'It isn't usual,' said Widmerpool.

'Couldn't an exception be made?'

After a minute or two of sparring, Widmerpool assented ungraciously. I suggested to Templer we should walk a short way up the street together.

'All right,' said Templer indifferently.

This exchange between Templer and myself had the effect of making Widmerpool restive, even irritable. He looked up from the table, round which a further set of papers was being doled out by the chief clerk.

'Do go away, Nicholas. I have some highly secret matters to deal with on the next agenda. I can't begin on them with people like you hanging about the room.'

Templer and I retired. On the first landing of the stairs, the sneezing marine was drying his handkerchief on the air-conditioning plant. We reached the street before Templer spoke. He seemed deeply occupied with his own thoughts.

'What's working at MEW like?'

'Just what you'd imagine.'

His manner was so unforthcoming, so far from recognizing we were old friends who had not met for a long time, that I began to regret suggesting we should have a word together after the meeting.

'Are you often in contact with Sunny Farebrother?'

'Naturally his people are in touch with the Ministry from time to time, though not as a rule with me personally.'

'When I saw him at my former Div HQ he rather indicated his new job might have some bearing on your own career.'

'That was poor security on Sunny's part. Well, you never know. Perhaps it will. I admit I've been looking about for something different. These things take time. The trouble is one's so frightfully old. Kenneth's sitting pretty, isn't he?'

'He thought he'd never get that job. He was in fairly hot water when last seen.'

'Kenneth can winkle his way out of anything,' said Templer. 'God save me from such a grind myself, but, if you like that sort of thing, it's quite a powerful one, properly handled. You can bet Kenneth gets the last ounce out of it.'

'You grade it pretty high?'

'Of course, it's nothing to find yourself working fourteen hours a day at a stretch, even longer than that, night after night into the small hours, and then back again at 9 a.m. If you can stand up to it physically—get the rest of the committee to agree with what you've written down of their discussion over a period of six or seven hours—you, as their secretary, word the papers that may go right up to the Chiefs of Staff—possibly to the PM himself. You've only seen the merest chicken feed, Nick. A Military Assistant Secretary, like Kenneth, can have quite an influence on policy—in a sense on the whole course of the war—if he plays his hand well.'

Templer had dropped his distant manner. The thought of Widmerpool's potential powers evidently excited him.

'It's only a lieutenant-colonel's appointment.'

'They range from majors to brigadiers—there might even be a major-general. I'm not sure. You see there are quite a lot of them. In theory, they rank equal in their own particular work, but of course rank always carries its own prestige. I say, this possibility has just occurred to me. Do you ever come across Prince Theodoric in your racket?'

'I believe my Colonel has seen him once or twice. I've never run across him myself—except for a brief moment years ago before the war.'

'I just wondered,' said Templer. 'I used to have business dealings with his country. Theodoric's position is a trifle delicate here, politically speaking, his brother, the King, not only in such bad health, but more or less in baulk.'

'Musing upon the King his brother's wreck?'

'And the heir to the throne too young to do anything, and anyway in America. Theodoric himself has always been a hundred per cent anti-Nazi. I'm trying to get Kenneth to put up a paper on the subject. That's all by the way. How's your family?'

The abruptness of transition was clearly to mark a deliberate change of subject. I told him Isobel and our child were living near enough to London to be visited once a fortnight; in return enquiring about Betty Templer. Although curious to hear what had happened to her, I had not asked at first because any question about Templer's women, even wives, risked the answer that they had been discarded or had left. His manner at that moment conveyed that revelation forced on him—if anything of the sort were indeed to be revealed—would be answered in a manner calculated to embarrass. There had been times when he liked to unload personal matters; this did not look like one of them. In any case, I hardly knew Betty, at least no more of her than her state of extreme nervous discomfort at Stourwater. However, enquiry was not to be avoided. Templer did not answer at once. Instead, he looked at me with an odd sardonic expression, preparation for news hardly likely to be good.

'You hadn't heard?'

'Heard what?'

'About Betty?'

'Not ill, I hope.'

It occurred to me she might have been killed in a raid. That could happen to acquaintances and remain unknown to one for months.

'She went off her rocker,' he said.

'You mean . . .'

'Just what I say. She's in the bin.'

He spoke roughly. The deliberate brutality of the statement was so complete, so designed to let no one, least of all myself, off any of its implications, that it could only be accepted as concealing an abyss of painful feeling. At least, correctly or not, such downright language had to be given the benefit of the doubt in that respect.

'Rather a peach, isn't she?'

That was what he had said of her, when I had first seen them together at Umfraville's night-club, a stage in their relationship when Templer could not remember whether his future wife's surname was Taylor or Porter. Now, he made no effort to help out the situation. There was nothing whatever to be said in return. I produced a few conventional phrases, none in the least adequate, at the same time feeling rather aggrieved that Templer himself should choose, first, to carry curtness of manner to the point of seeming positively unfriendly; then change to a tone that only long intimacy in the past could justify. Perhaps—thinking over Betty's demeanour staying with Sir Magnus Donners—this ultimate disaster was not altogether surprising. Having such cares on his mind could to some extent explain Templer's earlier unaccommodating manner.

'Just one of those things,' he said.

He spoke this time as if a little to excuse himself for what might look like an earlier show of heartlessness.

'To tell the truth, I'm feeling a shade fed up about marriage, women, my job, in fact the whole bag of tricks,' he said. 'Then this awful business of one's age. You keep on getting back to that. If it isn't one objection, it's another. "You're not young enough, old boy". I'm always being told that nowadays. On top of it all, a bomb hit my flat the other night. I was on Fire Duty at the Ministry. Everybody said what a marvellous piece of luck. Not sure.'

'Did it wreck the place completely?'

Templer shook his head, indicating not so much lack of damage at the flat, as that he could not bring himself to recapitulate further a subject so utterly tedious and unrewarding.

'You haven't any good idea where I might go temporarily? I'm living from hand to mouth at the moment with anyone who will put me up.'

I suggested the Jeavons house in South Kensington. Ted Jeavons, having somehow managed to find a builder to patch up the roof and back wall—an achievement no one but himself would have brought off at that moment—was still in residence. Only the rear part of the structure had been damaged by the bomb, the front remaining almost untouched. Jeavons ran the house more or less as it had been run when Molly was alive, with a shifting population of visitors, some of whom lived there more or less permanently, paying rent. Lots of households of much that kind existed in wartime London, a matter of luck if, homeless like Templer, you knew where to apply. He wrote down the address, at the same time showing characteristic lack of interest in information about Jeavons.

'I might propose myself,' he said. 'If a bomb's already hit the place, with any luck it won't happen again, though I don't know that there's any real reason to suppose that.'

He paused, then suddenly began to talk about himself in a manner that was oddly apologetic, quite unlike his accustomed style as remembered, or the tone he had been using up till now. Until then, I had felt all contact lost between us, that the picture I retained of him when we had been friends years before had become largely imaginary. Now a closer proximity seemed renewed.

'I've given up girls,' he said. 'I thought you'd be interested to know.'

'Charles Stringham said the same when I ran across him in the ranks. Is this for the war?'

Templer laughed.

'I used to think I was rather a success with the ladies,' he said. 'Now one wife's run away and the other is where I indicated, I'm not so sure. At least I can't be regarded as a great hand at marriage. It's lately been made clear to me I'm not so hot extra-matrimonially either. That's why I was beefing about age.'

He made a dismissive gesture.

'I'll ring your friend Jeavons,' he said.

He strolled away. There was always the slight impression of which Stringham used to complain—persisting even into the universal shabbiness of wartime—that Templer was too well dressed. I had never before known him so dejected.

While eating breakfast after Night Duty, I reflected that it would be as well to warn Jeavons that Templer might be getting in touch with him. Without some such notification, knowing them both, nothing was more likely than that they would get at cross purposes with each other. Then I put personal matters from my mind and began to think about the day's work that lay ahead.

'You'll be surprised at the decisions one has to take on one's own here.' Pennistone had said when I first joined the Section. 'You might think that applied to the Operational people more than ourselves, but in fact captains and majors in 'I' have to get used to giving snap answers about all sorts of relatively important policy matters.'

When I returned to the building, this time to our own room, Dempster, who looked after the Norwegians and had a passion for fresh air, was trying vainly to open one of the windows, laughing a lot while he did so. He was in the timber business and knew Scandinavia well, spending skiing holidays in Norway when a boy with an aunt who was a remote kinswoman of Ibsen's. Dempster was always full of Ibsen stories. He had won a couple of MCs in '14–'18, the second up at Murmansk during the War of Intervention, an interlude the less inhibited of the Russians would, once in a way, enjoy laughing about, if the subject came up after a lot of drinks at one of their own parties. That did not apply to the Soviet military attaché himself, General Lebedev, who was at all times a stranger to laughter. Dempster was a rather notably accomplished pianist, who had been known to play a duet with Colonel Hlava, the Czech, also a competent performer, though not quite in Dempster's class.

'No good,' said Dempster.

Holding a long pole with a hook on the end with which he had been trying to open the window, he looked like an immensely genial troll come south from the fjords to have a good time. Still laughing, he replaced the pole in its corner. This endlessly repeated game of trying to force open the window was always unsuccessful. The sun's rays, when there was any sun, penetrated through small rectangles in otherwise bricked up glass. The room itself, irregular of shape, was on the first floor, situated in an angle of the building, under one of the domed cupolas that ornamented the four corners of the roof. In winter—it was now early spring—life here was not unlike that lived at the earth's extremities, morning and evening only an hour or two apart, the sparse feeble light of day tailing away in early afternoon, until finally swallowed up into impenetrable outer blackness. Within, lamplight glowed dimly through the shadows and nimbus of cigarette smoke, the drone of dictating voices measuring a kind of plain-song against more brief emphatic exchanges made from time to time on one or more of the seven or eight telephones. This telephonic talk was, as often as not, in some language other than English; just as the badges and insignia of visitors tended, as often as not, to diverge from the common run of uniform.

Pennistone, still wearing a blue side-cap, was sitting in his chair, preparing for action by opening the small gold hunter that always lay on the desk in front of him during working hours, a watch that was wound with a key.

'Good morning, Nick.'

'You came down from Scotland last night?'

'Got a sleeper by a bit of luck. I shared it with an air-commodore who snored. How did the Cabinet Office meeting go?'

'All right—look, I'm just off night duty. What do you think? A message has come through that a few Poles are trickling over the Persian frontier.'

'No?'

'The Russians have released a driblet.'

'This could mean a Second Polish Corps.'

Pennistone had fair hair with a high-bridged nose over which he could look exceeding severe at people who annoyed him, of whom there were likely to be quite a few in the course of a day's business. Without possessing a conventionally military appearance, a kind of personal authority and physical ease of movement carried off in him the incisive demands of uniform. More basically, he could claim an almost uncanny instinctive grasp of what was required from a staff officer. Indeed, after months of dealing with him from day to day, General Bobrowski, when informed Pennistone was not a Regular, had exploded into a Polish ejaculation of utter astonishment, at the same time bursting into loud laughter, while executing in mid-air one of those snatching, clutching gestures of the fingers, so expressive of his own impatience with life. A major-general, Bobrowski, who was military attaché, had been with the Polish contingent in France at the beginning of the war, where, in contravention of the French Chief of Army Staff's order that no Polish troops were to be evacuated to England, he had mounted brens on locomotives and brought the best part of two brigades to a port of embarkation.

'Bobrowski began his military career in a Russian rifle regiment.' Pennistone had told me. 'He was *praporschik*—ensign, as usually translated—at the same time that Kielkiewicz was an aspirant—always a favourite rank of mine—in the Austro-Hungarian cavalry.'

Hanging his cap on one of the hooks by the door, Pennistone went upstairs at once to get orders from Finn about the news from Iran. Polish GHQ must have received the information simultaneously from their own sources—reports almost always comprehensive, if at times highly coloured—because Michalski, one of General Kielkiewicz's ADCs, came through on the telephone just after Pennistone had left the room, seeking to arrange an interview with everyone from the Chief of the Imperial General Staff downwards. He was followed almost immediately on the line by Horaczko, one of Bobrowski's assistants, with the same end in view for his master. We were on easy terms with both Michalski and Horaczko, so temporizing was not too difficult, though clearly fresh and more urgent solicitations would soon be on the way.

Michalski, now in his late thirties, had served like Bobrowski with the Polish contingent in France. Of large size, sceptical about most matters, he belonged to the world of industrial design—statuettes for radiator caps and such decorative items—working latterly in Berlin, which had left some mark on him of its bitter individual humour. In fact Pennistone always said talking to Michalski made him feel he was sitting in the Romanisches Café. His father had been a successful portrait painter, and his grandfather before him, stretching back to a long line of itinerant artists wandering over Poland and Saxony.

'Painting pictures that are now being destroyed as quickly as possible,' Michalski said.

He was accomplished at providing thumbnail sketches of the personalities at the Titian, the former hotel, subdued, Edwardian in tone, where headquarters of the Polish army in exile was established. Uncle Giles had once stayed there in days gone by, a moment when neither the Ufford nor the De Tabley had been able to accommodate him at short notice. 'I'll be bankrupt if I ever do it again,' he had declared afterwards, a financial state all his relations in those days supposed him to be in anyway.

Horaczko had reached England in a different manner from Michalski, and only after a lot of adventures. As an officer of the Reserve, he had begun the Eastern campaign on horseback, cantering about at the head of a troop of lancers, pennons flying, like one of the sequences of *War and Peace*, to intercept the advancing German armour. Executive in a Galician petroleum plant, he was younger than Michalski, having—as Pennistone and I agreed—some of the air of the junior lead in a drawing-room comedy, the young lover perhaps. When Poland was overrun on two fronts, Horaczko had avoided capture and internment, probably death, by escaping through Hungary. Both he and Michalski held the rank of second-lieutenant. While I was still speaking to Horaczko on the telephone, our clerk, Corporal Curtis, brought in a lot more stuff to be dealt with, additional, that is, to the formidable pile lying on the desk when I came in from breakfast.

'Good morning, Curtis.'

'Good morning, sir.'

'How are things?'

Curtis, a studious-looking young man, whose military career had been handicapped by weak eyesight, was a henchman of notable efficiency and wide interests. He had once confessed to Pennistone that he had read through the whole of Grote's *History of Greece*.

'A rather disturbing letter from the Adjutant-General's branch, sir.'

'Oh, Lord.'

'But not so bad as my first premonition on reading it. In fact, sir, I all but perpetrated a schoolboy howler in that connexion.'

'Impossible.'

'On the subject of redundant Polish officers taking commissions in the King's African Rifles—*Accra*, sir—the AG.10 clerk spoke indistinctly, as well as using what I understand to be an incorrect pronunciation, so that, to cut a long story short, sir, the place was first transcribed by me as *Agra*. The error did not take long to be righted, but it was a disturbing misconstruction.'

By the time I had run through the new lot of papers Pennistone had returned. He reported that Finn—after a word with the more sagacious of the two brigadiers—had been told to consult the Major-General in charge of our Directorate. I reported that Michalski and Horaczko had telephoned.

'Ring Horaczko back, otherwise Bobrowski will make him persecute us all day. Tell him we'll let him know the very moment anything comes through that his general should have. Don't worry about Michalski. I'll be seeing him. I'm off to the Titian at once to get Kielkiewicz's reactions.'

'What were the Colonel's?'

'He's in one of his flaps.'

Sudden pressures of this kind always upset Finn, whose temperament unpredictably fused agitation with calm; violent inner antagonism of these warring characteristics having presumably motivated whatever he had done—killed goodness knows how many enemy machine-gunners with a bayonet?—to be awarded his VC. No doubt the comparative lack of precedent for the situation now arisen in Persia, its eccentric deficiency of warning at the diplomatic level, general departure from normal routine—even from official good manners so far as the Soviet was concerned—discomposed Finn, a man both systematic and courteous. Although not a professional soldier, he had one way and another, seen a good deal of military service, having, like Dempster, stayed on for a while in the army after the Armistice in 1918; then been re-employed in the rank of major as early as 1938. In short, he had enjoyed plenty of opportunity to observe military problems, which on the whole he seemed to prefer to semi-political ones, like the evacuation of the Poles.

'He'll be all right when he's used to the idea,' said Pennistone. 'At first he could consider nothing short of flying out there at once and arranging it all himself.'

He reached for his cap again, unhooking it from the wall with the crook of a walking stick. Then he returned the watch to the breast pocket of his tunic.

'Have a talk with Q (Ops.) Colonel,' he said.

Borrit, who looked after the Netherlands, passed on his way towards the door.

'Borrit . . .'

'Yes, Pennistone?'

'You're not making for the car?'

Borrit's small fair moustache was set in a serious melancholy face, deeply tanned, as if he had spent much of his life under a blazing sun. Perhaps he had. He had come to the Section from employment as one of the Intelligence Officers at Headquarters on the Gold Coast, owing his knowledge of Spanish—at first naturally steering him to duties with the Neutrals—to many years spent on the wholesale side of the fruit trade. Language as usual proving of less consequence than facility for handling an 'opposite number' with tact, he had in due course gravitated to the more responsible job with an Ally. Stebbings, who took Borrit's place with the Spaniards and Latin-Americans, was also, oddly enough, in the fruit business, though on the retail side, where he had a nervous breakdown when his firm went into bankruptcy at the outbreak of war. If addressed sharply, Stebbings's left eyelid twitched, probably in consequence of that collapse. He remained always rather afraid of Finn. All the same, he tackled his duties with judgment. Stebbings was recently married to a Portuguese, a fact that continually worried the Security people. Borrit, on the other hand, was a widower. He must have been forty, perhaps a shade more, because he had seen action in the first war, though only as a result of having falsified his age to the recruiting authorities. During the occasional lulls of work Borrit and Stebbings would talk earnestly of fruit. Pennistone and Borrit had a standing rivalry over the Section's car—a vehicle of inconceivably cramped seating accommodation—for first use in the morning.

'Wait a moment . . .' said Pennistone.

'I'll drop you,' said Borrit. 'If you're on the way to the Titian.'

Pennistone turned to me again.

'Where was I?'

'Q (Ops.).'

'Ah, yes—the point is there's only the traditional one man and a boy at Meshed.'

'That's the key name?'

'We shall be hearing a lot about Meshed—and resorts like Yangi-yul and Alma Ata. Some sort of a reception centre will have to be rigged up. There may be quite a party to deal with once they start.'

'What am I to say to Q (Ops.)?'

'Just ventilate the question. They may have other ideas to ours.'

'They're presumably prepared for this. They were on the distribution.'

'But will want to be brought up to date from our end—and we'll need their background stuff to tell the London Poles.'

'Do you mind if we go, Pennistone?' said Borrit. 'Otherwise I'll be late for my appointment with Van der Voort.'

Pennistone, never to be hurried, stood in deep thought. He was as likely to be reflecting on Cartesianism as on the best way to approach Q (Ops.). Borrit made another move towards the door.

'What was it? I know—trouble again about Szymanski. You wouldn't think it possible one man could be such a nuisance. There's now doubt whether it's his real name, because a lot of people are called that. MI 5 want a word about him. Try and clear it up. Another good deed would be to extract an answer from Blackhead about the supply of straw for stuffing medical establishment palliasses. They're frantic about it in Scotland.'

'Blackhead's not raised objection to that?'

'He says straw comes under a special restrictive order. He should be alerted about the evacuation too, so that he can think up difficulties.'

Borrit opened the door, allowing a sharp current of air to drive in from the passages. This was done as a challenge. He leant on the handle, looking rather aggrieved. There were some shouts from the others requiring that the door be shut at once. Borrit pointed to Pennistone and myself. He would not venture to leave without Pennistone, but, to humour him, we both made a move towards the corridor.

'Come as far as the staff entrance,' said Pennistone. 'In case I think of other urgent problems.'

We followed Borrit down the back staircase. On the first floor, Intelligence, in its profuse forms, mingled with Staff Duties, a grumpy crowd, most of them, especially the Regulars ('If they were any good, they wouldn't be here', Pennistone said) and a few Operational sections, on the whole less immediately active ones, the more vital tending to have rooms on the floor above, close to the generals and higher grade brigadiers. A few civilian *hauts fonctionnaires*, as Pennistone called them, were also located here, provided with a strip of carpet as they rose in rank; at the highest level—so it was rumoured—even a cupboard containing a chamber pot. The Army Council Room was on this floor, where three or four colonels, Finn among them, had also managed to find accommodation. The great double staircase leading from the marble hall of the main entrance (over which the porter, Vavassor, presided in a blue frock coat with scarlet facings and top hat with gold band) led directly to these, as it were, state apartments. On the ground floor, technical branches and those concerned with supply rubbed shoulders with all sorts and conditions, internal security contacts of a more or less secret sort, Public Relations, typing pools, dispatch-riders, Home Guard.

'Kielkiewicz has heard of Kafka,' said Pennistone, as we reached the foot of the stairs.

'You put them all through their literary paces as a matter of routine?'

'He laughed yesterday when I used the term Kafkaesque.'

'Wasn't that rather esoteric?'

'It just slipped out.'

Pennistone laughed at the thought. Though absolutely dedicated to his duties with the Poles, he also liked getting as much amusement out of the job as possible.

'In the course of discussing English sporting prints with Bobrowski,' he said, 'a subject he's rather keen on. It turned out the Empire style in Poland is known as "Duchy of Warsaw". That's nice, isn't it?'

'I don't look forward to this tussle with Blackhead about palliasse straw—by the way, what happened in the war about the Air Cooperation Squadron and which command it came under?'

'One of my notable achievements up there was to settle that. But go and see Q (Ops.). That's the big stuff now. Then have a talk with Finn. Where's the driver?'

Borrit gave a shout. An AT came quickly from behind the screen that stood on one side of the untidy cramped little hall, crowded with people showing identity cards as they passed into the building. She glanced at us without interest, then went through the door into the street.

'Not bad,' said Borrit. 'I hadn't seen her before.'

Very young, she was one of those girls with a dead white complexion and black hair, the only colouring capable of rising above the boundlessly unbecoming hue of khaki. Instead of the usual ATS tunic imposed by some higher authority anxious that the Corps should look, if not as masculine as possible, at least as Sapphic, she had managed to provide herself, as some did, with soldier's battledress, paradoxically more adapted to the female figure. It had to be admitted that occasional intrusion at 'official level' of an attractive woman was something rather different from, more exciting than, the intermittent pretty secretary or waitress of peacetime, perhaps more subtly captivating from a sense that you and she belonged to the same complicated organism, in this case the Army. At the same time, Borrit's comment was one of routine rather than particular interest, because, according to himself, he lived a rather melancholy emotional life. His wife, a Canadian, had died about ten years before, and, while Borrit marketed fruit in Europe, their children preferred to live with grandparents in Canada. His own relations with the opposite sex took an exclusively commercial form.

'I've never had a free poke in my life,' he said. 'Subject doesn't seem to arise when you're talking to a respectable woman.'

He had confided this remark to the room in general. In spite of existing in this amatory twilight, he presented a reasonably cheerful exterior to the world, largely sustained by such phrases as 'What news on the Rialto?' or 'Bring on the dancing girls'. He and Pennistone followed the driver to where the Section's car was parked outside. I turned away from the staff entrance and made for Q (Ops.).

The new flight of stairs led down into the bowels of the earth, the caves and potholes of the basement and sub-basement, an underground kingdom comparable with that inhabited by Widmerpool. It might have been thought that Mime and his fellow Nibelungen haunted these murky subterranean regions, but they were in fact peopled by more important, less easily replaceable beings, many of whom practised mysteries too momentous to be exposed (in a target registering already more than a dozen outers, though as yet no bull's eye) to the comparative uncertainties of life at street level or above. Here, for example, the unsleeping sages of Movement Control spun out their lives, sightless magicians deprived eternally of the light of the sun, while, by their powerful arts, they projected armies or individual over land and sea or through the illimitable wastes of the air. The atmosphere below seemed to demand such highly coloured metaphor, thoughts of magic and necromancy bringing Dr Trelawney to mind, and the rumours in the earlier war that he had been executed in the Tower as a spy. I wondered if the Good Doctor, as Moreland used to call him, were still alive. Indiscreet observance of the rites of his cult, especially where these involved exotic drugs, could bring trouble in this war, though retribution was likely to stop short of the firing squad. Moreland himself, with Mrs Maclintick, had left London months before on some governmentally sponsored musical tour of the provinces.

Like a phantasm in one of Dr Trelawney's own narcotically produced reveries, I flitted down passage after passage, from layer to layer of imperfect air-conditioning, finding the right door at last in an obscure corner. Q (Ops.) Colonel was speaking on the scrambler when I entered the room, so I made as if to withdraw. He vigorously beckoned me to stay, continuing to talk for a few seconds about some overseas force. Abyssinia might have been a good guess. He hung up. I explained where I came from and put myself at his disposal.

'Ah, yes . . .'

He began to sort out papers, putting some away in a drawer. He gave an immediate impression, not only of knowing what he was about himself, but also of possessing the right sort of determination to use any information available from other sources. Inefficiency was rare in the building, but there was inevitably the occasional boor or temperamental obscurantist.

'Polish evacuation—here we are—these troops held by our Russian Allies since their invasion of our Polish Allies in 1939. They've retained their own units and formations?'

'We understand some in Central Asia have, or at least certain units have already been brigaded after release from prison camps. General Anders is organizing this.'

'The lot are in Central Asia?'

'At least eight or nine thousand Polish officers remain untraced.'

'Rather a large deficiency.'

'That's a minimum, sir. It's been put as high as fifteen thousand.'

'Any idea where they are?'

'Franz Josef Land's been suggested, sir.'

'Within the Arctic Circle?'

'Yes.'

He looked straight in front of him.

'Unlikely they'll be included in this evacuation, whatever its extent?'

'Seems most unlikely, sir.'

'Just the figures I have here?'

He pushed them over.

'So far as we know at present. On the other hand, anything might happen.'

'Let's have a look at the map again . . . Yangi-yul . . . Alma Ata . . . There's been constant pressure for the release of these troops?'

'All the time—also to discover the whereabouts of the missing officers.'

He wrote some notes.

'Lease-Lend . . .'

'Yes, sir?'

'You see the consignment papers?'

'From time to time some minor item is earmarked for the Polish forces in Russia and the papers pass through our hands.'

Once, when one of these interminable lists of weapons and vehicles, *matériel* of war for the Eastern Front, had come to us, Pennistone had compared the diplomatic representations of the moment directed to obtaining the release of the immobilized Polish army with a very small powder in a very large spoon of Lease-Lend jam. Now, the Germans penetrating into the country on an extended front, these solicitations seemed at last to have attracted official Soviet attention. This must have been four or five months before the siege of Stalingrad. Q (Ops.) Colonel ran through facts and figures, asked a few additional questions, then shook the papers together and clipped them back into their file.

'Right?'

'Right, sir.'

He took up the green telephone again.

'If the London Poles have anything to add to what I have here already, let me know.'

'We will, sir.'

He 'went over' on the scrambler with whomever he was talking to, and, as I withdrew, could have been dealing with Icelandic matters. Like Orpheus or Herakles returning from the silent shades of Tartarus, I set off upstairs again, the objective now Finn's room on the second floor.

Outside the Army Council Room, side by side on the passage wall, hung, so far as I knew, the only pictures in the building, a huge pair of subfusc massively framed oil-paintings, subject and technique of which I could rarely pass without re-examination. The murkily stiff treatment of these two unwontedly elongated canvases, although not in fact executed by Horace Isbister RA, recalled his brush-work and treatment, a style that already germinated a kind of low-grade nostalgia on account of its naïve approach and total disregard for any 'modern' development in the painter's art. The merging harmonies—dark brown, dark red, dark blue—depicted incidents in the wartime life of King George V: *Where Belgium greeted Britain*, showing the bearded monarch welcoming Albert, King of the Belgians, on arrival in this country as an exile from his own: *Merville, December 1st, 1914*, in which King George was portrayed chatting with President Poincaré, this time both with beards, the President wearing a hat somewhat resembling the head-dress of an *avocat* in the French lawcourts. Perhaps it was fur, on account of the cold. This time too busy to make a fresh assessment, aesthetic or sartorial, I passed the pictures by. Finn's door was locked. He might still be with the General, more probably was himself making a round of branches concerned with the evacuation. There was nothing for it but Blackhead, and restrictions on straw for hospital palliasses.

The stairs above the second floor led up into a rookery of lesser activities, some fairly obscure of definition. On these higher storeys dwelt the Civil branches and their subsidiaries, Finance, Internal Administration, Passive Air Defence, all diminishing in official prestige as the altitude steepened. Finally the explorer converged on attics under the eaves, where crusty hermits lunched frugally from paper bags, amongst crumb-powdered files and documents ineradicably tattooed with the circular brand of the teacup. At these heights, vestiges of hastily snatched meals endured throughout all seasons, eternal as the unmelted upland snows. Here, under the leads, like some unjustly confined prisoner of the Council of Ten, lived Blackhead. It was a part of the building rarely penetrated, for even Blackhead himself preferred on the whole to make forays on others, rather than that his own fastness should be invaded.

'You'll never get that past Blackhead,' Pennistone had said, during my first week with the Section.

'Who's Blackhead?'

'Until you have dealings with Blackhead, the word "bureaucrat" will have conveyed no meaning to you. He is the super-*tchenovnik* of the classical Russian novel. Even this building can boast no one else quite like him. As a special treat you can negotiate with Blackhead this afternoon on the subject of the issue of screwdrivers and other tools to Polish civilian personnel temporarily employed at military technical establishments.'

This suggested caricature, Pennistone's taste for presenting individuals in dramatic form. On the contrary, the picture was, if anything, toned down from reality. At my former Divisional Headquarters, the chief clerk, Warrant Officer Class I Mr Diplock, had seemed a fair performer in the field specified. To transact business even for a few minutes with Blackhead was immediately to grasp how pitifully deficient Diplock had, in fact, often proved himself in evolving a really impregnable system of obstruction and preclusion; awareness of such falling short of perfection perhaps telling on his nerves and finally causing him to embezzle and desert.

'Blackhead is a man apart,' said Pennistone. 'Even his colleagues are aware of that. His minutes have the abstract quality of pure extension.'

It was true. Closely 'in touch' with the Finance branch, he was, for some reason, not precisely categorized as one of them. Indeed, all precision was lacking where the branch to which Blackhead belonged was in question, even the house telephone directory, usually unequivocal, becoming all at once vague, even shifty. The phrase 'inspection and collation of governmental civil and economic administration in relation to Allied military liaison' had once been used by a member of one of the Finance branches themselves, then hastily withdrawn as if too explicit, something dangerous for security reasons to express so openly. Such prevarication hinted at the possibility that even his fellows by now could not exactly determine—anyway define to a layman—exactly what Blackhead really did. His rank, too, usually so manifest in every civil servant, seemed in Blackhead's case to have become blurred by time and attrition. To whom was he was responsible? Whom—if anyone—did he transcend? Obviously in the last resort he was subservient to the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for War, and Blackhead himself would speak of Assistant Under Secretaries—even of Principals—as if their ranks represented unthinkable heights of official attainment. On the other hand, none of these people seemed to have the will, even the power, to control him. It was as if Blackhead, relatively humble though his grading might be, had become an anonymous immanence of all their kind, a fetish, the Voodoo deity of the whole Civil Service to be venerated and placated, even if better—safer—hidden away out of sight: the mystic holy essence incarnate of arguing, encumbering, delaying, hair-splitting, all for the best of reasons.

Blackhead might be a lone wolf, a one-man band, but he was a force that had to be reckoned with, from whom there was no court of appeal, until once in a way Operations would cut the Gordian knot, brutally disregarding Blackhead himself, overriding his objections, as it were snapping asunder the skinny arm he had slipped through the bolt-sockets of whatever administrative door he was attempting to hold against all comers. Operations would, as I say, sometimes thrust Blackhead aside, and continue to wage war unimpeded by him against the Axis. However, such a confrontation took place only when delay had become desperate. There was no doubt he would make himself felt by delaying tactics when the evacuation got under way, until something of that drastic sort took place.

'Of course I'm not an officer,' he had once remarked bitterly to Pennistone when a humiliation of just that kind had been visited on him, 'I'm only Mr Blackhead.'

Some years after the war was over—by chance attending a gathering of semi-official character, possibly a *soirée* organized for a fund or charity—I enquired Blackhead's story from a former colleague of his who happened to be present. This personage (even in war days of distinguished rank, one of the *hauts fonctionnaires* on the second floor) would at first do no more than laugh, loudly though a shade uncomfortably. He seemed anxious to evade the question. In fact, all at length recoverable from his answers, such as they were, became reduced to the hypothesis that Blackhead had been deliberately relegated to an appointment peculiar to himself—that in which our Section had dealings with him—chiefly in order to keep him out of the way of more important people. As unique occupant of his individual branch, even if he did not promote the war effort, he did not greatly impede it—so, at least, my informant insisted—while duties almost anywhere else might prove less innocuous. This highly successful person nodded several times when he admitted that. Self-esteem made the reply a little unacceptable to me. Did we matter so little? I argued the point. Why could not Blackhead be eradicated entirely? No such machinery existed. That was definite. Blackhead's former colleague showed himself as nearly apologetic about the fact as anyone of his calling had it in him. He fiddled with the decoration round his neck.

'The process was known afterwards as doing a Blackhead,' he allowed. 'Alternatively, having a Blackhead done on you. The public may think we're a staid crowd, but we have our professional jokes like everyone else. I say, what are your views on liquid refreshment? Would it be acceptable? I wouldn't say no myself. Don't I see a buffet over there? Let's make tracks.'

This subsequent conversation explained why Pennistone and the rest of us, like Jacob and the Angel, had to wrestle with Blackhead until the coming of day, or nearly that. Such was the biblical comparison that came to mind as I climbed the stairs leading to Blackhead's room, the moral exile to which his own kind had banished him emphasized not only by its smallness, but also by the fact that he lived there alone, isolation rare for one of his putatively low degree—if, indeed, his degree was low. I opened the door a crack, but further enlargement of entry was blocked by sheer stowage of paper, the files thickly banked about the floor like wholesale goods awaiting allotment to retailers, or, more credibly, the residue of a totally unsaleable commodity stored up here out of everyone's way. Blackhead himself was writing. He jumped up for a second and fiercely kicked a great cliff of files aside so that I could squeeze into the room. Then he returned to whatever he was at, his right hand moving feverishly across the paper, while his left thumb and forefinger, both stained with ink, rested on the handle of a saucerless cup.

'I'll attend to you in a minute, Jenkins.'

Not only was Blackhead, so to speak, beyond rank, he was also beyond age; beyond or outside Time. He might have been a worn—terribly worn—thirty-five; on the other hand (had not superannuation regulations, no doubt as sacred to Blackhead as any other official ordinances, precluded any such thing), he could easily have achieved three-score years and ten, with a safe prospect for his century. Emaciated, though obviously immensely strong, he was probably in truth approaching fifty. His hair, which formed an irregular wiry fringe over a furrowed leathery brow, was of a metallic shade that could have been natural to him all his life.

'Glad you've come, Jenkins,' he said, putting his face still closer to the paper on which he was writing. 'Pennistone minuted me . . . Polish Women's Corps . . . terms I haven't been able fully to interpret . . . In short don't at all comprehend . . .'

His hand continued to move at immense speed, with a nervous shaky intensity, backwards and forwards across the page of the file, ending at last in a signature. He blotted the minute, read through what he had written, closed the covers. Then he placed the file on an already overhanging tower of similar dockets, a vast rickety skyscraper of official comment, based on the flimsy foundation of a wire tray. At this final burden, the pyramid began to tremble, at first seemed likely to topple over. Blackhead showed absolute command of the situation. He steadied the pile with scarcely a touch of his practised hand. Then, eyes glinting behind his spectacles, he rose jerkily and began rummaging about among similar foothills of files ranged on a side table.

'Belgian Women's Corps, bicycle for . . . Norwegian military attaché, office furniture . . . Royal Netherlands Artillery, second echelon lorries . . . Czechoslovak Field Security, appointment of cook . . . Distribution of Polish Global Sum in relation to other Allied commitments—now we're getting warm . . . Case of Corporal Altmann, legal costs in alleged rape—that's moving away . . . Luxembourg shoulder flashes—right out . . . Here we are . . . Polish Women's Corps, soap issue for—that's the one I wanted a word about.'

'I really came about the question of restrictions on straw for stuffing hospital palliasses in Scotland.'

Blackhead paused, on the defensive at once.

'You can't be expecting an answer on straw already?'

'We were hoping—'

'But look here . . .'

'It must be a week or ten days.'

'Week or ten days? Cast your eyes over these, Jenkins.'

Blackhead made a gesture with his pen in the direction of the files stacked on the table amongst which he had been excavating.

'Barely had time to glance at the straw,' he said. 'Certainly not think it out properly. It's a tricky subject, straw.'

'Liaison HQ in Scotland hoped for a quick answer.'

'Liaison HQ in Scotland are going to be disappointed.'

'What's so difficult?'

'There's the Ministry of Supply angle.'

'Can't we ignore them for once?'

'Ministry of Agriculture may require notification. Straw interests them . . . We won't talk about that now. What I want you to tell me, Jenkins, is what Pennistone means by this . . .'

Blackhead held—thrust—the file forward in my direction.

'Couldn't we just cast an eye over the straw file too, if you could find it while I try to solve this one.'

Blackhead was unwilling, but in the end, after a certain amount of search, the file about hospital palliasses was found and also extracted.

'Now it's the Women's Corps I want to talk about,' he said. 'Issue of certain items—soap, to be exact, and regulations for same. There's a principle at stake. I pointed that out to Pennistone. Read this . . . where my minute begins . . .'

To define the length of a 'minute'—an official memorandum authorizing or recommending any given course—is, naturally, like trying to lay down the size of a piece of chalk. There can be short minutes or long minutes, as there might be a chalk down or a fragment of chalk scarcely perceptible to the eye. Thus a long minute might be divided into sections and sub-headings, running into pages and signed by an authority of the highest rank. On the other hand, just as a piece of chalk might reasonably be thought of as a length of that limestone convenient for writing on a blackboard, the ordinary run of minutes exchanged between such as Pennistone and Blackhead might be supposed, in general, to take a fairly brief form—say two or three, to perhaps ten or a dozen, lines. Blackhead pointed severely to what he had written. Then he turned the pages several times. It was a real Marathon of a minute, even for Blackhead. When it came to an end at last he tapped his finger sharply on a comment written below his own signature.

'Look at this,' he said.

He spoke indignantly. I leant forward to examine the exhibit, which was in Pennistone's handwriting. Blackhead had written, in all, three and a half pages on the theory and practice of soap issues for military personnel, with especial reference to the Polish Women's Corps. Turning from his spidery scrawl to Pennistone's neat hand, two words only were inscribed. They stood out on the file:

Please amplify. D. Pennistone. Maj. GS.

Blackhead stood back.

'What do you think of that?' he asked.

I could find no suitable answer, in fact had nearly laughed, which would have been fatal, an error from which no recovery would have been possible.

'He didn't mention the matter to me.'

'As if I hadn't gone into it carefully,' said Blackhead.

'You'd better have a word with Pennistone.'

'Word with him? Not before I've made sure about the point I've missed. He wouldn't have said that unless he knew. I thought you'd be able to explain, Jenkins. If he thinks I've omitted something, he'd hardly keep it from you.'

'I'm at a loss—but about the palliasse straw—'

'What else can he want to know?' said Blackhead 'It's me that's asking the questions there, not him.'

'You'll have to speak together.'

'Amplify, indeed,' said Blackhead. 'I spent a couple of hours on that file.'

Blackhead stared down at what Pennistone had written. He was distraught; aghast. Pennistone had gone too far. We should be made to suffer for this frivolity of his. That was, if Blackhead retained his sanity.

'What would you like me to do about it?'

Blackhead took off his spectacles and pointed the shafts at me.

'I'll tell you what,' he said. 'I could send it to F 17 (b) for comments. They're the *only ones*, in my view, who might take exception to not being consulted. They're a touchy lot. Always have been. I may have slipped up in not asking them, but I'd have never guessed Pennistone would have spotted that.'

'The thing we want to get on with is the straw.'

'Get on with?' said Blackhead. 'Get on with? If Pennistone wants to get on with things, why does he minute me in the aforesaid terms? That's what I can't understand.'

'Why not talk to him when he comes back. He's at Polish GHQ at the moment. Can't we just inspect the straw file?'

Blackhead had been put so far off his balance that his usual obstinacy must have become impaired. Quite unexpectedly, he gave way all at once about the straw. We discussed the subject of palliasses fully, Blackhead noting in the file that 'a measure of agreement had been reached'. It was a minor triumph. I also prepared the way for papers about the evacuation, but this Blackhead could hardly take in.

'I can't understand Pennistone writing that,' he said. 'I've never had it written before—*please amplify*—not in all my service, all the years I've worked in this blessed building. It's not right. It suggests a criticism of my method.'

I left him gulping the chill dregs of his tea. Finn would probably be back in his room now, ready to hear the substance of what Q (Ops.) Colonel had said.

Rounding the corner of the passage just beyond the two pictures of George V, I saw Finn's door was open. A tall, stoutish officer, wearing khaki and red tabs, though not for some indefinable reason a British uniform, was taking leave of him. It seemed best to let them finish their conversation, then, when the foreign officer, probably a newly appointed military attaché, had left, catch Finn between interviews. This was never easy, because a steady flow perennially occupied him. He looked up the passage at that moment, and, seeing me, jerked his head as a summons. The red-tabbed officer himself turned. Dark complexioned, hook nosed—though that feature was nothing to the size of Finn's—he had something of the air of a famous tenor. More on account of recent photographs in the press, than because of having seen him before, I recognized Prince Theodoric. The story of the escape he had made from his own country at the moment of its invasion (he was said to have shot dead a Gestapo agent) had been given a lot of publicity when he arrived in England.

'Nicholas,' said Finn, 'I want to present you. One of my officers, sir—he will see you to the door, sir.'

Prince Theodoric held out his hand.

'You've been too kind already, Colonel Finn,' he said. 'Allowing me to take up your precious time with our small concerns. I certainly mustn't impose myself further by requisitioning the services of your officers, no doubt as overworked as yourself. I may have shown myself in the past inexperienced in methods of tactical withdrawal—as you know too well from the newspapers, I left the palace without shaving tackle—but at least let me assure you, my dear Colonel, that I can find my way unaided from this building.'

Theodoric talked that precise, rather old-fashioned English, which survives mainly outside the country itself. His manner, very consciously royal, had probably been made more assertive and genial by recent hazards undergone, because he had entirely overcome the self-conscious embarrassment I remembered from former brief contacts with him. Now, he added to that total ease and directness of royalties, who have never doubted for a second the validity of their own rank and station, the additional confidence of a man who has made his own way in the world, and a dangerous way at that. Finn began to assure the Prince that we were all at his service at any moment of the day.

'Finn's in many ways an unworldly man,' Pennistone used to say. 'He likes to hobnob with people like Bernhard of the Netherlands, Olaf of Norway, Felix of Luxembourg. Snobbish, if you like, in one sense. On the other hand, he wouldn't for a second allow any such taste to influence an official decision—nor would he walk across the passage to ingratiate himself with anyone, military or civil, for material reasons. In that respect, Finn is quite unlike Farebrother. Farebrother will get right up the arse of anyone he thinks likely to help him on. After all, everyone's got to choose their own approach to life.'

In any case, if Finn were ceremonious in his treatment of Theodoric, the Prince—as Templer had remarked—had always shown himself profoundly anti-Nazi and a friend of this country. There was reason to show courtesy. At this moment Farebrother himself appeared. He had evidently just made some contact required in our building and was marching along the passage, wearing his cap, a stick tucked under his arm. He came to a halt where we stood and saluted, immediately beginning to dispense round him what Stringham used to call 'several million volts of synthetic charm'.

'This is well met, sir,' he said dramatically.

He addressed himself to Theodoric, at the same time putting his hand on Finn's shoulder.

'I was coming to look in on my old friend here, after paying another visit, and now I find Your Royal Highness present too, just when I had made a mental note to telephone your equerry and ask for an interview.'

'Oh, I've nothing so grand as an equerry these days,' said Theodoric. 'But my staff-officer will arrange an appointment, Colonel Farebrother, any time that suits you.'

'There are several things I hoped to discuss, sir.'

'Why, of course, Colonel—'

Finn began to look rather disturbed. However much he might admire Farebrother's 'charm', he was not at all anxious to have some plot hatched on his doorstep. He must now have scented danger of circuitous arrangements being made through himself, because he suddenly assumed the expression of countenance that gave notice his deafness was about to come into play forthwith. At the same time, he twisted round his head and leant forward slightly.

'Can't hear all you say, Sunny, in this passage,' he said. 'Come into my room just for a moment or two. I'd like a word about Belgian arrangements, so far as they affect us both. I can just fit you in before General Asbjørnsen arrives. Don't keep the Prince waiting, Nicholas.'

'Why, Nicholas?' said Farebrother, feigning to recognize me only at that moment. 'You and I must have a talk, too, about yesterday's meeting . . .'

If Farebrother hoped to prolong this interlude with Prince Theodoric by bringing me in, he underrated Finn's capacity for action. The delaying tactic failed entirely. Finn somehow managed to get behind Farebrother, and, with surprising adroitness, propelled him forward into the room, the door of which was immediately closed.

'Then I shall hear from you, Colonel Farebrother?' Theodoric called.

He had shown every sign of being inquisitive about whatever Farebrother had to offer, but now it was clearly too late to go into matters further. He turned and smiled at me a little uncomprehendingly. We set off together in the direction of the front staircase.

'Your car's at the main entrance, sir?'

'Car? Not a bit of it. I walk.'

It seemed wiser not to refer to the party given by Mrs Andriadis more than a dozen years before, where I had in fact first set eyes on Theodoric, but I mentioned my presentation to him when he had been staying with Sir Magnus Donners at Stourwater, and the Walpole-Wilsons had taken me over to luncheon there. According to Pennistone, Mrs Andriadis herself was living in one room in Bloomsbury, drinking and drugging heavily. Later, one heard, she occupied herself with making propaganda for the so-called 'Second Front'.

'By Jove, those were the days,' said Theodoric. 'We didn't know how lucky we were. Will you believe me, Captain Jenkins, I had at that time only been shot at twice in my life, on each occasion by certified lunatics? And then, of course, marriage makes one more serious. We have become middle-aged, my dear Captain, we have become middle-aged.'

He sighed.

'I saw Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson the other day,' he went on. 'Of course he is getting on now, older even than ourselves. We discussed a lot of matters—as you remember, he was formerly your country's minister plenipotentiary to my own. Now he stands well to the left politically. I have certain leanings that way myself, but not as far as Sir Gavin. One must not remain embedded in the past, but Sir Gavin does not always understand our difficulties and the ruthless methods of a certain Ally. There are plenty of good young men in my country who want to get rid of the Germans. There are also men not equally good there who play another part—not all of them our own countrymen.'

Theodoric spoke with great earnestness. It was clear he considered not only people like Finn and Farebrother, but even those of my own rank worth sweeping in as supporters of whatever policy he represented.

'In knowing Sir Magnus Donners,' he said, 'I am particularly fortunate. He is personally conversant with our industrial problems, also—perhaps I should not say this—has the ear of a Very Important Person. If something is to be done, Sir Magnus is the man to do it. I need not tell you that I have had more than one long and interesting talk with him. He says we must wait.'

Theodoric stopped on the way down the marble stairs, where the flights divided, left and right, under the elaborately gilded wall clock and bronze bust of Kitchener. His tone suggested my views on the matter were scarcely less important than those of Sir Magnus. In terms of propaganda, that was an effective technique. The persuasiveness of the Prince was something to be reckoned with. This characteristic could have direct bearing on the fate of his country.

'I shall continue to put our case,' he said.

By now we had reached the great hall. Vavassor, the porter, an attendant spirit of some importance in the Section's background, was standing by the door. It was commonly Vavassor's duty to give warning to Finn of the arrival of callers belonging to the higher echelons, some of whom were capable of turning up without previous appointment, and demanding an interview on the spot. Vavassor could hold them in check; in extreme cases, turn them away. He was also, in this office of guarding the door, a key figure in the lives of Pennistone and myself, on account of frequent association with Allied comings and goings, raising no difficulties about our using the main entrance—superstitiously, though uncategorically, apprehended as prerogative of officers of the rank of brigadier and above—when we arrived for duty in the morning. This not only saved several yards of pavement, but, more important, means avoidance of the teeming mob at the staff entrance. It was a good opening to the day's work. Vavassor saluted Theodoric.

'No fire?' said the Prince.

'Don't let us have any coal when the weather's short of freezing,' said Vavassor. 'That grate takes the best part of a hundredweight a day, it's the truth. Wasn't made for rationing.'

He pointed to the huge fireplace. One supposed that at a certain level of rank—say, lieutenant-general—he called officers 'sir', though I had never heard him do so. In any case it was a formality he always considered inappropriate for foreigners, royal or otherwise.

'When I wait to be summoned by Colonel Finn and warm myself beside the fire,' said Theodoric. 'I always feel like St Peter.'

'I hope you won't cut off any ears, sir, when delay has been intolerably long.'

'How reassuring, Captain Jenkins, that your General Staff are brought up on the Scriptures. They are the foundation of knowledge. Now I must say goodbye. Tell Colonel Finn I will check the figures I gave him—persuade him, something I think he is rather nervous about, that I will not involve him in any matter of which he might disapprove.'

Theodoric laughed. He had evidently summed up Finn correctly. I remembered Sillery (who had recently written a long letter to *The Times* in praise of Stalin's declared war aims) speaking of the shrewdness Theodoric inherited from 'that touch of Coburg blood', adding with characteristic malice, 'though I suppose one should not hint at that.' I saw the Prince down the steps. He waved his hand, and set off at a sharp pace in the direction of Trafalgar Square. I returned under the high portal.

'Prince, is he?' asked Vavassor. 'That's what he calls himself when he arrives.'

'That's what he is.'

'Allied or Neutral?'

'So far as he himself is concerned, Allied.'

'See 'em all down here if you wait long enough.'

'I bet you do.'

'I suppose some of 'em help to win the war.'

'Let's hope so.'

'Not too good in the Far East at the moment of speaking.'

'Ever serve there?'

'Eight years to a day.'

'Things may pick up.'

'I worry too much,' said Vavassor. 'Shakespeare's dying words.'

His attention, my own too, was at that moment unequivocally demanded by the hurricane-like imminence of a thickset general, obviously of high rank, wearing enormous horn-rimmed spectacles. He had just burst from a flagged staff-car almost before it had drawn up by the kerb. Now he tore up the steps of the building at the charge, exploding through the inner door into the hall. An extraordinary current of physical energy, almost of electricity, suddenly pervaded the place. I could feel it stabbing through me. This was the CIGS. His quite remarkable and palpable extension of personality, in its effect on others, I had noticed not long before, out in the open. Coming down Sackville Street, I had all at once been made aware of something that required attention on the far pavement and saw him pounding along. I saluted at admittedly longish range. The salute was returned. Turning my head to watch his progress, I then had proof of being not alone in acting as a kind of receiving-station for such rays—which had, morally speaking, been observable, on his appointment to that top post, down as low as platoon commander. On this Sackville Street occasion, an officer a hundred yards or more ahead, had his nose glued to the window of a bookshop. As the CIGS passed (whom he might well have missed in his concentration on the contents of the window), this officer suddenly swivelled a complete about-turn, saluting too. No doubt he had seen the reflection in the plate glass. All the same, in its own particular genre, the incident gave the outward appearance of exceptional magnetic impact. That some such impact existed, was confirmed by this closer conjunction in the great hall. Vavassor, momentarily overawed—there could be no doubt of it—came to attention and saluted with much more empressement than usual. Having no cap, I merely came to attention. The CIGS glanced for a split second, as if summarizing all the facts of one's life.

'Good morning.'

It was a terrific volume of sound, an absolute bellow, at the same time quite effortless. A moment later, he was on the landing halfway up the stairs, where Theodoric had paused. Then he disappeared from sight. Vavassor grinned and nodded. He was without comment for once. I left him to his reflections about the Far East, hurrying myself now, again in the hope of catching Finn, quickly passing Kitchener's cold and angry eyes, haunting and haunted, surveying with the deepest disapproval all who came that way. Finn was free. He made no reference to Farebrother.

'You'll have to be quick, Nicholas,' he said. 'Asbjørnsen's due at any moment, but he's sometimes a second or two late. Now what about Q (Ops.)?'

He had quite set aside his deafness. I ran over the points at speed. Finn made some notes, collating the information with whatever material had emerged from his session with our own General. He was now quite recovered from the phase, reported by Pennistone, of feeling the only hope of getting the thing properly done would be to fly to Persia and himself arrange it singlehanded.

'The civilian elements are now definitely coming out, sir?'

'Anders insisted—no doubt rightly—but the women and children will not make the operation any easier.'

There had been controversy about these camp-followers who had managed to exist in the wake of the army, largely on its shared rations. At first it had seemed they might have to stay behind.

'Some of the boys are old enough to be trained as cadets. The CIGS himself noted that point on the paper with approval.'

Finn's telephone bell rang.

'Ask him to come up,' he said. 'It's Asbjørnsen. We'll return to the evacuation later, Nicholas. I shall have to keep Asbjørnsen from talking too much, as Colonel Chu is due in less than twenty minutes. Did I tell you Chu's latest after his six months course at Sandhurst?'

The Chinese military attaché, well known for the demanding nature of his requests, had just completed an attachment as cadet to the Royal Military College.

'Chu enjoyed the RMC so much he wants to go to Eton.'

'He could see Windsor Castle at the same time, though the state apartments are probably not open.'

'Good God,' said Finn. 'He doesn't just want to visit the place—he hopes to attend the school as a pupil.'

'He's a shade old, sir.'

'I told him thirty-eight is regarded as too mature in this country to be still at school. It was no good. All he said was "I can make myself young."'

Finn sighed.

'I wish I could,' he said.

Sometimes the military attachés dispirited him. Chu's unreasonableness seemed to have achieved that. General

Asbjørnsen arrived in the room. Tall, like General Lebedev, not much given to laughter, he always reminded me of Monsieur Ørn, the long craggy Norwegian, who had been at La Grenadière when, as a boy, I had stayed with the Leroys in Touraine. He shook hands with Finn and myself gravely. I withdrew to our room. Corporal Curtis had again increased the pile of stuff on the desk. I was still going through this when Pennistone returned from the Titian.

'What on earth were you about, David, minuting Blackhead *please amplify*?'

'Has it upset him?'

'Beyond description.'

'Good.'

'What were your reasons?'

'Renan says complication is anterior to simplicity. I thought Blackhead would make an interesting experiment for trying out that theory.'

'We can only pray Renan was right.'

'Renan would find prayer charming, but ineffectual. Did you see Q (Ops.)?'

Pennistone went through the points I had cleared with Finn.

'Look, Nick,' he said. 'I shan't be able to collect the Klnisaszewski Report tomorrow afternoon, as there's another meeting about the evacuation. Will you get it? Nothing whatever required, except to receive it from the Polish officer on duty.'

The Klnisaszewski Report was one of those items of Intelligence that fell, as such items sometimes do, in a no-man's-land between normal official channels and those secret services so cautiously handled by Finn. Even Finn saw no harm in our trafficking in this particular exchange of information, which the Operational and 'Country' sections liked to see. For some internal reason, the Polish branch concerned preferred to hand over the report direct, rather than present it, in the normal manner, through the Second Bureau of their GHQ. Pennistone, as it happened, always collected the Klnisaszewski Report, though merely, in the division of our duties, because he had fallen into the habit of doing so.

'Here's the address,' he said. 'It's the north side of the Park. We might discuss some of these evacuation points further at lunch.'

The following day I arranged to collect the report in the afternoon. When I went down to the staff entrance and shouted for our driver, the white-faced girl commended by Borrit again appeared from behind the screen. She was as sulky as ever. The Section's car was just large enough to hold four persons in great discomfort. If you were the only passenger, you could travel at the back or beside the driver, according to whim. I told her the street number and sat in front.

'Can you find your way there?'

'Yes.'

'You know London pretty well?'

She hardly answered. After a few minutes beside her, it was clear this AT possessed in a high degree that power which all women—some men—command to a greater or lesser extent when in the mood, of projecting round them a sense of vast resentment. The girl driving, I noticed, was able to do this with quite superlative effect. Her rankling animosity against the world in general was discharged with adamantine force, comparable with Audrey Maclintick's ill humours when her husband was alive, or Anne Stepney's intimations of rebellion before she had shaken off the trammels of family life. However, those two, although not without their admirers, were hardly in the same class as this girl when it came to looks. Borrit had been right in marking her down. She was very striking. All the same, after another remark received with little or no response, I gave up further talk. Perhaps she had a grievance or the curse. These drivers usually only did duty for a week or two and at the moment inducement was lacking to coax her out of that mood. It occurred to me—one never feels older than in the middle thirties—that she was bored with all but young men or had taken an instantaneous dislike to me. Conversation lapsed. Then, while driving through Hyde Park, she suddenly spoke of her own accord, though even then in a way to suggest that speech was a painful effort to her, every word so far as possible to be conserved.

'You're Captain Jenkins, aren't you?'

'I am.'

'I think you know my mother.'

'What's your mother's name?'

'Flavia Wisebite—but I'm Pamela Flitton. My father was her first husband.'

This was Stringham's niece. I remembered her holding the bride's train at his wedding. She must have been five or six years old then. At one stage of the service there had been a disturbance at the back of the church and someone afterwards said she had been sick in the font. Whoever had remarked that had found nothing surprising in unsatisfactory behaviour from her. Someone else had commented: 'That child's a fiend.' I knew little of her father, Cosmo Flitton—not even whether he were still alive—except for the fact that he had lost an arm in the earlier war, drank heavily, and was said to be a professional gambler. Alleged to be not too scrupulous in business dealings, Flitton had been involved in Baby Wentworth's divorce, later rejecting marriage with her. He had left Pamela's mother when this girl was not much more than a baby. Establishing the sequence of inevitable sameness that pursues individual progression through life, Flavia had married another drunk, Harrison F. Wisebite, son of a Minneapolis hardware millionaire, whose jocularity he had inherited with only a minute fragment of a post-depression fortune. I wondered idly whether Flavia owed her name to *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Mrs Foxe would have been quite capable of that. Mrs Foxe was said to have given her daughter a baddish time. Pamela, an only child, must be at least twenty by now. She looked younger.

'Where is your mother at the moment?'

'She's helping with Red Cross libraries. She gets sent all over the place.'

'I suppose you've no news of your Uncle Charles?'

'Charles Stringham?'

'The last I saw of him, he'd been posted overseas. I don't even know where.'

She began driving the little car very fast and we nearly ran into an army truck coming across the Park from the opposite direction. She did not answer. I repeated the question.

'You've heard nothing?'

'He was at Singapore.'

'Oh, God . . .'

With that strange instinct that exists in the ranks for guessing a destination correctly, Stringham had supposed himself on the way to the Far East.

'Nothing's known, I suppose?'

'No.'

'Just reported missing?'

'Yes.'

'He used to be a great friend of mine.'

'We were close when I was quite a child.'

She said that in an odd way, as if almost intending to imply something not to be investigated too far. When I thought the remark over later, it seemed to me unlikely she had seen much of Stringham when she was a child and he was being cured of drink in the iron grip of Miss Weedon. Later, I understood that the ambiguity might have been deliberate. Girls of Pamela's sort take pleasure in making remarks like that, true or not.

'Will you tell your mother—how dreadfully sorry . . .'

Again she made no answer. Iciness of manner remained complete. She was perhaps not altogether normal, what Borrit called 'a bit off the beam'. There was no denying she was a striking girl to look at. Many men would find this cosmic rage with life, as it seemed to be, an added attraction. Perhaps all these suppositions were wide of the mark, and she was just in poor form because she considered herself crossed in love or something obvious of that sort. All the same, the impression was of an uneasy personality, one to cause a lot of trouble. The news about Stringham made relations even more difficult. Her demeanour suggested only gross indifference on my own part had kept me in ignorance of what had happened, that she did not wish to speak more about a matter specially painful to herself.

'How did you discover I was in the Section?'

'Oh, I don't know. Your name cropped up somewhere the other night. I was saying what a bloody awful series of jobs I always get, and the next one was to drive for this outfit. Somebody said you were in it.'

'You don't like the ATS?'

'Who wants to be a bloody AT?'

By this time we had entered the confines of Bayswater. Some of the big houses here had been bombed and abandoned, others were still occupied. Several blocks that had formerly housed Victorian judges and merchants now accommodated refugees from Gibraltar, whose tawny skins and brightly coloured shirts and scarves made this once bleak and humdrum quarter of London, with its uncleaned or broken windows and peeling plaster, look like the back streets of a Mediterranean port. Even so, the area was not yet so squalid as it was in due course to become in the period immediately following the end of the war, when squares and crescents over which an aroma of oppressive respectability had gloomily hung, became infested at all hours of day and night by prostitutes of the lowest category.

'What number did you say?'

'It must be the one on the corner.'

She drew up the car in front of a large grey house in the midst of a complex of streets that had on the whole escaped bomb damage. Several steps led up to a sub-palladian porch, the fanlight over the open door daubed with dark paint to comply with black-out regulations. The place had that slightly sinister air common to most of the innumerable buildings hurriedly converted to official use, whether or not they were enclaves of a more or less secret nature.

'Will you wait with the car? I shan't be long.'

After the usual vetting at the door, my arrival being expected, quick admission took place. A guide in civilian clothes led the way to a particular office where the report was to be obtained. We went up some stairs, through a large hall or ante-chamber where several men and women were sitting in front of typewriters, surrounded by walls covered with a faded design of blue and green flowers, enclosed above and below by broad parchment-like embossed surfaces. This was no doubt the double-drawing-room of some old-fashioned family, who had not redecorated their home for decades. I was shown into the office of a Polish lieutenant-colonel in uniform, from whom the report was to be received. We shook hands.

'Good afternoon . . . Please sit down . . . *Procze, pana, procze, pana* . . . I usually see Major Pennistone, yes.'

He unlocked a drawer and handed over the report. We spoke about its contents for a minute or two, and shook hands again. Then he accompanied me back to where I could find my way out, and, after shaking hands for the third time, we parted. Halfway down the stairs, I grasped that I was in the Ufford, ancient haunt of Uncle Giles. The place of typewriters, so far from being the drawing-room of some banker or tea-broker (perhaps that once), was the combined 'lounge' and 'writing-room', in the former of which my Uncle used to entertain me with fishpaste sandwiches and seed cake. There, Mrs Erdleigh had 'set out the cards', foretold the rows about St John Clarke's book on Isbister, my love affair with Jean Duport. The squat Moorish tables of those days had been replaced by trestles: the engraving of *Bolton Abbey in the Olden Time*, by a poster of characteristically Slavonic design announcing an exhibition of Polish Arts and Crafts. On the ledge of the mantelpiece, on which under a glass dome had stood the clock with hands eternally pointing to twenty minutes past five, were photographs of General Sikorski and Mr Churchill. It struck me the Ufford was in reality the Temple of Janus, the doors between the lounge and the writing-room closed in peace, open in war.

Reaching the entrance, I saw the hotel's name had been obliterated over the front door, as had also that of the De Tabley opposite, to which Uncle Giles had once, at least, briefly defected; only to return in penitence—had he been capable of that inner state—to the Ufford. The De Tabley was now the local branch of the Food Office. The name always recalled an incident at school. Le Bas used to make a habit of reading from time to time the works of the lesser-known Victorian poets to his pupils. He had been doing this on some occasion, declaiming with his accustomed guttural enunciation and difficulty with the letter 'R':

'Sweet are the ways of death to weary feet,
    Calm are the shades of men.
The phantom fears no tyrant in his seat,
    The slave is master then.'

He asked where the lines came from. Of course no one knew.

'Lord de Tabley's chorus from *Medea*.'

'Never heard of him, sir.'

'A melancholy fellow, but not without merit.'

Stringham, who had previously appeared all but asleep, had asked if he might see the book. Le Bas handed it over. He always rather liked Stringham, although never much at ease with him. Stringham turned the pages for a moment or two, then returned to the poem Le Bas had read aloud. Stringham himself spoke the second verse:

> 'Love is abolished; well that that is so;
> We know him best as Pain.
> The gods are all cast out, and let them go!
> Who ever found them gain?'

Le Bas was prepared, in moderation, to have Death commended, but he never liked references to Love; probably, for that matter, was unwilling to have the Gods so peremptorily dismissed. He had, I suppose, been betrayed into quoting the earlier lines on account of some appositeness they bore to whatever he had been talking about. He must have seen that to allow Stringham to handle the volume itself had been a false step on his own part.

'Love, of course, had a rather different meaning—indeed, two quite separate meanings in Ancient Greece—from what the modern world understands by the term,' he said. 'While railing against the gods was by no means unknown in their mythological stories.'

'Not bad for a peer of the realm, do you think, sir?' said Stringham.

That was rather cheek, but Le Bas had let it pass, probably finding a laugh the easiest channel for moving on to less tricky matters.

As I went down the steps, I saw a uniformed Pole had strolled out of the Ufford—as I now thought of the place—and was chatting with Pamela Flitton. He seemed to be making a better job of it than myself, because, although continuing to look sullen, she was listening with comparative acceptance to what seemed the commonplaces of conversation. At first I thought the Pole was an officer, then saw he was an 'other rank', who wore his battledress, as most of them did, with a tough air and some swagger. He was dark, almost oriental in feature, showing a lot of gold teeth when he smiled and saluted, before withdrawing up the steps. We set off on the return journey. In the far distance sounded the gentle lowing of an Air Raid Warning. They were to be heard intermittently in the daytime. As the car passed once more through the park, the All Clear sounded, equally faint and far.

'Sounds as if they let off the first one by mistake.'

She did not answer. Perhaps she only liked foreigners. In any case, the thought of Stringham put things on an unhappy, uncomfortable basis. I was not sure, in truth, whether she wanted to avoid discussing the subject because she herself felt so deeply, or because she was really scarcely at all interested in anything but her own personality. We reached the staff entrance. I made some further remark about a message to her mother. She nodded, disappearing once more behind the screen. Pennistone had returned from the meeting.

'How did it go?'

'Finn brought off one of his inimitable French phrases—Kielkiewicz is, as you know, more at ease in French. During a moment's silence, Finn suddenly murmured very audibly: Le Commandant-Chef aime bien les garçons.'

'What provoked this startling revelation?'

'The Polish cadets—a message came down from the top approving of them as potential training material. Thank God, Bobrowski wasn't there. He'd have had a stroke. Even Kielkiewicz went rather red in the face and pretended to blow his nose.'

'You didn't ask Finn to amplify?'

'One was reminded of the French judge comforting the little boy cross-questioned in court. "Ne t'inquiètes-pas, mon enfant, les juges aiment les petits garçons"—then remembering himself and adding: "Pourtant les juges aiment les petites filles."'

A day or two later Pamela Flitton drove me again when I was going to Bobrowski's office. This was in the Harley Street neighbourhood (ten years later I used to sit in a dentist's chair where once I had talked with Horaczko), from where I should proceed to the Titian. Horaczko's business was likely to be completed in a few minutes, so she was told to wait with the car. As it happened, Horaczko himself wanted to visit Polish GHQ and asked for a lift. When we came out together from the military attaché's office, Pamela Flitton was standing by the car, surveying the street with her usual look of hatred and despair. Horaczko, seeing her, lightly touched the peak of his cap. For a moment I thought this just another example of well-applied technique in what was generally agreed to be the eminently successful relationship established by the Polish forces with the opposite sex in the country of their exile, but, although her acknowledgment was of the slightest, it was plain they had met before. As there were two of us, Horaczko and I sat at the back of the car. We talked about official matters all the way to the Titian.

Passing through its glass doors, guarded by Military Police wearing red covers, like our own, on their angular ethnic Polish lancer caps, Eastern Europe was instantaneously attained. A similar atmosphere imposed, though in a less powerful form, on the Ufford, no doubt accounted to some extent for the brief exorcism there, on first arrival, of the ghost of Uncle Giles. At the Titian, this Slav ethos was overwhelming. Some Poles, including Horaczko, who prided himself on assimilation with things British, found his own nation's characteristics, so he said, here rather depressingly caricatured. To me, on the other hand, the Titian offered an exotic change from the deadly drabness of the wartime London backcloth. The effect was to some extent odorously created, an aroma that discreetly blended elements of eau-de-cologne and onions, sweat and leather, the hotel's Edwardian past no doubt contributing its own special Art Nouveau pungency to more alien essences.

'I see you know our driver. She's the daughter of a friend of mine, as it happens.'

Horaczko at once became tremendously diplomatic in manner, as if large issues were raised by this remark, which was certainly the product of curiosity.

'Miss Flitton?' he said. 'Oh, yes. She's—well, a rather delicate situation has been raised by her.'

He smiled and looked rather arch, if that is the right word.

'She is a beautiful girl,' he said.

We shook hands and he went off to whatever duties concerned him. Horaczko was always immensely tactful. For once he had been surprised into giving away more than he was usually prepared to do. It looked as if Pamela Flitton was already quite a famous figure in Polish military circles. I mounted the stairs to General Kielkiewicz's ante-room. One or more of his ADCs was always on duty there, usually in the company of a Polish colonel of uncertain age, probably a good deal older than he looked at first sight, with features resembling those of a death's head, who sat on an upright chair, eternally reading *Dziennik Polski*. This colonel seemed to be awaiting an interview for which the General was never available. Now, he rose, folded his newspaper, shook hands with me and left the room. Michalski was on duty at that moment. We too shook hands.

'I hope the Colonel did not go away on my account?'

'It is to be arranged that he should write a history of cavalry,' said Michalski. 'The General has not yet found time to break the news to him.'

A week or two later, there was trouble about the Section's car. Finn had specially ordered it for an important meeting and it was not at the door when he went down. One of the other ATS drivers said she thought the vehicle was out on duty, but no one could trace a Section officer who was using it, or had sent it out on an errand. When Driver Flitton was in due course traced, she said she had been given instructions some weeks before to deliver certain routine papers of a non-secret nature to several of the Neutral military attachés. She had been out by herself doing this. The precise degree of truth in that matter was hard to pinpoint. It was alleged, with apparent conviction, that those particular instructions had later been countermanded, the documents being not at all urgent, though some of them had certainly been sent out. Even if correct that Driver Flitton had misunderstood the instruction, she had taken an unusually long time to make the rounds. Rather a fuss took place about the whole matter. Either on account of that, or simply because, quite by chance, she was given another posting, Driver Flitton was withdrawn from duties with the Section.

2

LIKE FINN'S ACHING JAW ON the line of march, the war throbbed on, punctuated by interludes when more than once the wrong tooth seemed to have been hurriedly extracted. Meanwhile, I inhabited a one-room flat on the eighth floor of a prosaic Chelsea tenement. Private life, apparently at a standstill, as ever formed new patterns. Isobel's brother, George Tolland (by then a lieutenant-colonel serving as 'A & Q' on a Divisional staff in the Middle East), badly wounded in the campaign defeating Rommel, was in hospital in Cairo. Her sister Susan's husband, Roddy Cutts, major of Yeomanry transformed into Reconnaissance Corps, had recently written home to say he had fallen in love with one of the girls decoding cables at GHQ Persia/Iraq Force, and, accepting risk of spoiling a promising political career, wanted a divorce. This eventuality, not at all expected by Susan, nor any of the rest of the family, as Roddy had always been regarded as rather unadventurous in that sort of situation, caused a good deal of dismay.

If not required to stay late in the Whitehall area, I used, as a general routine, to come straight back from duty to a nearby pub, dine there, then retire to bed with a book. At that period the seventeenth century particularly occupied me, so that works like Wood's *Athenae Oxonienses* or Luttrell's *Brief Relation* opened up vistas of the past, if not necessarily preferable to one's own time, at least appreciably different. These historical readings could be varied with Proust. The flat itself was not wholly unsympathetic. The block's ever-changing population, a mixed bag consisting largely of persons of both sexes working for the ministries, shaded off on the female side from high-grade secretaries, officers of the women's services, organisers of one thing and another, into a nebulous world of divorcées living on their own and transient types even less definable, probably all but unemployable where 'war work' was concerned, yet for one reason or another prepared to stay in London and face the blitz. On warm evenings these unattached ladies were to be met with straying about on the flat roof of the building, watching the bombers fly out, requesting cigarettes or matches and complaining to each other, or anyone else with whom they made contact, about the shortcomings of Miss Wartstone.

On another floor of the block, Hewetson, the Section's officer with the Belgians and Czechs, also rented a flat. For a time he and I used to set out together every morning; then, deciding to share a larger place with a friend in the Admiralty (who had a hold over a woman who could cook) Hewetson moved elsewhere. He was a solicitor in private life, and, although he did not talk much of such things, gave the impression of being more fortunate than Borrit in chance relationships. He did admit to some sort of an adventure that had arisen from sunning himself on the roof during a period of convalescence after a bout of flu with one of these sirens of the chimney pots. Another told him she could only achieve emotional intimacy with her own sex, so Hewetson probably knew the roof better than one might think. All the same, he could not get on with Miss Wartstone. She was manageress of the flats. Her outward appearance at once prepared residents for an unusually contentious temperament. Miss Wartstone had, indeed, passed into a middle-age of pathological quarrelsomeness, possibly in part legacy of nervous tensions built up during the earlier years of the blitz. Latterly, nothing worse than an occasional window broken by blast had disturbed the immediate neighbourhood, but, as the war progressed, few tempers remained as steady as at the beginning.

Miss Wartstone used to put up notices, like those at school, and, in the same way, people would draw pictures on them and write comments. '*Disgasting Management*', somebody scrawled, probably one of the Allied officers, of whom quite a fair number were accommodated at the flats. Hewetson himself would go white if Miss Wartstone's name was mentioned.

'That woman,' he would say.

When the Eighth Army moved into Tripoli, Hewetson was offered promotion in a new branch of the Judge-Advocate General's department proliferated in North Africa. As things turned out, this resulted in a change of my own position in the Section. It could be dated, more or less, by the fact that, when Hewetson came down from speaking with Finn about his own departure, Colonel Cobb, one of the American assistant military attachés, was in our room at that moment, talking of the capture of the German generals at Stalingrad. Although the Americans had a mission of their own for the bulk of their business, Cobb used to visit Finn from time to time about a few routine matters. He usually dropped in afterwards for a minute or two, chiefly, I think, to satisfy a personal preoccupation with the British Army and its unexpected ways, an interest by now past the stage of mere desire for professional enlightenment and become fairly obsessive. He would endlessly question people, if opportunity arose, about their corps, Regular or Territorial, its special peculiarities and customs: when raised: where served: what worn. In the banter that sometimes followed these interrogations, Cobb rather enjoyed a touch of grimness, smiling with grave acquiescence when, in the course of one such scrutiny, it was by chance revealed that my own Regiment had borne among the Battle Honours of its Colours the names of Detroit and Miami.

'Ah, Detroit?' he said, speaking as if it had happened yesterday. 'An unfortunate affair that . . . Miami . . . The name reminds me of my great-aunt's grandfather, a man not to be trifled with, held a commission from King George in the West Florida Provincials.'

To his own anecdotes, of which he possessed an impressive store, Cobb brought a dignified tranquillity of manner that might have earned a high fee in Hollywood, had he ever contemplated acting a military career, rather than living one. He narrated them in a low unemphasized mumble, drawing the words and sentences right back into his mouth, recalling certain old-fashioned types of Paris American. Like Finn, though in a totally different genre, Cobb indulged these dramatic aptitudes in himself, which, one suspected, could even motivate a deliberate visit—for example, the day after Pearl Harbour—should he feel an affirmation required to be made in public.

'What's America's next step, Colonel?' someone had asked on that occasion.

Cobb did not answer at once. Instead, he threw himself into a relatively theatrical pose, one of those attitudes, stylized yet unforced, in which he excelled; this time in the character of a man giving deep attention to a problem of desperate complexity. Then he spoke a considered judgment.

'The US Navy are prohibited alcohol,' he said. 'We'll have to call in their golf-clubs, I guess.'

Years later in New York, I repeated that comment to Harrison F. Wisebite's nephew, Milton, met at a publisher's party at the St Regis. Milton Wisebite, who worked in the

Time-Life office at that period, had himself served in Europe with his country's expeditionary force.

'Courthouse Cobb?' he said. 'Haven't thought of him in decades.'

'That was his nickname?'

'Throughout the US Army.'

'What did it mean?'

'There was reference to a supposed predilection towards severity in the exercise of discipline.'

That was a side of Colonel Cobb, imaginable, though happily never imperative to encounter. However, Milton Wisebite's words recalled the stern tone in which Cobb had referred to the capitulation of Paulus on that day, endorsing thereby in memory the progress of the war and the moment when Hewetson left the Section. Finn was unwilling to replace him with an officer lacking any previous experience of liaison work. Accordingly the new man, Slade, a schoolmaster by profession, was given to Pennistone as second-string, and I was ordered to take over the Belgians and Czechs.

As it happened, on that evening at the St Regis, when everyone had had a good deal to drink, Milton Wisebite had gone on to ask news of Pamela Flitton, with whom, so it then appeared, he had enjoyed a brief moment of intimacy at some stage of the war. Apparently the episode had been the high peak of romance in his life, more especially as she was a kind of relation of his. Whatever took place between them—he was not explicit—must have been at an appreciably later period than the other surrender at Stalingrad, but, within the year or less that had passed since she had driven for the Section, Pamela Flitton's name had already become fairly notorious for just that sort of adventure.

The stories, as such stories do, came in gradually. For example, the affair of which Horaczko had hinted, when our ways had parted in the hall of the Titian, was confirmed later by Michalski, less reserved in discussing such matters, who said he thought things had ended by a Polish major being brought before one of their army's Courts of Honour. Even if that were an exaggeration, there was much else going round to suggest it might be true. To mention a few of these items: two RAF officers, one from Bomber, the other from Fighter Command, were court-martialled as a consequence of a fight about which was to drive her home after a party. The Naval Police had separated them, and, although a serious view was not taken by the authorities, the episode had made too much disturbance to be disregarded. The Navy was involved again in the person of a paymaster-lieutenant commander, who for some reason received a severe reprimand on her account. He was reported to be a scatterbrained fellow anyway. More ominously, a relatively senior official in the Treasury, a married man with several children, gave her a lift in his car one night at Richmond station—goodness knows what she was doing there in the first instance—starting a trail of indiscretion that led to his transference to a less distinguished ministry. Barker-Shaw, who had been Field Security Officer at my former Division, now at MI 5, hinted there had nearly been an unofficial strike about her down at the docks. These were only some of the tales one heard. No doubt most of them were greatly inflated in the telling, if not positively untrue, but they indicated her range, even if you discounted ones like pouring the wine on the floor when Howard Craggs, the left-wing publisher, now a temporary civil servant of some standing, had given her dinner at an expensive black market restaurant; even less to be believed that—like Barbara Goring discharging the sugar over Widmerpool–she had emptied the bottle over Craggs's head. The latter version was agreed to be untrustworthy if only because he was known still to pursue her.

Even if these highly coloured anecdotes were to be disbelieved, their very existence indicated a troublesome personality. Myth of such pervasive volume does not suddenly arise about a woman entirely without reason. One thing was certain. She had left the ATS. This was said to be due to bad health, trouble with a lung.

'I never yet met a pretty girl who didn't tell you she had TB,' said Dicky Umfraville. 'Probably the least of the diseases she inherited from Cosmo.'

Umfraville had been unsuccessful in his efforts to find a niche in one of the secret organizations, and was now commanding a transit camp with the rank of major.

'Giving men hell is what Miss Flitton likes,' he said. 'I know the sort. Met plenty of them.'

There was something to be said for accepting that diagnosis, because two discernible features seemed to emerge from a large, often widely diversified, canon of evidence chronicling Pamela Flitton's goings-on: the first, her indifference to the age and status of the men she decided to fascinate: the second, the unvarying technique of silence, followed by violence, with which she persecuted her lovers, or those who hoped to be numbered in that category. She appeared, for example, scarcely at all interested in looks or money, rank or youth, as such; just as happy deranging the modest home life of a middle-aged air-raid warden, as compromising the commission of a rich and handsome Guards ensign recently left school. In fact, she seemed to prefer 'older men' on the whole, possibly because of their potentiality for deeper suffering. Young men might superficially transcend their seniors in this respect, but they probably showed less endurance in sustaining that state, while, once pinioned, the middle-aged could be made to writhe almost indefinitely. In the Section her memory remained with Borrit.

'Wonder what happened to that juicy looking AT,' he said more than once. 'The good-lookers never stay. Wouldn't mind spending a weekend with her.'

‘Weekends’ took place once a fortnight, most people saving up their weekly one day off to make them up. Once in a way Isobel managed to come to London during the week and we went out for a mild jaunt. This was not often, and, when she rang up one day to say Ted Jeavons had got hold of a couple of bottles of gin and was asking a few people in to share them with him, the invitation presented itself as quite an excitement. After Molly’s death, Isobel and her sisters used to keep in closer touch with Jeavons than formerly, making something of a duty to see him at fairly regular intervals, on the grounds that, a widower, he needed more attention than before. I had not seen him myself since suggesting Templer should take a room at the Jeavons’ house, but heard Templer had done so. Whether he remained, I did not know. Jeavons, keeping up Molly’s tradition of always welcoming any member of the family, had shown surprising resilience in recovering from the unhappy night when he had lost his wife. Certainly he had been greatly upset at the time, but he possessed a kind of innate toughness of spirit that carried him through. Norah Tolland, who did not care for any suggestion of sentimentality that concerned persons of the opposite sex—though she tolerated the loves, hates and regrets of her own exclusively feminine world—insisted that Jeavons’s recovery was complete.

‘Ted’s perfectly capable of looking after himself,’ she said. ‘In some respects—allowing for the war—the place is better run than when Molly was alive. I get a bit sick of those long disjointed harangues he gives about ARP.’

His duties as an air-raid warden had now become Jeavons’s sole interest, the whole background of his life. Apart from his period in the Army during the previous war, he must have worked longer and more continuously at air-raid precautions than at any other job. Jeavons, although to be regarded as not much good at jobs, had here found his vocation. No one knew quite how the money situation would resolve itself when Molly died, Jeavons no longer in his first youth, with this admitted lack of handiness at earning a living. It turned out that Molly, with a forethought her noisy manner concealed, had taken steps to compound for her jointure, a financial reconstruction that had included buying the South Kensington house, thereby insuring (air raids unforeseen in that respect) her husband having a roof over his head, if she predeceased him. Although she was older, that possibility seemed unlikely enough in the light of Jeavons's much propagated 'rotten inside', the stomach wound so perpetually reviled by himself. However, the unlikely had come to pass. Chips Lovell, when alive, had never tired of deploring Sleaford stinginess where their widows were concerned, but at least Jeavons had reaped some residue. One felt he deserved that at his age, though what precisely that age was, no one knew. Fifty must be in the offing, if not already attained.

'Norah's bringing a girl-friend with her,' he said. 'Wonder what she's got hold of this time. The last one had a snub nose and freckles with biggish feet.'

Norah Tolland was a driver in one of the several classifications of women's services, a corps which regarded themselves as of rather more consequence than mere ATS, whose officers they were not required to salute. Norah had taken pleasure in explaining that to a very important ATS officer wearing red tabs who had hauled her up for a supposed omission of respect.

'Sorry your friend Templer's gone, Nick,' said Jeavons. 'We got on pretty well. Used to have long talks at odd moments of the night when we'd both come off duty in the small hours. He told me a thing or two. Stories about the ladies, my hat.'

Jeavons's thick dark hair, with its ridges of corkscrew curls, had now turned quite white, the Charlie Chaplin moustache remaining black. This combination of tones for some reason gave him an oddly Italian appearance, enhanced by blue overalls, obscurely suggesting a railway porter at a station in Italy. Jeavons continued to wear these overalls, though by now promoted to an administrative post at the local ARP headquarters. He poured out glasses of gin-and-orange, a drink for ever to recall world war.

'Why did Templer leave?'

'Been fed up for ages. Wanted a more active job. Quite worried him.'

'He told me all that nearly a year ago.'

'There was a woman in the case. Usually is. That's why he wanted to do something more dangerous. London's quite dangerous enough for me. Templer didn't think so.'

'It sounds unlike him.'

'He went off to some training place,' said Jeavons. 'Never know how people will behave. Look at poor Charles Stringham, missing at Singapore. Remember when he lived on the top floor here with Miss Weedon trying to cure him of the booze. He and I used to have one on the sly once in a way. Mrs Conyers, I should call her, not Miss Weedon. Bad luck her husband dropping dead like that, but in your nineties you must be prepared for accidents.'

General Conyers, also an air-raid warden, had collapsed in the street one night, pursuing looters attempting to steal a refrigerator from a bombed house. He died, as he had lived, in active, dramatic, unusual circumstances; such, one felt, as he himself would have preferred.

'Tuffy, as Charles used to call her, is in MI 5 now,' said Jeavons. 'Don't think she has to get into evening dress and jade ear-rings and vamp German agents. Just supervises the girls there. Always looked as if she knew a lot of secrets. Those black dresses and white collars. I expect they want reliable people, and she's reliable all right. This girl of Templer's made him feel he was getting old. He wanted to find out whether that was true or not. Of course, you might argue he oughtn't to have been playing around at all. You've got to remember the circumstances. Wife's in a mental home, as you probably know. Awful thing to happen. It's hard to keep straight, if you're on your own. I remember Smith, that butler of your brother-in-law Erry's, using those very words. Erry used to lend us Smith from time to time, when he was away from Thrubworth. Of course, Smith's wife had been dead for years, luckily for her. I warrant there'd been some high jinks on Smith's part at one time or another. Terrible chap, Smith. Oughtn't to say it, but I'm really glad he's dead. No chance of his ever working here again.'

'Erry said it was a rather ghastly business when Smith pegged out.'

'Ghastly?' said Jeavons. 'Just about. Didn't you know? He was bitten by Maisky, that monkey Molly used to own. It seems Smith tried to take a biscuit away from that tenacious ape. Probably wanted it himself to mop up some of the gin he'd drunk. God, the way that man used to put back our gin. I marked the bottle, but it wasn't a damn bit of use. Silly thing to do, to take issue with Maisky. Of course Smith came off second-best. Perhaps they both reached out for the biscuit at the same moment. Anyway, Maisky wouldn't have any snatching and Smith contracted septicemia with fatal results. Meant the end of Maisky too, which wasn't really just. But then what is just in this life? Still, I suppose some things are, if you think about them. Smith'll be the last butler I'll ever find myself employing—not that there's likely to be many butlers to employ, the way things are going. That fact doesn't break my heart. Taking them all in all, the tall with the short, the fat with the thin, the drunk with the sober, they're not a profession that greatly appeals to me. Of course, I was brought in contact with butlers late in life. Never set eyes on them in the circles I came from. I may have been unlucky in the butlers I've met. There may be the one in a hundred, but it's a long time to wait. Read about butlers in books—see 'em in plays. That's all right. Have 'em in the house—a very different matter. Look what they do to your clothes, apart from anything else. I started without butlers and I'll die without butlers, no less a happy man. There's the bell. No butler, so I'll answer it myself. Probably some of the pals from my ARP dump.'

He went off down the stairs. After the bomb damage, the house had been shored up to prevent collapse, but no interior renovation had taken place. A long, jagged crack still zigzagged across one of the walls, which were in many places covered with large brown patches, like maps showing physical features, or the rather daring ornamental designs of a modernistic decorator. All the pictures, even the Moroccan pastels, had been removed, as well as the oriental bowls and jars that used to clutter the drawing-room. A snapshot of Molly, wearing a Fair Isle jumper and holding Maisky in her arms like a baby, stood on the mantelpiece, curled and yellowing. Maisky, heedless of mortality, looked infinitely self-satisfied. Jeavons returned, bringing with him several ARP colleagues, male and female.

'Room's not looking very smart for a party,' he said.

A minute or two later Norah Tolland arrived. Her companion—'girl-friend', as Jeavons had termed her—turned out to be Pamela Flitton. Norah was in uniform, which suited her. She was, in general, more settled, more sure of herself than when younger, though on this particular occasion the presence of Pamela seemed to make her both elated and nervous.

'Ted, I felt sure you wouldn't mind my bringing Pam,' she said. 'She's having dinner with me tonight. It seemed so much easier than meeting at the restaurant.'

'Most welcome,' said Jeavons.

He looked Pamela over. Jeavons examining a woman's points was always in itself worth observing. If good-looking, he stared at her as if he had never before seen anything of the kind, though at the same time determined not to be carried away by his own astonishment. Pamela justified this attention. She was wearing a neat black frock, an improvement on her battledress blouse. It was clear she had established over Norah an absolute, even if only temporary, domination. Norah's conciliatory manner showed that.

'Have a drink?' said Jeavons.

'What have you got?'

Pamela glanced aggressively round the room, catching my eye, but making no sign of recognition.

'Gin-and-orange.'

'No whisky?'

'Sorry.'

'I'll have gin-and-water—no, neat gin.'

I went across to her.

'Escaped from the ATS?'

'Got invalided.'

'A lady of leisure?'

'My job's a secret one.'

Jeavons took her lightly by the arm and began to introduce her to the other guests. She shook his hand away with her elbow, but allowed him to tell her the names of two or three persons who worked with him. When introductions were over, she picked up a paper from the table—apparently some not very well printed periodical—and took it, with her glass of gin, to the furthest corner of the room. There she sat on a stool, listlessly turning the pages. Norah, talking to Isobel, gave an anxious glance, but did not take any immediate steps to join Pamela, or try to persuade her to be more sociable. A talkative elderly man with a red face, one of the ARP guests, engaged me in conversation. He said he was a retired indigo planter. Jeavons himself went across the room and spoke to Pamela, but he must have received a rebuff, because he returned a second or two later to the main body of the guests.

'She's reading our ARP bulletin,' he said.

He spoke with more surprise than disapproval; in fact almost with admiration.

'Read the poem in this number?' asked the indigo planter. 'Rather good. It begins "What do you carry, Warden dear?" Gives a schedule of the equipment—you know, helmet, gas-mask, First Aid, all that—but leaves out one item. You have to guess. Quite clever.'

'Jolly good.'

Norah, evidently not happy about Pamela, separated herself from Isobel soon after this, and went across to where her friend was sitting. They talked for a moment, but, if Norah too hoped to make her circulate with the rest, she was defeated. When she returned I asked her what her own life was like.

'I was with Gwen McReith's lot for a time. Quite fun, because Gwen herself is amusing. I first met Pam with her, as a matter of fact.'

'Pam seems quite a famous figure.'

Norah sighed.

'I suppose she is now,' she said.

'Is she all right over there in the corner?'

'No good arguing with her.'

'I mean we both of us might go over and talk to her.'

'For God's sake not.'

Nothing of any note took place during the rest of the party, until Norah and Pamela were leaving. Throughout that time, Pamela had continued to sit in the corner. She accepted another drink from Jeavons, but ceased to read the ARP bulletin, simply looking straight in front of her. However, before she and Norah went off together, an unexpected thing happened. She came across the room and spoke in her accustomed low, almost inaudible tone.

'Are you still working with the Poles?'

'No—I've switched to the Belgians and Czechs.'

'When you were with the Poles, did you ever hear the name Szymański?'

'It's a very common Polish name, but if you mean the man who used to be with the Free French, and caused endless trouble, then transferred to the Poles, and caused endless trouble there, I know quite a lot about him.'

She laughed.

'I just wondered,' she said.

'What about him?'

'Oh, nothing.'

'Was he the character you were talking to outside that Polish hide-out in Bayswater?'

She shook her head, laughing softly again. Then they went away. The ARP people left too.

'There's enough for one more drink for the three of us,' said Jeavons. 'I hid the last few drops.'

'What do you think of Pamela Flitton?'

'That's the wench that gave Peter Templer such a time,' said Jeavons. 'Couldn't remember the name. It's come back. He said it all started as a joke. Then he got mad about her. That was the way Templer put it. What he didn't like—when she wasn't having any, as I understand it—was the feeling he was no good any more. How I feel all the time. Nothing much you can do about it. Mind you, he was browned off with the job too.'

'Do men really try to get dangerous jobs because they've been disappointed about a woman?'

'Well, I don't,' Jeavons admitted.

The enquiry about Szymanski was odd, even if he were not the Pole outside the Ufford. Neither Pennistone nor I had ever set eyes on this man, though we had been involved in troubles about him, including a question asked in Parliament. There was some uncertainty as to his nationality, even whether the territory where he was stated to have been born was now Polish or Czechoslovak, assuming he had in truth been born there. Most of his life he had lived on his wits as a professional gambler—like Cosmo Flitton—so it appeared, familiar as a dubious character in France, Belgium and the Balkans; in fact all over the place. He had a row of aliases: Kubitsa: Brod: Groza: Dupont: to mention only a few of them. No one—even MI 5 was vague—seemed to know when and how he had first appeared in this country, but at an early stage he was known to have volunteered for the Belgian forces. This offer was prudently declined. Szymanski then tried the Free French, who, with the self-confidence of their race, took him on the strength; later ceding him with relief to the Poles, who may have wanted to make use of him in some special capacity. The general opinion was that he had a reasonable claim to Polish citizenship. The Czechs raised no objection. There were those who insisted his origins were really Balkan.

'It seems fairly clear he's not Norwegian,' said Pennistone, 'but I've learnt to take nothing on trust about Szymanski. You may have him on your hands before we've finished, Dempster.'

Szymanski was one of those professional scourges of authority that appear sporadically in all armies, a type to which the Allied contingents were peculiarly subject owing to the nature of their composition and recruitment. Like Sayce of my former Battalion, Szymanski was always making trouble, but Sayce magnified to a phantasmagoric degree, a kind of super-Sayce of infinitely greater intelligence and disruptive potential. The abiding fear of the Home Office was that individuals of this sort might, after being found stateless, be discharged from the armed forces and have to be coped with as alien civilians.

As it happened, Szymanski's name cropped up again a day or two later in our room. Masham, who was with the British Mission in liaison with the Free French, was waiting to be summoned by Finn, to whom he was to communicate certain points arising out of Giraud taking over from Darlan in North Africa. Masham asked Pennistone how the Poles were getting on with Szymanski, who had caused a lot of trouble to himself in his Free French days.

'Szymanski's gone a bit too far this time,' Pennistone said. 'They've sent him to detention. It was bound to come.'

There was a barracks, under the control of a British commandant, specially to accommodate delinquent Allied personnel.

I asked how recently that had happened.

'A week or so ago.'

'I'm not surprised,' said Masham. 'Though one's got to admit the man was rather a card. It looks as if this North African switch-over will mean a back place for de Gaulle.'

'Has anyone else hanged himself in his braces in that Free French snuggery behind Selfridge's?' asked Borrit.

'Nobody hanged himself in his braces there or in any other Free French establishment,' said Masham, rather irritably. 'You've got the story wrong.'

Like all his Mission, Masham was, as he himself would have expressed it, *plus catholique que le Pape*, far more Francophil than the Free French themselves, who on the whole rather enjoyed a good laugh at less reputable aspects of their own corporate body. When in due course I had direct dealings with them myself, they were always telling stories about some guerrilla of theirs who divided his time between being parachuted into France to make contact with the Resistance, and returning to London to run a couple of girls on Shaftesbury Avenue.

'What did happen then?'

'There was some fuss about an interrogation.'

'De Gaulle was pretty cross when our people enquired about it.'

'He's got to run his own show, hasn't he?' said Masham. 'Anyway, it looks as if he's on the way out. By the way, Jenkins, the successful candidate for the job you applied to us for caught it at Bir Hakim.'

Kucherman rang up at that moment, and, by the time I had finished with Belgian business, Masham had gone up to see Finn. Transfer to the Belgians and Czechs meant no more physically than ceasing to sit next to Pennistone, though it vitiated a strong alliance in resisting Blackhead. The two Allied contingents with which I was now in liaison were, of course, even in their aggregate, much smaller numerically than the Polish Corps. At first sight, in spite of certain advantages in being one's own master, responsible only to Finn, a loss in other directions seemed threatened by diminution of variety in the general field of activity. A claustrophobic existence offered, in this respect, the consolation of exceptional opportunities for observing people and situations closely in a particular aspect of war. Our Section's viewpoint was no doubt less all embracing than, say, Widmerpool's in his subterranean lair; at the same time could provide keener, more individual savour of things noted at first-hand.

It had been stimulating, for example, to watch the quickly gathering momentum of the apparatus—infinitesimally propelled, among others, by oneself—that reduced to some order the circumstances of the hundred and fifteen thousand Poles permitted to cross the Russian frontier into Iran; assisting, as it were, Pennistone's 'one man and a boy' at the receiving end. Hundreds of thousands were left behind, of course, while those who got out were in poorish shape. All the same, these were the elements to form the Second Polish Army Corps; later so creditably concerned at Monte Cassino and elsewhere. Regarded superficially, the new Belgian and Czech assignments seemed to offer problems less obviously engrossing. However, as matters turned out, plenty of channels for fresh experience were provided by these two. Even the earliest meetings with Major Kucherman and Colonel Hlava promised that.

Precise in manner, serious about detail, Hewetson was judged to perform his duties pretty well, though he possessed no particular qualifications as expert on Belgian affairs, still less those of Czechoslovakia. Before I took over from him, he gave me a briefing about the characteristics of the Allies in question.

'An excellent point about the Belgians,' he said, 'is not caring in the least what they say about each other, or their own national failings. They have none of that painful wish to make a good impression typical of some small nations. It's a great relief. At the same time their standards in certain respects—food and drink, for example—are high ones. They are essentially easy to get on with. Do not believe disobliging propaganda, chiefly French, about them. They are not, it must be admitted, indifferent to social distinction. Their assistant MA, Gauthier de Graef, likes telling a story, no doubt dating from the last war, of an English officer, French officer, and Belgian officer, when a woman rode by on a horse. The Englishman said: "What a fine horse"; the Frenchman, "What a fine woman": the Belgian, "I wonder what she was née". Of course I don't suggest that would happen today.'

'One can't make the classless society retroactive.'

'Another saying of Gauthier's is that when he wakes up in the night in a wagon-lit and hears a frightful row going on in the next compartment, he knows he's back in his own beloved country—though I must say I haven't been subjected to the smallest ill-humour myself on the part of my Belgian charges.'

'They sound all right.'

'One small snag—Lannoo was given promotion the other day, and has already left for his new job. The Belgian authorities still won't make up their minds whom to appoint in his place. I've been dealing with Gauthier de Graef for weeks, who of course can't take the decisions his boss could. I suppose this delay is the sort of thing the Belgians themselves grumble about.'

As it turned out, the official appointment of Kucherman came through only on the day when Hewetson left the Section. There was some misunderstanding about certain customary formalities, one of those departmental awkwardnesses that take place from time to time and can cause coolness. The fact was Kucherman himself was a figure of much more standing at home than the average officer likely to be found in that post. Possibly some of the Belgian Government thought this fact might overweight the job; others, that more experience was desirable in purely military matters. At least that was the explanation given to Hewetson when things were in the air. As he had said, a particular charm possessed by the Belgians was, in a world everyday increasingly cautious about hazarding in public opinions about public affairs, no Belgian minded in the least criticizing his Government, individually or collectively.

'One of their best points,' Hewetson repeated.

In short, by the time I introduced myself to Kucherman, a faint sense of embarrassment had been infused into the atmosphere by interchanges at a much higher level than Finn's. Kucherman was only a major, because the Belgians were rather justly proud of keeping their ranks low.

'After all the heavy weather that's been made, you'll have to be careful not to get off on the wrong foot, Nicholas,' said Finn. 'Kucherman's own people may have been to blame for some of that, but we've been rather stiff and unaccommodating ourselves. You'll have to step carefully. Kucherman's a well known international figure.'

I repeated these remarks of Finn's to Pennistone.

'Kucherman's a big shot all right,' said Pennistone. 'I used to hear a lot about him and his products when I was still in business. He's head of probably the largest textile firm. That's just one of his concerns. He's also a coal owner on an extensive scale, not to mention important interests in the Far East—if they still survive. We shall expect your manner to alter after a week or two of putting through deals with Kucherman.'

The picture was a shade disconcerting. One imagined a figure, younger perhaps, but somewhat on the lines of Sir Magnus Donners: tall: schoolmasterish: enigmatic. As it turned out, Kucherman's exterior was quite different from that. Of medium height, neat, brisk, with a high forehead and grey hair, he seemed to belong to the eighteenth-century, the latter half, as if he were wearing a wig of the period tied behind with a black bow. This, I found later, was one of the Belgian physical types, rather an unexpected one, even in a nation rich in physiognomies recalling the past.

On the whole, a march-past of Belgian troops summoned up the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, emaciated, Memling-like men-at-arms on their way to supervise the Crucifixion or some lesser martyrdom, while beside them tramped the clowns of Teniers or Brouwer, round rubicund countenances, haled away from carousing to be mustered in the ranks. These latter types were even more to be associated with the Netherlands contingent—obviously a hard and fast line was not to be drawn between these Low Country peoples—Colonel Van der Voort himself an almost perfect example. Van der Voort's features seemed to have parted company completely from Walloon admixtures—if, indeed, it was Walloon blood that produced those mediaeval faces. Van der Voort's air had something faintly classical about it too, something belonging not entirely to domestic pot-house or kermesse scenes, a touch of the figures in the train of Bacchus or Silenus; though naturally conceived in Dutch or Flemish terms. Kucherman's high forehead and regular features—the French *abbé* style—was in contrast with all that, a less common, though a fairly consistent Belgian variant that gave the impression, on such occasions as the parade on their National Day, of the sudden influence of a later school of painting.

The first day at Eaton Square—by then almost a preserve of the Belgian ministries—the name of Sir Magnus Donners did indeed crop up. He had been in the headlines that morning on account of some more or less controversial statement made in public on the subject of manpower. Kucherman referred to this item of news, mentioning at the same time that he had once lunched at Stourwater. We talked about the castle. I asked if, since arrival in England, he had seen Sir Magnus. Kucherman laughed.

'A member of your Cabinet does not want to be bothered by a major in one of the smaller Allied contingents.'

'All the same, it might be worth while letting him know you are here.'

'You think so?'

'Sure of it.'

'Certainly he showed great interest in Belgium when we met—knowledge of Belgian affairs. You know Belgium yourself?'

'I've been there once or twice. When my father was at the War Office, I remember him bringing two Belgian officers to our house. It was a great excitement.'

'Your father was *officier de carrière*?'

'He'd come back from Paris, where he'd been on the staff of the Peace Conference. By the way, several Belgian officers are living at the same block of flats as myself. I don't know any of them.'

Kucherman asked the name of the place.

'Ah, yes,' he said. 'Clanwaert is there. You will be dealing with him about Congo matters. An amusing fellow.'

'I have an appointment with him tomorrow.'

'He was formerly in the Premier Régiment des Guides—like your Life Guards, one might say. I believe he fought his first engagement in 1914 wearing what was almost their parade uniform—green tunic, red breeches, all that. Then a love affair went wrong. He transferred to La Force Publique. A dashing fellow with a romantic outlook. That was why he never married.'

The Force Publique was the Congo army, quite separate from the Belgian army, officered somewhat on the lines, so it seemed, of our own Honourable East India Company's troops in the past.

'Kucherman's going to be all right,' said Finn.

Even Gauthier de Graef, who had all his countrymen's impatience with other people's methods, and would not have hesitated to grumble about his new chief, agreed with that judgment. He was a tall young man with a large moustache, who, after a frantic drive to the coast to catch up the remnant of the Belgian forces embarked for England, had jumped the last yard or so over water, as the boat had already set sail from harbour.

'I needed a drink after that,' he said. 'A long one, let me assure you.'

I was just off to see Kucherman or Hlava one morning, when General Bobrowski was put through on my telephone. Bobrowski, even for himself, was in a tremendous state of excitement. He explained that he had been unable to make contact with Finn, and now he was told that neither Pennistone nor Slade were available. It was a matter of the most urgent importance that he had an appointment with Finn as soon as possible. He appealed to me as Pennistone's former assistant in Polish liaison. Finn was at that moment with one of the brigadiers; Pennistone probably at the Titian—where it was quite likely he would learn of whatever was on Bobrowski's mind—and Slade was no doubt somewhere in the building negotiating with another section. Slade returned at that moment and I handed Bobrowski over to him. I wondered what the trouble was. Bobrowski became easily excited, but this seemed exceptional. Pennistone outlined the enormity on my return.

'Listen to this,' he said. 'Tell me whether you believe it or not.'

He was partly angry himself, partly unable not to laugh.

'Let's go and have lunch. I'll tell you there.'

The story was certainly a strange one.

'Szymanski's out,' said Pennistone.

'Out of where?'

'Jug.'

'He's escaped from the detention barracks?'

'In a rather unusual way.'

'Did he break out?'

'He left by the front door.'

'In disguise?'

'It appears that first of all a certain amount of telephoning took place from the appropriate branches, Polish and British, saying that Szymanski's conviction had been quashed and his case was to be reconsidered. Then two British officers arrived bearing the correct papers to obtain his body. Szymanski was accordingly handed over to their custody.'

'This was bogus?'

'The next thing was, Szymanski himself appeared shortly after at the prison, wearing the uniform of a British second-lieutenant and explaining that he knew the way to get out of anywhere. In fact, the prison hasn't been invented that could keep him inside.'

'Didn't they lock him up again?'

'They couldn't. The documents made him a free man.'

'What had happened?'

'There were those who thought Szymanski's outstanding qualities—not necessarily his most gentlemanly ones—might come in useful for a piece of work required.'

'You mean some of our people?'

'Possibly certain Polish elements were also sympathetic to the scheme. That's not clear yet. It would have been easier to organize, had that been the case. However, one can't be sure. Another country may be in on it too.'

'Was this Sunny Farebrother's crowd?'

'It looks like it.'

'With forged papers?'

'Yes.'

'Won't there be the hell of a row?'

'There will—and is. As liaison officer with the Poles, naturally I can only regard the whole affair as perfectly disgraceful. At the same time, one can't help seeing it has its funny side.'

'Finn must be having a fit.'

'He's beside himself.'

'Is Sunny personally involved?'

'So it's believed—though he did not turn up himself at the prison gates.'

'Is it known who did?'

'One of them was called Stevens. I believe rather a tough nut, quite young, with an MC. He's said to have been wounded in the Middle East, and came back to join Farebrother's show.'

'Odo Stevens?'

'I don't know his first name.'

'Will they re-arrest Szymanski?'

'How can they? He's been disposed of abroad probably. Anyway undergoing training at some secret place.'

'He'll be dropped somewhere?'

'To do something pretty unpleasant, I should imagine.'

'And the Poles are angry?'

'Our ones are livid. Can you blame them? I've never seen Bobrowski in such a state. It's understandable. At one end of the scale, our authorities make a great parade of the letter of the Law. The Home Office, if it possibly can, displays its high-mindedness in hampering the smaller Allies from arresting their deserters—they'd be much too afraid to obstruct the Americans or Russians—then a thing like this happens. All we can do is to grin feebly, and say we hope no offence will be taken.'

Although this incident had its being in the half-light encompassing those under-the-counter activities from which Finn liked to keep his Section so rigorously apart, Finn himself, not to mention Pennistone, had to suffer most of the consequences of what had taken place, so far as the Polish authorities were concerned. They were not at all pleased, saying, not without reason, that a serious blow had been struck against discipline. The episode strongly suggested that the British, when it suited them, could carry disregard of all convention to inordinate lengths; indulge in what might be described as forms of military bohemianism of the most raffish sort. Finn was, of course, entirely on the Polish side in thinking that. It was hard that he himself should have to bear most of the brunt of their complaint. The undertaking was no less remarkable in that Farebrother, outwardly so conventional, was prepared to lend himself to such a plot. It was just another view as to how the war should be won; perhaps the right one.

'A great illusion is that government is carried on by an infallible, incorruptible machine,' Pennistone said. 'Officials

—all officials, of all governments—are just as capable of behaving in an irregular manner as anyone else. In fact they have the additional advantage of being able to assuage their conscience, if they happen to own one, by assuring themselves it's all for the country's good.'

I wondered if Pamela Flitton had known these monkey-tricks were on the way, when she had enquired about Szymanski. Her own exploits continued to be talked about. Clanwaert was the next Ally to mention her. That was a month or two later. We met one evening on the way back to the block of flats. Outwardly, Clanwaert suppressed any indication of the romanticism at which Kucherman had hinted. He had a moustache even larger than Gauthier de Graef's, and an enormous nose to which it seemed attached, as if both were false. The nose was a different shape from Finn's, making one think more of Cyrano de Bergerac. Clanwaert used to tap it, in the old-fashioned traditional gesture, when he knew the answer to some question. Like Kucherman, he talked excellent English, though with a thicker, more guttural accent, a habit of spitting all his words out making most of his remarks sound ironic. Perhaps that was intended. I asked if it were true he had fought his first battle in red breeches.

'Not *red*, my friend—this is important—*amaranthe*. How do you say that in English?'

'Just the same—amaranth.'

'That's the name of a colour?'

'An English writer named St John Clarke called one of his books *Fields of Amaranth*. It was a novel. The flower is supposed to be unfading in legend. The other name for it in English is Love-lies-bleeding. Much play was made about these two meanings in the story.'

'Love-lies-bleeding? That's a strange name. Too good for a pair of breeches.'

'Not if they were unfading.'

'Nothing's unfading, my friend,' said Clanwaert. 'Nothing in Brussels, at least.'

'I've enjoyed visits there before the war.'

'It was a different city after '14–'18. Most places were. That was why I transferred to la Force Publique. I can assure you the Congo was a change from la Porte Louise. For a long time, if you believe me, I was Elephant Officer. Something to hold the attention. I would not mind going back there at the termination of this war. Indeed, one may have no choice—be lucky if one reaches Africa. Nevertheless, there are times when the Blacks get on one's nerves. One must admit that. Perhaps only because they look at the world in a different manner from us—maybe a wiser one. I shall be writing you another letter about those officers in the Congo who want a share in this war of ours. As I told you before, they feel out of it, afraid of people saying afterwards—"As for you, gentlemen, you were safe in the Congo." It is understandable. All the same your High Command say they cannot see their way to employ these Congo officers. I understand that too, but I shall be writing you many letters on the subject. You must forgive me. By the way, I met a young lady last night who told me she knew you.'

'Who was that?'

'Mademoiselle Flitton.'

'How was she?'

Clanwaert laughed, evidently aware of the impression the name would make.

'She told me to remind you of the Pole she mentioned when you last met.'

'She did?'

'That was some joke?'

'Some people thought so. I hope Mademoiselle Flitton is in good Belgian hands now.'

'I think she has higher aspirations than that.'

Clanwaert laughed, but revealed no secrets. As it turned out, the implications of the words were clarified through the agency of the Czechs.

'Colonel Hlava is an excellent man.' Hewetson had said. 'More ease of manner than most of his countrymen, some of whom like to emphasise their absolute freedom, as a nation, from the insincere artificialities of social convention. Makes them a bit dour at times. Personally, I find it oils the wheels when there's a drop of Slovak, Hungarian or Jewish blood. Not so deadly serious.'

'Hlava's a flying ace?'

'With innumerable medals for gallantry in the last war—where he served against the Russians, whom he's now very pro—not to mention international awards as a test pilot. He is also rather keen on music, which I know nothing about. For example, he asked me the other day if I didn't get rather tired of Egyptian music. As I'm almost tone deaf, I'd no idea Egypt was in the forefront as a musical country.'

'Tzigane—gipsy.'

'I thought he meant belly-dancing,' said Hewetson. 'By the way, when you're dealing with two Allies at once, it's wiser never to mention one to the other. They can't bear the thought of your being unfaithful to them.'

It was at one of Colonel Hlava's musical occasions that the scene took place which showed what Clanwaert had been talking about. This was at a performance of *The Bartered Bride* mounted by the Czechoslovak civil authorities in the interests of some national cause. I was not familiar with the opera, but remembered Maclintick and Gossage having a music critics' argument about Smetana at Mrs Foxe's party for Moreland's symphony. No recollection remained of the motif of their dispute, though no doubt, like all musical differences of opinion, feelings had been bitter when aroused. I was invited, with Isobel, to attend *The Bartered Bride* in a more or less official capacity. We sat with Colonel Hlava, his staff and their wives.

'The heroine is not really a bride, but a fiancée,' explained Hlava. 'The English title being not literal for German *Die Verkaufte Braut*.'

In most respects very different from Kucherman, the Czech colonel possessed the same eighteenth-century appearance. Perhaps it would be truer to say Hlava recalled the nineteenth century, because there was a look of Liszt about his head and thick white hair, together with a certain subdued air of belonging to the Romantic Movement. This physical appearance was possibly due to a drop of Hungarian blood—one of the allegedly lubricating elements mentioned by Hewetson—though Hlava himself claimed entirely Bohemian or Moravian origins. Quiet, almost apologetic in manner, he was also capable of firmness. His appointment dated back to before the war, and, during the uncertainties of the immediately post-Munich period, he had armed his staff, in case an effort was made to take over the military attaché's office by elements that might have British recognition, but were regarded by himself as traitorous. Hlava liked a mild joke and was incomparably easy to work with.

'Smetana's father made beer,' he said. 'Father wanted son to make beer too, but Smetana instead make Czechoslovak national music.'

These wartime social functions had to take place for a variety of reasons: to give employment: raise money: boost morale. They were rarely very enjoyable. Objection was sometimes aimed at them on the grounds that they made people forget the war. Had such oblivion been attainable, they would, indeed, have provided a desirable form of recuperation. In fact, they often risked additionally emphasizing contemporary conditions, the pursuits of peace, especially the arts, elbowed out of life, being hard to re-establish at short notice. Conversations, on such occasions as this opera, were apt to hover round semi-political or semi-official matters, rather than break away into some aesthetic release.

'Your other great national composer is, of course, Dvořák.'

'Dvořák poor man like Smetana. Dvořák's father poor pork butcher.'

'But a musical pork butcher?'

'Played the bagpipes in the mountains,' said Hlava. 'Like in Scotland.'

Most of the theatre was occupied with Allied military or civil elements, members of the Diplomatic Corps and people with some stake in Czech organizations. In one of the boxes, Prince Theodoric sat with the Huntercombes and a grey-haired lady with a distinguished air, probably one of his household, a countrywoman in exile. Lord Huntercombe, now getting on in age, was shown in the programme as on the board staging this performance. He was closely connected with many Allied causes and charities, and looked as shrewd as ever. He and Theodoric were wearing dark suits, the grey-haired lady in black—by this stage of the war not much seen—beside Lady Huntercombe, in rather a different role from that implied by her pre-war Gainsborough hats, was formidable in Red Cross commandant's uniform.

'Who's the big man with the white moustache three rows in front?' asked Isobel.

'General van Strydonck de Burkel, Inspector-General of the Belgian Army and Air Force—rather a figure.'

The overture began. The curtain had already gone up on the scene of the country fair, when a woman came through one of the doors of the auditorium, paused and looked about her for a moment, then, showing no sign of being embarrassed by her own lateness, made her way to an empty seat beside another woman, in the same row as General van Strydonck, but nearer the middle. In doing this she caused a good deal of disturbance. Several men stood up to let her get by, among them Widmerpool, whom I had not before noticed. It was surprising to see him at a show like this, as he was likely to be working late every night at his particular job. When the lights went on again, he was revealed as being in the company of a youngish major-general. Our party went out during the entr'acte.

'How unpunctual Miss Flitton is,' said Isobel.

Pamela Flitton came into the foyer at that moment. She was wearing a bright scarlet coat and skirt, and accompanied by a woman in uniform, Lady McReith, someone I had not seen for the best part of twenty years.

'She must have blown every coupon she's got on that outfit.'

'Or taken them off some poor chap who received a special issue for overseas.'

Apart from hair now iron-grey, very carefully set, Lady McReith remained remarkably unaltered. She was thinner than ever, almost a skeleton, the blue veins more darkly shaded in on her marble skin. She retained her enigmatic air, that disconcerting half-smile that seemed to be laughing at everyone, although at this moment she did not look in the best of humours. Probably she had paid for Pamela's ticket and was cross at her lateness. If Lady McReith were at the head of a detachment of drivers, she would know about discipline. However, annoyance showed only in her eyes, while she and Pamela stood in a corner watching the crowd. Widmerpool and his general, who was of unknown identity, were behaving as if something important was brewing between them, strolling up and down in a preoccupied manner like men talking serious business, rather than a couple of opera-lovers having a night off duty. On the way back to our seats, we found ourselves next to them in the aisle. Widmerpool, who had met Isobel in the past, peered closely to make sure I was out with my wife, and said good evening. Then he muttered a question under his breath.

'Do you happen to know the name of the girl in red who came in late? I've seen her before. With some Americans at one of Biddle's big Allied gatherings.'

'Pamela Flitton.'

'So that's Pamela Flitton?'

'She's a niece of Charles Stringham's. You heard he was at Singapore when the Japs moved in?'

'Yes, yes, poor fellow,' said Widmerpool.

He made no reference to the fact that he had been in some measure responsible for sending Stringham there, indeed, there was no time to do so before he went back to his seat. During the second entr'acte he did not appear, possibly having left the theatre with his companion. The Huntercombes, who had remained in their box on this earlier opportunity for the audience to stretch its legs, now entered the foyer with Theodoric and the foreign lady. Theodoric, always very conscious of the social demands imposed by royal rank, began to look about him for people to whom it was a requirement to make himself agreeable. No doubt feeling the disfavour Czechs, in principle, affected for persons of high degree had first claim on his good manners, he came over to shake hands with Hlava's party.

'How is Colonel Finn? Busy as ever?'

'More than ever, sir.'

'I try not to waste his time with our small problems, but I may have to ask for an interview next week.'

I gave a reassuring reply. Theodoric left the Hlava group, crossing the floor for a word with Van Strydonck de Burkel. Huge, with a white curled moustache, the Belgian general, though now rather old to take an active part in the direction of policy, looked everything he should from his picturesque reputation. In the earlier war, at the head of two squadrons of cavalry, he had led an operationally successful charge against a German machine-gun emplacement; a kind of apotheosis of those last relics of horsed warfare represented by Horaczko and Clanwaert. Having spoken a word or two to Van Strydonck, the Prince was on his way to another sector of the foyer, when Pamela Flitton suddenly detached herself from Lady McReith, and moved swiftly through the crowd. On reaching Theodoric, she slipped her arm through his.

'Don't miss Lola Montez,' said Isobel.

Considering the familiarity of the behaviour, its contrast with Pamela's usually icy demeanour, Theodoric accepted the gesture with composure. If he felt whatever intimacy might exist between them were better left unadvertised in a theatre packed with official personages, he did not encourage gossip by showing any sign of that. On the contrary, he took her hand, pressed it earnestly, as if they scarcely knew each other but he wished to show himself specially grateful for some thoughtful action that had gratified his sense of what was right. Then, having spoken a few words to her, he gave a smile of dismissal, and turned towards General Asbjørnsen who was standing nearby. Pamela was at first not prepared to accept this disengaging movement on the part of the Prince, or at any rate preferred to demonstrate that it was for her rather than Theodoric himself to decide when and how the conversation should be terminated. Accordingly, she constituted herself part of the Theodoric-Asbjørnsen axis for a minute or two; then, giving in her turn a nod to Theodoric, at the same time patting his arm, she coolly returned to Lady McReith, who now made no effort to look anything but cross. The bell sounded. We sat down to the Third Act and the man disguised as a bear.

'British gave Smetana musical degree,' said Hlava.

The Bartered Bride was the only occasion, a unique one, so far as I know, that added any colour to the rumour going round that Pamela Flitton was 'having an affair' with Prince Theodoric. Whether that were true, or whether she merely hoped to create an impression it was true, was never to my knowledge finally cleared up. All that can be said is that later circumstances supplied an odd twist to the possibility. When, subsequently, Jeavons heard the story, he showed interest.

'Sad Molly's gone,' he said. 'She always liked hearing about Theodoric, on account of his having been mixed up years ago with her ex-sister-in-law, Bijou. Looks as if Theodoric falls for an English girl every dozen years or so. Well, his wife's in America and I told you what Smith said, Can't be too cheerful having your country occupied by the Germans either. By all accounts, he's doing what he can to help us get them out. Needs some relaxation. We all do.'

About this time, Jumbo Wilson, in the light-hearted manner of generals, made nonsense of the polite letters Clanwaert and I used to send each other on the subject of the Congo army, by delivering a speech in honour of a visiting Belgian ex-Prime Minister to the effect that the services of La Force Publique would come in very useful in the Middle East. The words were scarcely out of his mouth when they set off with all their vehicles to the field of operation, arriving there very reasonably intact, and, I suppose, justifying Jumbo Wilson's oratory. However, if Clanwaert and I were thereby given something to laugh about, plenty of horrible matters were abroad too.

An announcement was made on the German radio, stating that at a place called Katyn, near the Russian town of Smolensk, an accumulation of communal graves had been found by advancing German troops. These graves were filled with corpses wearing Polish uniform. There were several thousands of bodies. The source of this information was naturally suspect, but, if in any degree to be believed, offered one solution to the mysterious disappearance of the untraced ten or fifteen thousand Polish officers, made prisoners of war by the Soviet army in 1939. 'Rather a large deficiency', as Q (Ops.) Colonel had remarked. The broadcast stated that individual bodies could be identified by papers carried on them, in some cases a tunic still bearing the actual insignia of a decoration, a practice of the Polish army in the case of operational awards. The hands had been tied together and a shot placed in the base of the skull. As a consequence of this radio announcement, the Polish Government in London approached the International Red Cross with a view to instituting an investigation. Exception was at once taken to this step by the USSR, relations with the Polish Government being immediately severed.

'The show-down has come,' said Pennistone.

The day this news was released, I went upstairs to see Finn about a rather complicated minute (to be signed by one of the Brigadiers) on the subject of redundant Czech army doctors being made available for seconding to the Royal Army Medical Corps. There had been difficulty about drafting satisfactory guarantees to make sure the Czechs, should they so require, would be able to recover the services of their MOs. Finn was in one of his unapproachable moods. The Russo-Polish situation had thoroughly upset him.

'It's a bad business,' he kept repeating. 'A bad business. I've got Bobrowski coming to see me this afternoon. What the hell am I to say?'

I tried to get the subject round to Czech medical matters and the views of the RAMC brasshats, but he told me to bring the matter up again that afternoon.

'You've got to go over to the Cabinet Offices now,' he said. 'They've just rung through. Some Belgian papers they want us to see. Something about the King. Nothing of any great importance, I think, but graded "hand of officer", and to be read by those in direct contact with the Belgians.'

The position of the King of the Belgians was delicate. Formally accepted as monarch of their country by the Belgian Government in exile, the royal portrait hanging in Kucherman's office, King Leopold, rightly or wrongly, was not, officially speaking, very well looked on by ourselves. His circumstances had been made no easier by a second marriage disapproved by many of his subjects.

'Have a look at this Belgian file before you bring it up,' said Finn. 'Do a note on it. Then we can discuss it after we've settled the Czech medicos. God, this Polish business.'

I went across to the Ministry of Defence right away. Finn had given the name of a lieutenant-colonel from whom the papers were to be acquired. After some search in the Secretariat, this officer was eventually traced in Widmerpool's room. I arrived there a few minutes before one o'clock, and the morning meeting had begun to adjourn. If they were the same committee as that I had once myself attended, the individual members had all changed, though no doubt they represented the same ministries. The only one known to me was a figure remembered from early London days, Tompsitt, a Foreign Office protégé of Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson's. Sir Gavin himself had died the previous year. Obituaries, inevitably short in wartime, had none of them mentioned the South American misjudgment that had lead to his retirement. His hopes in Tompsitt, untidy as ever and no less pleased with himself, seemed to have been realized, this job being presumably a respectable one for his age, if not particularly glamorous. Widmerpool, again in a good humour, made a facetious gesture of surprise on seeing me.

'Nicholas? Good gracious me. What is it you want, do you say? Belgian papers? Do you know anything about this, Simon? You do? Then we must let him have them.'

Someone was sent to find the papers.

'We finished early this morning,' said Widmerpool. 'An unheard of thing for us to do. I'm going to allow myself the luxury of lunching outside this building for once. So you're looking after the Belgians now, are you, Nicholas? I thought it was the Poles.'

'I've moved over.'

'You must be glad.'

'There were interesting sides.'

'Just at this moment, I mean. You are well out of the Poles. They are rocking the boat in the most deplorable manner. Our own relations with the USSR are never exactly easy—then for the Poles to behave as they have done.'

The attention of the other civilian, who, with Tompsitt, had been attending the meeting, was caught by Widmerpool's reproachful tone. He looked a rather younger version of our former housemaster, le Bas, distinctly clerical, a thin severe overworked curate or schoolmaster.

'One would really have thought someone at the top of the Polish set-up would have grasped this is not the time to make trouble,' he said. 'Your people must be pretty fed up, aren't they, Tompy?'

Tompsitt shook back his unbrushed hair.

'Fed to the teeth,' he said. 'Probably put everything back to scratch.'

'All the same,' said the sailor, 'it looks a bit as if the Russkis did it.'

He was a heavily built man, with that totally anonymous personality achieved by certain naval officers, sometimes concealing unexpected abilities.

'Not to be ruled out,' said Tompsitt.

'More information's required.'

'Doesn't make it any better to fuss at this moment,' said the curate-schoolmaster.

He stared angrily through his spectacles, his cheeks contorted. The soldier, youngish with a slight stutter, who looked like a Regular, shook his papers together and put them into a briefcase.

'It's quite a crowd,' he said.

'What are the actual figures?' asked the sailor.

'Been put as high as nine or ten thousand,' said the airman.

He was a solid-looking middle-aged man with a lot of decorations, who had not spoken until then.

'How would that compare with our own pre-war army establishment?' asked the sailor. 'Let me see, about . . .'

'Say every third officer,' said the soldier. 'Quite a crowd, as I remarked. Say every third officer in our pre-war army.'

'But it's not pre-war,' said Tompsitt. 'It's war.'

'That's the point,' said Widmerpool. 'It's war. Just because these deaths are very upsetting to the Poles themselves—naturally enough, harrowing, tragic, there isn't a word for it, I don't want to underrate that for a moment—but just because of that, it's no reason to undermine the fabric of our alliances against the Axis. Quarrels among the Allies themselves are not going to defeat the enemy.'

'Even so, you can't exactly blame them for making enquiries through the International Red Cross,' the soldier insisted.

He began to move towards the door.

'But I do blame them,' said Tompsitt. 'I blame them a great deal. Their people did not act at all circumspectly. The Russians were bound to behave as they did under the circumstances.'

'Certainly hard to see what explanation they could give, if they did do it,' said the airman. '"Look here, old boy, we've shot these fellows of yours by accident" . . . Of course, it may turn out the Germans did it after all. They're perfectly capable of it.'

Everyone agreed that fact was undeniable.

'There's quite a chance the Germans did,' said the curate-schoolmaster hopefully.

'In any case,' said Widmerpool, 'whatever materializes, even if it does transpire—which I sincerely trust it will not—that the Russians behaved in such a very regrettable manner, how can this country possibly raise official objection, in the interests of a few thousand Polish exiles, who, however worthy their cause, cannot properly handle their diplomatic relations, even with fellow Slavs. It must be confessed also that the Poles themselves are in a position to offer only a very modest contribution, when it comes to the question of manpower. How, as I say, can we approach our second most powerful Ally about something which, if a fact, cannot be put right, and is almost certainly, from what one knows of them, the consequence of administrative inadequacy, rather than wilful indifference to human life and the dictates of compassion? What we have to do is not to waste time and energy in considering the relative injustices war brings in its train, but to make sure we are going to win it.'

By this time the Belgian file had been found and handed over to me. The others, having settled to their own satisfaction the issues of the Russo-Polish difference, were now talking of luncheon. Tompsitt had begun telling the curate-schoolmaster about some scandal in diplomatic circles when he had been *en poste* in Caracas.

'Going through the park, Michael?' Widmerpool asked the sailor. 'We might set off together if you can be seen walking with a Pongo.'

The sailor had an appointment in the other direction. I wondered whether in the access of self-abasement that seemed to have overcome him, Widmerpool would make a similar suggestion to the airman, referring to himself as a 'brown job'. However, he required instead my own company. Tompsitt came to the climax of the anecdote which made his colleague suck in his thin lips appreciatively.

'Of course he's a Vichy man now,' said Tompsitt.

'Do French diplomats have mistresses?'

'The Italians are worse,' said Tompsitt pontifically.

'Now then, you two, keep off the girls,' said Widmerpool gaily. 'Come on, Nicholas.'

'I've got to take these papers back.'

'You can cut through the Horse Guards.'

We ascended to ground level and set off through St James's Park. The water had been drained from the lake to decrease identification from the air, leaving large dejected basins of clay-like soil. There were no ducks.

'Rather ridiculous the way those two were talking about women,' said Widmerpool. 'You'd hardly believe how unsophisticated some of these Civil Servants are on such subjects, even senior ones, the Foreign Office as much as any, in spite of thinking so much of themselves. They like to behave as if they are a lot of duke's nephews who've got there by aristocratic influence, whereas they're simply a collection of perfectly ordinary middle-class examinees with rather less manners than most. "The Italians are worse"! Did you ever hear such a remark? I've known Tompy for a very long time, and he's not a bad fellow, but lives in a very constricted social sphere.'

'Who was the other?'

'Some fellow from MEW,' said Widmerpool. 'No real experience of the world.'

There was something to be said for Widmerpool's views, though there had been a time when he had argued the other way. This contempt for those uninstructed in moral licence was new too. It was the sort of subject he was inclined to avoid. His own sex life had always been rather a mystery. There was nothing so very unusual about that. Most people's sex life is a mystery, especially that of individuals who seem to make most parade of it. Such is the conclusion one finally arrives at. All the same, Widmerpool's had more than once shown himself an exceptional mixture of vehemence and ineptitude; the business of Gypsy Jones, for example, in his early days; then the disastrous engagement to Mrs Haycock or his romantic love for Barbara Goring. Few subjects are more fascinating than other people's sexual habits from the outside; the tangled strands of appetite, tenderness, convenience or some hope of gain. In the light of what he had been saying, a direct question could sound not unreasonably inquisitive.

'How do you organize that side of your own life these days?'

I did not feel absolutely at ease making this unconcealed attempt to satisfy curiosity, but, in supposing Widmerpool might be embarrassed, evasive or annoyed, I was wholly wrong. The enquiry delighted him. He clapped me on the back.

'Plenty of pretty little bits in the black-out.'

'Tarts?'

'Of course.'

The solution was the same as Borrit's. I remembered now that Widmerpool had commented favourably, years before, when I told him my own rooms in Shepherd Market were flanked by a large block of flats housing prostitutes. At the time, I had supposed that remark bombast on his part. Now, such a diagnosis seemed less positive. Perhaps, anyway in the course of the years, his remark, 'How convenient', had acquired a certain authenticity. One wondered what cumbersome burden of desire, satisfied or unsatisfied, possibly charged in its fulfilment with some elaborate order of ritual, Widmerpool carried round with him.

'I suppose you have to be rather careful.'

It was a lame comment, which Widmerpool treated with the contempt it deserved.

'I am careful,' he said. 'Is there anything about my life that would lead you to suppose I should not be careful? I believe in thinking things out. Arranging my life, but arranging it in such a way that I do not fall into a groove. By the way, there is a probability I shall go red in the near future.'

'Go red?'

I had not the least idea what he meant. It seemed possible he might have returned to the subject of sexual habits, planning something in that line embarrassing even to himself.

'Become a full colonel.'

He snapped the words out. Failure to recognize a colloquialism had irritated him. The phrase was peculiar to himself. Usually people spoke of a 'red hat' or 'taking flannel'.

'Only a tanner a day more in pay,' he said, recovering his good humour, 'but it's the real jump in rank.'

It was no doubt specifically to inform me of this imminent promotion that he must have come out of the way across the Horse Guards Parade, I thought. By now we had nearly reached the arch leading into Whitehall. He suddenly lost his high spirits, sinking all at once to the depths of gloom, as I had known him do before, one of those changes of mood that would overcome him without warning.

'You never know about promotion till it's in the bag,' he said. 'There are occupational risks where I work. There are anywhere where you may find yourself in the CIGS's entourage.'

'Why him specially?'

'He's quite ruthless, if he doesn't like the look of you. The other day he said, "I don't want to see that officer again. I don't like his face". Perfectly good man, but they had to get rid of him.'

Widmerpool spoke with infinite dejection. I saw what he meant. Given the CIGS was easily irritated by the faces of staff-officers, Widmerpool's, where survival was in question, was a bad bet, rather than a good one.

'No use worrying,' he said. 'After all, I was not affected by all the trouble Liddament made.'

'His Corps seem to have done well in the desert.'

'No doubt Liddament has his points as a commander in the field. Unfortunately, I was blind to them when serving on the staff of his Division. Tell me—talking of those days made me think of Farebrother—had you left the Poles at the time of the Szymanski scandal?'

'Yes.'

'You heard Farebrother was largely responsible?'

'That was being said.'

'He's been unstuck in consequence. Not without some action on my part.'

'I didn't know you were involved.'

'I made it my business to be involved. Strictly between ourselves, the whole disgraceful affair was not unconnected with Prince Theodoric whom we saw at that musical performance the other night.'

'Where does Theodoric come in?'

'That is naturally secret, but I don't mind telling you that the Prince is bringing a lot of pressure to bear one way and another.'

'You mean from the Resistance point of view.'

'I hold my own views on that subject,' said Widmerpool. 'I hear that young woman in red, whose name I asked, is said to be Theodoric's mistress.'

'That's the gossip.'

'I have little or no time for social life, but one keeps an eye on these things.'

A full colonel, wearing the red tabs with which Widmerpool himself hoped soon to be equipped, came out of a door under the arch and turned into Whitehall. Widmerpool pointed after him and laughed.

'Did you see who that was?' he asked. 'I really strolled with you across here, out of my way, in case we might catch sight of him.'

'Was it Hogbourne-Johnson?'

'Relegated to the Training branch, where, if he's not kicked out from there too, he will remain until the end of the war. The man who thought he was going to get a Division. Do you remember when he was so abominably rude to me?'

'That balls-up about traffic circuits?'

'It won't be long now before I'm his equal in rank. I may find an opportunity to tell him some home truths, should our paths cross, though that's unlikely enough. It's only on the rarest occasions like today that I'm out of my office—and, after all, Hogbourne-Johnson's a very unimportant cog in the machine.'

He nodded and began to move off. I saluted—the uniform, as one was always told, rather than the man—and took the Belgian documents back to our room.

3

ONE DAY, SEVERAL WEEKS AFTER the Allied Forces had landed in Normandy, I was returning over Westminster Bridge on foot from transacting some minor item of Czechoslovak army business with a ministry housed on the south bank of the river in the former Donners-Brebner Building. It was lovely weather. Even the most pessimistic had begun to concede that the war, on the whole, had taken a turn for the better. Some supposed this might mean the end of raids. Others believed the Germans had a trick or two up their sleeve. Although it was London Bridge to which the poem referred, rather than Westminster, the place from which I had just come, the dark waters of the Thames below, the beauty of the day, brought to mind the lines about Stetson and the ships at Mylae, how death had undone so many. Donners-Brebner—where Howard Craggs, recently knighted, now reigned over one of the branches—had been badly knocked about in the early days of the blitz. The full extent of the damage was not visible, because the main entrance, where Barnby's frescoes had once been, was heaped with sandbags, access by a side door. Barnby was no longer available to repaint his frescoes. Death had undone him. It looked as if death might have undone Stringham too. At Donners-Brebner he had put me off for dinner because he was going to Peggy Stepney's parents. Peggy's second husband had been undone too. She was married to Jimmy Klein now, said to have always loved her. These musings were interrupted by a tall officer falling into step with me. It was Sunny Farebrother.

'Hullo, Nicholas. I hope my dear old Finn is not still cross with me about Szymanski?'

'There may still be some disgruntlement, sir.'

'Disgruntlement', one was told, was a word that could be used of all ranks without loss of discipline. As I heard myself utter it, I became immediately aware of the manner in which Farebrother, by some effort of the will, made those with whom he dealt as devious as himself. It was not the first time I had noticed that characteristic in him. The reply, the term, was in truth hopelessly inadequate to express Finn's rage about the whole Szymanski affair.

'Finn's a hard man,' said Farebrother. 'Nobody I admire more. There is not an officer in the entire British army I admire more than Lieutenant-Colonel Lysander Finn, VC.'

'Lysander?'

'Certainly.'

'We never knew.'

'He keeps it quiet.'

Farebrother smiled, not displeased at finding this piece of information so unexpected.

'Who shall blame him?' he said. 'It's modesty, not shame. He thinks the name might sound pretentious in the winner of a VC. Finn's as brave as a lion, as straight as a die, but as hard as nails—especially where he thinks his own honour is concerned.'

Farebrother said the last words in what Pennistone called his religious voice.

'You weren't yourself affected by the Szymanski matter, Nicholas?'

'I'd left the Poles by then.'

'You're no longer in Finn's Section?'

Farebrother made no attempt to conceal his own interest in any change that might take place in employment or status of those known to him, in case these might in some manner, even if unforeseen, react advantageously to himself.

'Ah,' he said. 'The Belgians and Czechs. I should like to have a talk with you one of these days about those two Allies, but not now. You don't know how sorry I am that poor old Finn was inconvenienced in that way. I hate it when friends think you've let them down. I remember a Frenchman in the last war whom I'd promised to put in for a British decoration that never came through. No use regretting these things, I suppose, but I'm made that way. We all have to do our duty as we see it, Nicholas. Each one of us has to learn that and it's sometimes a hard lesson. In the case of Szymanski, I was made to suffer for being too keen. Disciplined, demoted in rank, shunted off to a bloody awful job. Tell Finn that. Perhaps he will forgive me when he hears I was made to pay for my action. You know who went out of his way to bring this trouble about—our old friend Kenneth Widmerpool.'

'But you've left that job now?'

'In Civil Affairs, with my old rank and a good chance of promotion.'

The Civil Affairs branch, formed to deal with administration of areas occupied by our enemies, had sprung into being about a year before. In it were already collected together a rich variety of specimens of army life. Farebrother would ornament the collection. Pennistone compared Civil Affairs with 'the head to which all the ends of the world are come, and the eyelids are a little weary.'

'That just describes it,' Pennistone said. '"No crude symbolism disturbs the effect of Civil Affairs' subdued and graceful mystery".'

Among others to find his way into this branch was Dicky Umfraville, who had thereby managed to disengage himself from the transit camp he had been commanding. I asked if Farebrother had any dealings with Umfraville, whom I had not seen for some little time. Farebrother nodded. He looked over his shoulder, as if he feared agents were tracking us at that very moment and might overhear his words.

'You know Kenneth pretty well?'

'Yes.'

'Umfraville was talking to one of our people who'd been in Cairo when Kenneth flew out there for a day or two, as member of a high-level conference secretariat. Do you know what happened? Something you'd never guess. He managed to make a fool of himself about some girl employed in a secret outfit there.'

'In what way?'

'Took her out or something. She was absolutely notorious, it seems.'

'What happened?'

'Don't let's talk about it,' said Farebrother. 'If there's one thing I hate, it's a woman who lowers herself in that sort of way. I'm afraid there are quite a few of them about in wartime.'

We had by now turned into Whitehall. Farebrother suddenly raised his arm in a stiff salute. I did the same, taking my time from him, though not immediately conscious of whom we were both saluting. Then I quickly apprehended that Farebrother was paying tribute to the Cenotaph, which we were at that moment passing. The preoccupations of wartime often resulted in this formality—always rather an uncomfortable and precarious one—being allowed to pass unobserved. It was a typical mark of Farebrother's innate regard for ceremoniousness in all its aspects that he brought out his salute as if on a parade ground march-past. However, at that moment, another—and certainly discordant—circumstance clouded the scene. Just as Farebrother had been the first to see and pay homage to the Cenotaph, he was undoubtedly the first of us also to appreciate the necessity of taking another decision, a quick one, in a similar field. This resolve also had important implications, though of a very different sort. The situation was posed by a couple walking briskly towards us from the direction of Trafalgar Square: a middle-aged civilian—almost certainly a Civil Servant of high standing—wearing a very old hat on the back of his head, beside him an officer in a full colonel's red capband and tabs. Even at this distance the tabs could be seen to be imposed on one of the new 'utility' uniforms, service-dress tunics skimped at the pockets and elsewhere to save cloth. These innovations always gave the wearer, even if a thin man, the air of being too large for his clothes, and this officer, stoutish with spectacles, was bursting from them. I noticed the uniform before appreciating that here was Widmerpool 'gone red'.

'In life—'

Farebrother had just begun to speak. He broke off suddenly. The way in which he did this, obviously abandoning giving expression to some basic rule of human conduct, made me sure, reflecting on the incident afterwards, that he had seen Widmerpool first. There can also be no doubt that he was as ignorant as myself of his old enemy's promotion. That must have been gazetted subsequent to the Cairo tour of duty. For a split second I had time to wonder whether Farebrother would accord Widmerpool as smart an acknowledgment of rank—after all, it was 'the uniform', even if only a 'utility' one—as he had rendered the Cenotaph. It should be explained perhaps that, although in theory majors and upwards had some claim to a salute from those of junior rank, in practice the only officers saluted by other officers in the street were those who wore red. I was therefore once more preparing to take my time from Farebrother, when he suddenly seized my arm. We were just passing 'the Fortress', Combined Operations Headquarters, then more or less underground, after the war covered by a building of many storeys. At first I thought he wanted to draw my attention to something happening on the other side of the road.

'Nicholas?'

'Sir?'

'A moment ago I was telling you I don't like to see a woman making herself cheap. Women's lives should be beautiful, an inspiration. I thought of that the other night. I was taken to a film called *The Song of Bernadette*. Have you seen it?'

'No, sir.'

He looked at me fixedly. He had put on his holy face, as was to be expected from the subject of the movie, and spoke the words in an equally appropriate tone.

'It's about Lourdes.'

I repeated that I had not seen the film.

'You should, Nicholas. I don't often get out in the evenings, much too much to do, but I think that night did me good. Made me a better man.'

I could not imagine what all this was leading up to.

'You really think I ought to make an effort to go, sir?'

Farebrother did not answer. Instead, he gave another of his quick glances over the shoulder. For a moment I remained at a loss to know why *The Song of Bernadette* had so much impressed him that he felt a sudden need to speak of the film so dramatically. Then all at once I grasped that the menace of saluting Widmerpool no longer hung over us. Farebrother, with all his self-control in such matters, all the years he had schooled himself to accept the ways of those set in authority over him, had for one reason or another been unable to face that bitterness in my presence. Inner disciplines, respect for tradition, taste for formality, had none of them been sufficient. The incident showed

Farebrother, too, had human weaknesses. Now, he seemed totally to have forgotten about Bernadette. We walked along in silence. Perhaps he was pondering the saintly life. We reached the gates of the Horse Guards. Farebrother paused. His gay blue eyes became a little sad. 'Do your best to make your Colonel forgive me, Nicholas. You can tell him—without serious breach of security—that Szymanski's already done a first-rate job in one quarter and likely to do as good a one in another. Do you ever see Prince Theodoric in these days? In my present job I no longer have grand contacts like that.'

I told him I had not seen Theodoric since *The Bartered Bride*. We went our separate ways.

That night in bed, reading *Remembrance of Things Past*, I thought again of Theodoric, on account of a passage describing the Princesse de Guermantes' party:

'The Ottoman Ambassadress, now bent on demonstrating to me not only her familiarity with the Royalties present, some of whom I knew our hostess had invited out of sheer kindness of heart and would never have been at home to them if the Prince of Wales or the Queen of Spain were in her drawing-room the afternoon they called, but also her mastery of current appointments under consideration at the Quai d'Orsay or Rue Dominique, disregarding my wish to cut short our conversation—additionally so because I saw Professer E—— once more bearing down on us and feared the Ambassadress, whose complexion conveyed unmistakable signs of a recent bout of varicella, might be one of his patients—drew my attention to a young man wearing a cypripedin (the flower Bloch liked to call 'sandal of foam-borne Aphrodite') in the buttonhole of his dress coat, whose swarthy appearance required only an astrakhan cap and silver-hilted yataghan to complete evident affinities with the Balkan peninsula. This Apollo of the hospodars was talking vigorously to the Grand Duke Vladimir, who had moved away from the propinquity of the fountain and whose features now showed traces of uneasiness because he thought this distant relative, Prince Odoacer, for that was who I knew the young man of the orchid to be, sought his backing in connexion with a certain secret alliance predicted in Eastern Europe, material to the interests of Prince Odoacer's country no less than the Muscovite Empire; support which the Grand Duke might be unwilling to afford, either on account of his kinsman having compromised himself financially, through a childish ignorance of the Bourse, in connexion with a speculation involving Panama Canal shares (making things no better by offering to dispose 'on the quiet' of a hunting scene by Wouwerman destined as a birthday present for his mistress), from which he had to be extracted by the good offices of that same Baron Manasch with whom Swann had once fought a duel; or, even more unjustly, because the Grand Duke had heard a rumour of the unfortunate reputation the young Prince had incurred for himself by the innocent employment as valet of a notorious youth whom I had more than once seen visiting Jupien's shop, and, as I learnt much later, was known among his fellow inverts as La Gioconda. "I'm told Gogo—Prince Odoacer—has Dreyfusard leanings!" said the Ambassadress, assuming my ignorance of the Prince's nickname as well as his openly expressed political sympathies, the momentary cruelty of her smile hinting at Janissary blood flowing in her veins. "Albeit a matter that does not concern a foreigner like myself," she went on, "yet, if true that the name of Colonel de Froberville, whom I see standing over there, has been put forward as military attaché designate to the French Legation of Prince Odoacer's country, the fact of such inclinations in one of its Royal House should be made known as soon as possible to any French officer likely to fill the post."'

This description of Prince Odoacer was of special interest because he was a relation—possibly great-uncle—of Theodoric's. I thought about the party for a time, whether there had really been a Turkish Ambassadress, whom Proust found a great bore; then, like the Narrator himself in his childhood days, fell asleep early. This state, left undisturbed by the Warning, was brought to an end by rising hubbub outside. A very noisy attack had started up. Some residents, especially those inhabiting the upper storeys, preferred to descend to the ground floor or basement on these occasions. Rather from lethargy than any indifference to danger, I used in general to remain in my flat during raids, feeling that one's nerve, certainly less steady than at an earlier stage of the war, was unlikely to be improved by exchanging conversational banalities with neighbours equally on edge.

From first beginnings, this particular raid made an unusually obnoxious din and continued to do so. While bombs and flak exploded at the present rate there was little hope of dropping off to sleep again. I lay in the dark, trying to will them to go home, one way, not often an effective one, of passing the time during raids. My interior counter-attack was not successful. An hour went by; then another; and another. So far from decreasing, the noise grew greater in volume. There was a suggestion of more or less regular bursts of detonation launched from the skies, orchestrated against the familiar rise and fall of gunfire. It must have been about two or three in the morning, when, rather illogically, I decided to go downstairs. A move in that direction at least offered something to do. Besides, I could feel myself growing increasingly jumpy. The ground floor at this hour was at worst likely to provide, if nothing else, a certain anthropological interest. The occasion was one for the merest essentials of uniform, pockets filled with stuff from which one did not want to be separated, should damage occur in the room while away. I took a helmet as a matter of principle.

On one of the walls of the lift, incised with a sharp instrument (similar to that used years before to outline the caricature of Widmerpool in the *cabinet* at La Grenadière), someone quite recently—perhaps that very night—had etched at eye-level, in lower case letters suggesting an E. E. Cummings poem, a brief cogent observation about the manageress, one likely to prove ineradicable as long as the lift itself remained in existence, for no paint could have obscured it:

old bitch wartstone

Quite a few people were below, strolling about talking, or sitting on the benches of the hall. No doubt others were in the basement, a region into which I had never penetrated, where there was said to be some sort of 'shelter'. This crowd was in a perpetual state of change: some, like myself, deciding they needed a spell out of bed; others, too tired or bored to stay longer chatting in the hall, retiring to the basement or simply returning to their own flats. Clanwaert, smoking a cigarette, his hands in the pockets of a rather smart green silk dressing-gown, was present. Living on the ground floor anyway, he had not bothered to dress.

'This raid seems to be going on a long time.'

'Of course it is, my friend. We are getting the famous Secret Weapon we have heard so much about.'

'You think so?'

'Not a doubt of it. We knew it was coming in Eaton Square. Had you not been informed in Whitehall? The interesting thing will be to see how this fine Secret Weapon really turns out.'

It looked as if Clanwaert were right. He began to talk of the Congo army and the difficulties they had encountered in the Sudanese desert. After a while the subject exhausted itself.

'Is there any point in not going back to bed?'

'Hard to say. It may quiet down. I am in any case a bad sleeper. One becomes accustomed to doing without sleep, if one lives a long time in the tropics.'

He put out his cigarette and went to the front door to see how things were looking in the street. A girl with a helmet set sideways on her head, this headdress assumed for decorative effect rather than as a safety measure, came past. She wore an overcoat over trousers in the manner of Gypsy Jones and Audrey Maclintick. It was Pamela Flitton.

'Hullo.'

She looked angry, as if suspecting an attempted pick-up, then recognized me.

'Hullo.'

She did not smile.

'What a row.'

'Isn't it.'

'Seen anything of Norah?'

'Norah and I haven't been speaking for ages. She's too touchy. That's one of the things wrong with Norah.'

'Still doing your secret job?'

'I've just come back from Cairo.'

'By boat?'

'I got flown back.'

'You were lucky to get an air passage.'

'I travelled on a general's luggage.'

A youngish officer, in uniform but with unbuttoned tunic, came into the hall from the passage leading to the ground floor flats. He was small, powerfully built, with hair growing in regular waves of curls, like Jeavons's, though fair in colour.

'We seem to be out of fags,' he said to Pamela.

'Oh, Christ.'

He turned to me. I registered a crown on his shoulder, MC and bar above the pocket.

'Haven't got a cigarette by any chance, pal?' he said. 'We've smoked our last—why, Nicholas? I'll be buggered. Caught you trying to pick up Pam. What cheek. How are you, old boy. Marvellous to meet again.'

'Pamela and I know each other already. She used to drive me in her ATS days, not to mention my practically attending her christening.'

'So you live in this dump, too, and suffer from old Wartstone? If I wasn't leaving the place at any moment, I'd carve up that woman with a Commando knife in a way that would make Jack the Ripper look like the vicar cutting sandwiches for a school treat.'

I was not specially pleased to see Odo Stevens, whose conduct, personal and official, could not be approved for a variety of reasons, whatever distinction he might have earned in the field. At the same time, there was small point in attempting to take a high moral line, either about his affair with Priscilla or the part he had played over Szymanski. Priscilla and Chips Lovell were dead: Szymanski too, for all one knew by this time. Besides, to be pompous about such matters was even in a sense to play into the hands of Stevens, to give opportunity for him to justify himself in one of those emotional displays that are always part of the stock-in-trade of persons of his particular sort. With characteristic perspicuity, he guessed at once what was going through my mind. His look changed. It was immediately clear he was going to bring up the subject of Priscilla.

'It was simply awful,' he said. 'What happened after we last met. That bomb on the Madrid killing her husband—then the other where she was staying. I even thought of writing to you. Then I got mixed up with a lot of special duties.'

He had quite changed his tone of voice from the moment before, at the same time assuming an expression reminiscent of Farebrother's 'religious face', the same serious pained contraction of the features. I was determined to endure for as short a time as possible only what was absolutely unavoidable in the exhibition of self-confessed remorse Stevens was obviously proposing to mount for my benefit. He had been, I recalled, unnecessarily public in his carryings-on with Priscilla, had corroded what turned out to be Chips's last year alive. That might be no very particular business of mine, but I had liked Chips, therefore preferred the circumstances should remain unresurrected. That was the long and the short of it.

'Don't let's talk about it. What's the good?'

Stevens was not to be silenced so easily.

'She meant so much to me,' he said.

'Who did?' asked Pamela.

'Someone who was killed in an air-raid.'

He put considerable emotion into his voice when he said that. Perhaps Priscilla had, indeed, 'meant a lot' to him. I did not care. I saw no reason to be dragged in as a kind of prop to his self-esteem, or masochistic pleasure in lacking it. Besides, I wanted to get on to the Szymanski story.

'You're always telling me I mean more to you than any other girl has,' said Pamela. 'At least you do after a couple of drinks. You've the weakest head of any man I've ever met.'

She spoke in that low almost inaudible mutter employed by her most of the time. There was certainly a touch of Audrey Maclintick about her, at least enough to explain why Stevens and Mrs Maclintick had got on so comparatively well together that night in the Café Royal. On the other hand, this girl was not only much better looking, but also much tougher even than Mrs Maclintick. Pamela Flitton gave the impression of being thoroughly vicious, using the word not so much in the moral sense, but as one might speak of a horse—more specifically, a mare.

'I don't claim the capacity for liquor of some of your Slav friends,' said Stevens laughing.

He sounded fairly well able to stand up to her. This seemed a suitable moment to change the subject.

'You were in the news locally not so long ago—where I work, I mean—about one Szymanski.'

'Don't tell me you're with the Poles, Nicholas?'

'I'd left them by the time you got up to your tricks.'

Pamela showed interest at the name Szymanski.

'I sent you a message,' she said. 'Did you get it?'

When she smiled and spoke directly like that, it was possible to guess at some of her powers should she decide to make a victim of a man.

'I got it.'

'Then you were in on the party?' asked Stevens.

'I saw some of the repercussions.'

'God,' he said. 'That was a lark.'

'Not for those engaged in normal liaison duties.'

One's loyalties vary. At that moment I felt wholly on the side of law and order, if only to get some of my own back for his line of talk about the Lovells.

'Oh, bugger normal liaison duties. Even you must admit the operation was beautifully executed. Look here . . .'

He took my arm, and, leaving Pamela sitting sullenly by herself on a bench, walked me away to a deserted corner of the hall. When we reached there, he lowered his voice.

'I'm due for a job in the near future not entirely unconnected with Szymanski himself.'

'Housebreaking?'

Stevens yelled with laughter.

'That'll be the least of our crimes, I'd imagine,' he said. 'That is, the least of his—which might easily not stop at manslaughter, I should guess. Actually, we're doing quite different jobs, but more or less in the same place.'

'Presumably it's a secret where you're conducting these activities.'

'My present situation is being on twenty-four hour call to Cairo. I'll release something to you, as an old pal, in addition to that. The plot's not unconnected with one of Pam's conquests. Rather a grand one.'

'You remind me of the man who used to introduce his wife as *ancienne maîtresse de Lord Byron*.'

'This is classier than a lord—besides Pam and I aren't married yet.'

'You don't have to spell the name out.'

I was not impressed by Stevens's regard for 'security', always a risk in the hands of the vain. All the same, not much damage would be done by my knowing that at last some sort of assistance was to be given to the Resistance in Prince Theodoric's country; and that Stevens and Szymanski were involved. That was certainly interesting.

'I'll be playing for the village boys,' he said. 'Rather than the team the squire is fielding.'

'A tricky situation, I should imagine.'

'You bet.'

'I saw Sunny Farebrother yesterday, who took the rap in the Szymanski business.'

'Cunning old bugger. They pushed him off to a training centre for a bit, but I bet he's back on something good.'

'He thinks so. Was Szymanski a boy-friend of Pamela's?'

I thought I had a right to ask that question after the way Stevens had talked. For once he seemed a shade put out.

'Who can tell?' he said. 'Even if there's still a Szymanski. They may have infiltrated him already and he may have been picked up. I hope not. The great thing is he knows the country like the back of his hand. What are you doing yourself, old boy?'

The change of mood, sudden fear for Szymanski—and by implication for himself—was characteristic. I told him about my job, also explaining how I knew Pamela.

'Won't she be cross if we leave her much longer?'

'She's cross all the time. Bloody cross. Chronic state. Thrives on it. Her chief charm. Makes her wonderful in bed. That is, if you like temper.'

Emphasis expressed as to the high degree of sexual pleasure to be derived from a given person is, for one reason or another, always to be accepted with a certain amount of suspicion, so far as the speaker is concerned, especially if referring to a current situation. Stevens sounded as if he might be bolstering himself up in making the last statement.

'She's the hell of a girl,' he said.

I wondered whether he had run across Pamela with Szymanski in the first instance. In any case, people like that gravitate towards each other at all times, almost more in war than in peace, since war—though perhaps in a more limited sense than might be supposed—offers obvious opportunities for certain sorts of adventure. Stevens, whose self-satisfaction had if anything increased, seemed to have no illusions about Pamela's temperament. He accepted that she was a woman whose sexual disposition was vested in rage and perversity. In fact, if he were to be believed, those were the very qualities he had set out to find. We returned to where she was sitting.

'Where the hell have you two been?'

She spoke through her teeth. There was still a lot of noise going on outside. We all three sat on the bench together. Clanwaert strolled past. He glanced in our direction, slightly inclining his head towards Pamela, who took no perceptible notice of him. He had evidently decided to return to bed and said goodnight to me.

'That was the Belgian officer who gave me your message about Szymanski.'

'Ask him if he's got a cigarette.'

I called after Clanwaert. He turned back and came towards us. I enquired if he had a cigarette for Pamela, saying I believed they had met. He took a case from his dressing-gown pocket and handed it round. Pamela took one, looking away as she did so. Clanwaert showed himself perfectly at ease under this chilly treatment.

'We could have met at the Belgian Institute,' he said. 'Was it with one of our artillery officers—Wauthier or perhaps Ruys?'

'Perhaps it was,' she said. 'Thanks for the smoke.'

Clanwaert smiled and retired.

'One of your *braves Belges*?' asked Stevens. 'Since you've lived here some time, you've probably come across the old girl standing by the door. She's called Mrs Erdleigh. The other evening, I saw her burning something on the roof. I thought she was sending up smoke signals to the enemy—it wasn't yet dark—but it turned out to be just incense, which seems to play some part in her daily life, as she's a witch. We got on rather well. In the end she told my fortune and said I was going to have all sorts of adventures and get a lot of nice presents from women.'

'Not me,' said Pamela. 'You'll have to go elsewhere if you want to be kept.'

Mrs Erdleigh was, indeed, looking out into the street through the glass doors at the other end of the hall. Her age as indeterminate as ever from her outward appearance, she was smiling slightly to herself. This was the first time I had seen her since living in the flats. A helmet was set very squarely on her head and she wore a long coat or robe, a pushteen or similar garment, woolly inside, skin without, the exterior ornamented with scrolls and patterns of oriental design in bright colours. She was carrying a small black box under one arm. Now she set this on the ground and removed the helmet, revealing a coiffure of grey-blue curls that had been pressed down by the weight of the tin hat. These she ruffled with her fingers. Then she took the helmet between her hands, and, as if in deep thought, raised it like a basin or sacrificial vessel, a piece of temple equipment for sacred rites. Her quiet smile suggested she was rather enjoying the raid than otherwise. Nothing much seemed to be happening outside, though the row continued unabated.

'She was mixed up with an uncle of mine—in fact he left her his money, such as it was.'

The bequest had caused great annoyance in the family, almost as much on account of Uncle Giles turning out to own a few thousands, as because of the alienation of the capital sum.

'Must have made it quite lately as the result of some very risky speculation,' my father had said at the time. 'Never thought Giles had a penny to bless himself with.'

'Let's go over and talk to her,' said Stevens. 'She's good value.'

He had that taste, peculiar to certain egotists, to collect together close round him everyone he might happen to know in any given area.

'Oh, God,' said Pamela. 'Need we? I suppose she flattered you.'

'Go on, Nicholas,' he said. 'Ask Mrs Erdleigh to join us, if you know her as well.'

I agreed to do this, more from liking the idea of meeting Mrs Erdleigh again than to please Stevens. As I approached, she herself turned towards me.

'I wondered when you would speak,' she said gently.

'You'd already seen me in the hall?'

'Often in this building. But we must not anticipate our destinies. The meeting had to wait until tonight.'

From the way she spoke, it was to be assumed that she was so far above material contacts that the impetus of our reunion must necessarily come from myself. The magical course of events would no doubt have been damaged had she taken the initiative and addressed me first.

'What a night.'

'I could not sleep,' she said, as if that were a matter for surprise. 'The omens have not been good for some days past, though in general better than for many months. I can see at once from your face that you are well situated. The Centaur is friend to strangers and exiles. His arrow defends them.'

'Come and talk to us. There's a young man called Odo Stevens, who has done rather well as a soldier—been very brave, I mean—and a girl called Pamela Flitton. He says he knows you already.'

'I met your young army friend on the roof when I was engaged in certain required exsufflations. He is under Aries, like your poor uncle, but this young man has the Ram in far, far better aspect, the powerful rays of Mars favouring him rather than the reverse, as they might some—your uncle, for example.'

I told her I had seen the Ufford—where we had first met—now in such changed circumstances. She was not at all interested, continuing to speak of Stevens, who had evidently made an impression on her.

'It is the planet Mars that connects him with that very beautiful young woman,' she said. 'The girl herself is under Scorpio—like that unhappy Miss Wartstone, so persecuted by Saturn—and possesses many of the scorpion's cruellest traits. He told me much about her when we talked on the roof. I fear she loves disaster and death—but he will escape her, although not without an appetite for death himself.'

Mrs Erdleigh smiled again, as if she appreciated, even to some extent approved, this taste for death in both of them.

'Lead me to your friends,' she said. 'I am particularly interested in the girl, whom I have not yet met.'

She picked up the black box, which presumably contained spells and jewellery, carrying the helmet in her other hand. We returned to Stevens and Pamela. They were having words about a bar of chocolate, produced from somewhere and alleged to have been unfairly divided. Stevens jumped up and seized Mrs Erdleigh by the hand. It looked as if he were going to kiss her, but he stopped short of that. Pamela put on the helmet that had been lying beside her on the seat. This was evidently a conscious gesture of hostility.

'This is Miss Flitton,' said Stevens.

Pamela made one of her characteristically discouraging acknowledgments of this introduction. I was curious to see whether Mrs Erdleigh would exercise over her the same calming influence she had once exerted on Mona, Peter Templer's first wife, when they had met. Mona, certainly a far less formidable personality than Pamela, had been in a thoroughly bad mood that day—without the excuse of an air-raid being in progress—yet she had been almost immediately tranquillized by Mrs Erdleigh's restorative mixture of flattery, firmness and occultism. For all one knew, air-raids might positively increase Mrs Erdleigh's powers. She took Pamela's hand. Pamela withdrew it at once.

'I'm going to have a walk outside,' she said. 'See what's happening.'

'Don't be a fool,' said Stevens. 'You're not allowed to wander about during raids, especially one like this.'

'My dear,' said Mrs Erdleigh, 'I well discern in your heart that need for bitter things that knows no assuagement, those yearnings for secrecy and tears that pursue without end, wherever you seek to fly them. No harm will come to you, even on this demonic night, that I can tell you. Nevertheless stay for a minute and talk with me. Death, it is true, surrounds your nativity, even though you yourself are not personally threatened—none of us is tonight.

There are things I would like to ask you. The dark unfathomable lake over which you glide—you are under a watery sign and yet a fixed one—is sometimes dull and stagnant, sometimes, as now, angry and disturbed.'

Pamela was certainly taken aback by this confident approach, so practised, so self-assured, the tone at once sinister and adulatory, but she did not immediately capitulate, as Mona had done. Instead, she temporized.

'How do you know about me?' she asked. 'Know when I was born, I mean.'

She spoke in a voice of great discontent and truculence. Mrs Erdleigh indicated that Stevens had been her informant. Pamela looked more furious than ever.

'What does he know about me?'

'What do most people know about any of their fellows?' said Mrs Erdleigh quietly. 'Little enough. Only those know, who are aware what is to be revealed. He may have betrayed the day of your birth. I do not remember. The rest I can tell from your beautiful face, my dear. You will not mind if I say that your eyes have something in them of the divine serpent that tempted Eve herself.'

It was impossible not to admire the method of attack. Stevens spoiled its delicacy by blundering in.

'Tell Pam's fortune,' he said. 'She'd love it—and you were wonderful with me.'

'Why should I want my fortune told? Haven't I just said I'm going to have a look round outside?'

'Wiser not, my dear,' said Mrs Erdleigh. 'As I said before, my calculations tell me that we are perfectly safe if we remain here, but one cannot always foresee what may happen to those who ride in the face of destiny. Why not let me look at your hand? It will pass the time.'

'If you really want to. I don't expect it's very interesting.'

I think Mrs Erdleigh was not used to being treated in such an ungracious manner. She did not show this in the smallest degree, but what she went on to say later could be attributed to a well controlled sense of pique. Perhaps that was why she insisted that Pamela's hand should be read by her.

'No human life is uninteresting.'

'Have a look then—but there's not much light here.'

'I have my torch.'

Pamela held out her palm. She was perhaps, in fact, more satisfied than the reverse at finding opposition to her objections overruled. It was likely she would derive at least some gratification in the anodyne process. However farouche, she could scarcely be so entirely different from the rest of the world. On the other hand, some instinct may have warned her against Mrs Erdleigh, capable of operating at as disturbing a level as herself. Mrs Erdleigh examined the lines.

'I would prefer the cards,' she said. 'I have them with me in my box, of course, but this place is really too inconvenient . . . As I guessed, the Mount of Venus highly developed . . . and her Girdle . . . You must be careful, my dear . . . There are things here that surprise even me . . . *les tentations lubriques sont bien prononcées* . . . You have found plenty of people to love you . . . but no marriage at present . . . no . . . but perhaps in about a year . . .'

'Who's it going to be?' asked Stevens. 'What sort of chap?'

'Mind your own business,' said Pamela.

'Perhaps it is my business.'

'Why should it be?'

'A man a little older than yourself,' said Mrs Erdleigh. 'A man in a good position.'

'Pamela's mad about the aged,' said Stevens. 'The balder the better.'

'I see this man as a jealous husband,' said Mrs Erdleigh. 'This older man I spoke of . . . but . . . as I said before, my dear, you must take good care . . . You are not always well governed in yourself . . . your palm makes me think of that passage in Desbarrolles, the terrible words of which always haunt my mind when I see their marks in a hand shown to me . . . *la débauche, l'effronterie, la licence, le dévergondage, la coquetterie, la vanité, l'esprit léger, l'inconstance, la paresse* . . . those are some of the things in your nature you must guard against, my dear.'

Whether or not this catalogue of human frailties was produced mainly in revenge for Pamela's earlier petulance was hard to know. Perhaps not at all. Mrs Erdleigh was probably speaking no more than the truth, voicing an analysis that did not require much occult skill to arrive at. In any case, she never minded what she said to anyone. Whatever her intention, the words had an immediate effect on Pamela herself, who snatched her hand away with a burst of furious laughter. It was the first time I had heard her laugh.

'That's enough to get on with,' she said. 'Now I'm going for my walk.'

She made a move towards the door. Stevens caught her arm.

'I say you're not going.'

She pulled herself away. There was an instant's pause while they faced each other. Then she brought up her arm and gave him a backhand slap in the face, quite a hard one, using the knuckles.

'You don't think I'm going to take orders from a heel like you, do you?' she said. 'You're pathetic as a lover. No good at all. You ought to see a doctor.'

She walked quickly through the glass door of the entrance hall, and, making the concession of putting on her helmet once more, disappeared into the street. Stevens, knocked out for a second or two by the strength of the blow, made no effort to follow. He rubbed his face, but did not seem particularly surprised nor put out by this violence of treatment. Probably he was used to assaults from Pamela. Possibly such incidents were even fairly normal in his relationships with women. There was, indeed, some slight parallel to the moment when Priscilla had suddenly left him in the Café Royal, though events of that night, in some manner telepathically connecting those concerned, had been enough to upset the nerves of everyone present. We might be in the middle of a raid that never seemed to end, but at least personal contacts were less uncomfortable than on the earlier occasion. Mrs Erdleigh, too, accepted with remarkable composure the scene that had just taken place.

'Little bitch,' said Stevens. 'Not the first time she has done that. Nothing I like less than being socked on the jaw. I thought she'd like to have her fortune told.'

He rubbed his face. Mrs Erdleigh smiled one of her slow, sweet, mysterious smiles.

'You do not understand enough her type's love of secrecy, her own unwillingness to give herself.'

'I understand her unwillingness to give herself,' said Stevens. 'I've got hold of that one OK. In fact I'm quite an expert on the subject.'

'To allow me to look longer at her palm would have been to betray too much,' said Mrs Erdleigh. 'I offered to make a reading only because you pressed me. I was not surprised by this result. All the same, you are right not to be unduly disturbed by her behaviour. In that way you show your own candour and courage. She will come to no harm. In any case, I do not see the two of you much longer together.'

'Neither do I, if there are many more of these straight lefts.'

'Besides, you are going overseas.'

'Soon?'

'Very soon.'

'Shall I see things through?'

'There will be danger, but you will survive.'

'What about her. Will she start up with any more Royalties? Perhaps a king this time.'

He said this so seriously that I laughed. Mrs Erdleigh, on the other hand, accepted the question gravely.

'I saw a crown not far away,' she said. 'Her fate lies along a strange road but not a royal one—whatever incident the crown revealed was very brief—but still it is the road of power.'

She picked up her black box again.

'You're going back to your room?'

'As I said before, no danger threatens tonight, but I thoughtlessly allowed myself to run out of a little remedy I have long used against sleeplessness.'

She held out her hand. I took it. Mention of 'little remedies' called to mind Dr Trelawney. I asked if she ever saw him. She made a mysterious sign with her hand.

'He passed over not long after your uncle. Being well instructed in such enlightenments, he knew his own time was appointed—in war conditions some of his innermost needs had become hard to satisfy—so he was ready. Quite ready.'

'Where did he die?'

'There is no death in Nature'—she looked at me with her great misty eyes and I remembered Dr Trelawney himself using much the same words—'only transition, blending, synthesis, mutation. He has re-entered the Vortex of Becoming.'

'I see.'

'But to answer your question in merely terrestrial terms, he re-embarked on his new journey from the little hotel where we last met.'

'And Albert—does he still manage the Bellevue?'

'He too has gone forth in his cerements. His wife, so I hear, married again—a Pole invalided from the army. They keep a boarding-house together in Weston-super-Mare.'

'Any last words of advice, Mrs Erdleigh?' asked Stevens.

He treated her as if he were consulting the Oracle at Delphi.

'Let the palimpsest of your mind absorb the words of Eliphas Lévi—to know, to will, to dare, to be silent.'

'Me, too?' I asked.

'Everyone.'

'The last most of all?'

'Some think so.'

She glided away towards the lift, which seemed hardly needed, with its earthly and mechanical paraphernalia, to bear her up to the higher levels.

'I'm going to kip too,' said Stevens. 'No good wandering all over London on a night like this looking for Pam. She might be anywhere. She usually comes back all right after a tiff like this. Cheers her up. Well, I may or may not see you again, Nicholas. Never know when one may croak at this game.'

'Good luck—and to Szymanski too, if you see him.'

The raid went on, but I managed to get some sleep before morning. When I woke up, it still continued, though in a more desultory manner. This was, indeed, the advent of the Secret Weapon, the inauguration of the V.1's—the so-called 'flying bombs'. They came over at intervals of about twenty minutes or half an hour, all that day and the following night. This attack continued until Monday, a weekend that happened to be my fortnightly leave; spent, as it turned out, on their direct line of route across the Channel on the way to London.

'You see, my friend, I was right,' said Clanwaert.

One of the consequences of the Normandy landings was that the Free French forces became, in due course, merged into their nation's regular army. The British mission formerly in liaison with them was disbanded, a French military attaché in direct contact with Finn's Section coming into being. Accordingly, an additional major was allotted to our establishment, a rank to which I was now promoted, sustaining (with a couple of captains to help) French, Belgians, Czechs and Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. As the course of the war improved, work on the whole increased rather than diminished, so much so that I was unwillingly forced to refuse the offer of two Italian officers, sent over to make certain arrangements, whose problems, among others, included one set of regulations that forbade them in Great Britain to wear uniform; another that forbade them to wear civilian clothes. All routine work with the French was transacted with Kernével, first seen laughing with Masham about *les voies hiérarchiques*, just before my first interview with Finn.

'They're sending a *général de brigade* from North Africa to take charge,' said Finn. 'A cavalryman called Philidor.'

Since time immemorial, Kernével, a Breton, like so many of the Free French, had worked at the military attaché's office in London as chief clerk. By now he was a captain. At the moment of the fall of France, faced with the alternative of returning to his country or joining the Free French, he had at once decided to remain, his serial number in that organization—if not, like Abou Ben Adhem's, leading all the rest—being very respectably high in order of acceptance. It was tempting to look for characteristics of my old Regiment in these specimens of Romano-Celtic stock emigrated to Gaul under pressure from Teutons, Scandinavians and non-Roman Celts.

'I don't think my mother could speak a word of French,' said Kernével. 'My father could—he spoke very good French—but I myself learnt the language as I learnt English.'

Under a severe, even priestly exterior, Kernével concealed a persuasive taste for conviviality—on the rare occasions when anything of the sort was to be enjoyed. From their earliest beginnings, the Free French possessed an advantage over the other Allies—and ourselves—of an issue of Algerian wine retailed at their canteens at a shilling a bottle. Everyone else, if lucky enough to find a bottle of Algerian, or any other wine, in a shop, had to pay nearly ten times that amount. So rare was wine, they were glad to give that, when available. This benefaction to the Free French, most acceptable to those in liaison with them, who sometimes lunched or dined at their messes, was no doubt owed to some figure in the higher echelons of our own army administration—almost certainly learned in an adventure story about the Foreign Legion—that French troops could only function on wine. In point of fact, so far as alcohol went, the Free French did not at all mind functioning on spirits, or drinks like *Cap Corse*, relatively exotic in England, of which they consumed a good deal. Their Headquarter mess in Pimlico was decorated with an enormous fresco, the subject of which I always forgot to enquire. Perhaps it was a Free French version of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*, brought up to date and depicting themselves as survivors from the wreck of German invasion.

They did not reject, as we sometimes did ourselves, Marshal Lyautey's doctrine, quoted by Dicky Umfraville, that gaiety was the first essential in an officer, that some sort of light relief was required to get an army through a war. Perhaps, indeed, they too liberally interpreted that doctrine. If so, the red-tape they had to endure must have driven them to it; those terrible *bordereaux*—the very name recalling the Dreyfus case whenever they arrived—labyrinthine and ambiguous enough to extort admiration from a Diplock or even a Blackhead.

'All is fixed for General Philidor's interview?' asked Kernével.

'I shall be on duty myself.'

General Philidor, soon after his arrival in London, had to see a personage of very considerable importance, only a degree or so below the CIGS himself. It had taken a lot of arranging. Philidor was a lively little man with a permanently extinguished cigarette-end attached to his lower lip, which, under the peak of his general's khaki képi, gave his face the fierce intensity of a Paris taxi-driver. His rank was that, in practice, held by the commander of a Division. As a former Giraud officer, he was not necessarily an enthusiastic 'Gaullist'. At our first meeting he had asked me how I liked being in liaison with the French, and, after speaking of the purely military aspects of the work, I had mentioned Algerian wine.

'Believe me, mon commandant, before the '14–'18 war many Frenchmen had never tasted wine.'

'You surprise me, sir.'

'It was conscription, serving in the army, that gave them the habit.'

'It is a good one, sir.'

'My father was a *vigneron*.'

'Burgundy or Bordeaux, sir?'

'At Chinon. You have heard of Rabelais, mon commandant?'

'And drunk Chinon, sir—a faint taste of raspberries and to be served cold.'

'The vineyard was not far from our cavalry school at Saumur, convenient when I was on, as you say, a course there.'

I told him about staying at La Grenadière, how the Leroys had a son instructing at Saumur in those days, but General Philidor did not remember him. It would have been a long shot had he done so. All the same, contacts had been satisfactory, so that by the time he turned up for his interview with the important officer already mentioned, there was no sense of undue formality.

Philidor started in Finn's room, from where I conducted him to a general of highish status—to be regarded, for example, as distinctly pre-eminent to the one in charge of our own Directorate—who was to act as it were as mediator between Philidor and the all but supreme figure. This mediating general was a brusque officer, quickly mounting the rungs of a successful military career and rather given to snapping at his subordinates. After he and Philidor had exchanged conventional army courtesies, all three of us set off down the passage to the great man's room. In the ante-chamber, the Personal Assistant indicated that his master was momentarily engaged. The British general, lacking small talk, drummed his heels awaiting the summons. I myself should remain in the ante-chamber during the interview. There was a few seconds delay. Then a most unfortunate thing happened. The general acting as midwife to the birth of the parley, misinterpreting a too welcoming gesture or change of facial expression on the part of the PA, guardian of the door, who had up to now been holding us in check, motioned General Philidor to follow him, and advanced boldly into the sanctuary. This reckless incursion produced a really alarming result. Somebody—if it were, indeed, a human being—let out a frightful roar. Whoever it was seemed to have lost all control of himself.

'*I thought I told you to wait outside—get out . . .*'

From where our little group stood, it was not possible to peep within, but the volume of sound almost made one doubt human agency. Even the CIGS saying good-morning was nothing to it. This was the howl of an angry animal, consumed with rage or pain, probably a mixture of both. Considered merely as a rebuke, it would have struck an exceptionally peremptory note addressed to a lance-corporal.

'Sorry, sir . . .'

Diminished greatness is always a painful spectacle. The humility expressed in those muttered words, uttered by so relatively exalted an officer, was disturbing to me. General Philidor, on the other hand, seemed to feel more detachment. Appreciative, like most Frenchmen, of situations to be associated with light comedy—not to say farce—he fixed me with his sharp little eyes, allowing them to glint slightly, though neither of us prejudiced the frontiers of discipline and rank by the smallest modification of expression. However, entirely to avoid all danger of doing any such thing, I was forced to look away.

This incident provoked reflections later on the whole question of senior officers, their relations with each other and with those of subordinate rank. There could be no doubt, so I was finally forced to decide, that the longer one dealt with them, the more one developed the habit of treating generals like members of the opposite sex; specifically, like ladies no longer young, who therefore deserve extra courtesy and attention; indeed, whose every whim must be given thought. This was particularly applicable if one were out in the open with a general.

'Come on, sir, *you* have the last sandwich,' one would say, or 'Sit on my mackintosh, sir, the grass is quite wet.'

Perhaps the cumulative effect of such treatment helped to account for the highly strung temperament so many generals developed. They needed constant looking after. I remembered despising Cocksidge, a horrible little captain at the Divisional Headquarters on which I had served, for behaving so obsequiously to his superiors in rank. In the end, it had to be admitted one was almost equally deferential, though one hoped less slavish.

'They're like a lot of ballerinas,' agreed Pennistone. 'Ballerinas in Borneo, because their behaviour, even as ballerinas, is quite remote from everyday life.'

Meanwhile the V.1's continued to arrive sporadically, their launchers making a habit of sending three of them across Chelsea between seven and eight in the morning, usually a few minutes before one had decided to get up. They would roar towards the flats—so it always sounded—then switch off a second or two before you expected them to pass the window. One would roll over in bed and face the wall, in case the window came in at the explosion. In point of fact it never did. This would happen perhaps two or three times a week. Kucherman described himself as taking cover in just the same way.

'Nevertheless,' he said, 'I must insist that things are taking a very interesting turn from the news in this morning's papers.'

'Insist' was a favourite word of Kucherman's. He used it without the absolute imperative the verb usually implied in English. He was referring to what afterwards became known as the Officers' Plot, the action of the group of German generals and others who had unsuccessfully attempted to assassinate Hitler. They had failed, but even the fact that they had tried was encouraging.

'Colonel von Stauffenberg sounds a brave man.'

'I have met him several times,' said Kucherman.

'The right ideas?'

'I should insist, certainly. We last talked at a shooting party in the Pripet marshes. Prince Theodoric was also staying in the house, as it happened. Our Polish host is now buried in a communal grave not so many miles north of our sport. The Prince is an exile whose chance of getting back to his own country looks very remote. I sit in Eaton Square wondering what is happening to my business affairs.'

'You think Prince Theodoric's situation is hopeless?'

'Your people will have to make a decision soon between his Resistance elements and the Partisans.'

'And we'll come down on the side of the Partisans?'

'That's what it looks increasingly like.'

'Not too pleasant an affair.'

'There's going to be a lot of unpleasantness before we've finished,' said Kucherman. 'Perhaps in my own country too.'

When we had done our business Kucherman came to the top of the stairs. The news had made him restless. Although quiet in manner, he gave the impression at the same time of having bottled up inside him immense reserves of nervous energy. It was, in any case, impossible not to feel excitement about the way events were moving.

'This caving in of the German military caste—that is the significant thing. An attempt to assassinate the Head of the State on the part of a military group is a serious matter in any country—but in Germany how unthinkable. After all, the German army, its officer corps, is almost a family affair.'

Kucherman listened to this conventional enough summary of the situation, then suddenly became very serious.

'That's something you always exaggerate over here,' he said.

'What, Germans and the army? Surely there must be four or five hundred families, the members of which, whatever their individual potentialities, can only adopt the army as a career? Anyway that was true before the Treaty of Versailles. Where they might be successful, say at the Law or in business, they became soldiers. There was no question of the German army not getting the pick. At least that is what one was always told.'

Kucherman remained grave.

'I don't mean what you say isn't true of the Germans,' he said. 'Of course it is—anyway up to a point, even in the last twenty years. What you underestimate is the same element in your own country.'

'Not to any comparable degree.'

Kucherman remained obdurate.

'I speak of something I have thought about and noticed,' he said. 'Your fathers were in the War Office too.'

For the moment—such are the pitfalls of an alien language and alien typifications, however familiar, for Kucherman spoke English and knew England well—it seemed he could only be facetious. I laughed, assuming he was teasing. He had not done so before, but so much optimism in the air may have made him feel a joke was required. He could scarcely be ignorant that nowhere—least of all within the professional army—was the phrase 'War Office' one for anything but raillery. Perhaps he had indeed known that and disregarded the fact, because a joke was certainly not intended. Kucherman was a man to make up his own mind. He did not take his ideas second-hand. Possibly, thinking it over that night on Fire Duty, there was even something to be said for his theory; only our incurable national levity making the remark at that moment sound satirical. A grain of truth, not necessarily derogatory, was to be traced in the opinion.

Fire Duty was something that came round at regular intervals. It meant hanging about the building all night, fully dressed, prepared to go on the roof, if the Warning sounded, with the object of extinguishing incendiary bombs that might fall there. These were said to be easily dealt with by use of sand and an instrument like a garden hoe, both of which were provided as equipment. On previous occasions, up to now, no raid had occurred, the hours passing not too unpleasantly with a book. Feeling I needed a change from the seventeenth century and Proust, I had brought Saltykov-Schredin's *The Golovlyov Family* to read. A more trivial choice would have been humiliating, because Corporal Curtis turned out to be the accompanying NCO that night, and had *Adam Bede* under his arm. We made whatever mutual arrangements were required, then retired to our respective off-duty locations.

Towards midnight I was examining a collection of photographs taken on D-Day, which had not long before this replaced the two Isbister-like oil paintings. Why the pictures had been removed after being allowed to hang throughout the earlier years of the blitz was not apparent. Mime, now a captain, had just hurried past with his telegrams, when the Warning sounded. I found my way to the roof at the same moment as Corporal Curtis.

'I understand, sir, that we ascend into one of the cupolas as an action station.'

'We do.'

'I thought I had better await your arrival and instructions, sir.'

'Tell me the plot of *Adam Bede* as far as you've got. I've never read it.'

Like the muezzin going on duty, we climbed up a steep gangway of iron leading into one of the pepperpot domes constructed at each corner of the building. The particular dome allotted to us, the one nearest the river, was on the far side from that above our own room. The inside was on two floors, rather like an eccentric writer's den for undisturbed work. Curtis and I proceeded to the upper level. These Edwardian belvederes, elaborately pillared and corniced like Temples of Love in a rococo garden, were not in themselves of exceptional beauty, and, when first erected, must have seemed obscure in functional purpose. Now, however, the architect's design showed prophetic aptitude. The exigencies of war had transformed them into true gazebos, not, as it turned out, frequented to observe the 'pleasing prospects' with which such rotundas and follies were commonly associated, but at least to view their antithesis, 'horridly gothick' aspects of the heavens, lit up by fire and rent with thunder.

This extension of purpose was given effect a minute or two later. The moonlit night, now the melancholy strain of the sirens had died away, was surprisingly quiet. All Ack-Ack guns had been sent to the coast, for there was no point in shooting down V.1's over built-up areas. They would come down anyway. Around lay the darkened city, a few solid masses, like the Donners-Brebner Building, recognisable on the far side of the twisting strip of water. Then three rapidly moving lights appeared in the southern sky, two more or less side by side, the third following a short way behind, as if lacking acceleration or will power to keep up. They travelled with that curious shuddering jerky movement characteristic of such bodies, a style of locomotion that seemed to suggest the engine was not working properly, might break down at any moment, which indeed it would. This impression that something was badly wrong with the internal machinery was increased by a shower of sparks emitted from the tail. A more exciting possibility was that dragons were flying through the air in a fabulous tale, and climbing into the turret with Curtis had been done in a dream. The raucous buzz could now be plainly heard. In imagination one smelt brimstone.

'They appear to be heading a few degrees to our right, sir,' said Curtis.

The first two cut-out. It was almost simultaneous. The noisy ticking of the third continued briefly, then also stopped abruptly. This interval between cutting-out and exploding always seemed interminable. At last it came; again two almost at once, the third a few seconds later. All three swooped to the ground, their flaming tails pointing upwards, certainly dragons now, darting earthward to consume their prey of maidens chained to rocks.

'Southwark, do you think?'

'Lambeth, sir—having regard to the incurvations of the river.'

'Sweet Thames run softly . . .'

'I was thinking the same, sir.'

'I'm afraid they've caught it, whichever it was.'

'I'm afraid so, sir.'

The All Clear sounded. We climbed down the iron gangway.

'Do you think that will be all for tonight?'

'I hope so, sir. Just to carry the story on from where we were when we were interrupted: Hetty is then convicted of the murder of her child and transported.'

The rest of the tour of duty was quiet. I read *The Golovlyov Family* and thought what a pity Judushka had not lived at a later period to become a commissar. A month later the Allies entered Paris. George Tolland remained too ill to be moved from Cairo.

4

In due course v.1's went out of fashion, and V.2's, a form of rocket, became the mode. They were apt to come over in the middle of the morning. Finn was talking to me one day about the transference of Luxembourg personnel from the Belgian artillery (where they manned a battery) to the newly raised army of the Grand Duchy (envisaged with a ceiling of three battalions), when his voice was completely drowned. The dull roar blotting out his comments had been preceded by an agonized trembling of the surrounding atmosphere, the window seeming about to cave in, but recovering itself. I just managed not to jump. Finn appeared totally unimpressed by the sound, whether from strength of nerves or deafness was uncertain. He repeated what he had to say without the smallest modification of tone, signed the minute and put down his pen.

'We've been ordered to take the Allied military attachés overseas,' he said. 'Show 'em a few things. Bound to cause trouble, but there it is. Dempster will be in charge while I'm away. David will probably take the Neutrals when their turn comes, so I shall want you to act as an additional Conducting Officer, Nicholas. Just cast your eye over these papers. It's going to be rather a scramble at such short notice.'

He talked about arrangements. I picked up the instructions and was about to go. Finn drummed on the table with his pen.

'By the way,' he said, 'I've made it up with Farebrother. He's in Civil Affairs now and he came in yesterday about some matter he thought might concern us. Of course, he's a fellow of great charm, whatever else one thinks. Told me he was going to get married—a general's widow in MI 5. "Won't be able to conceal anything from her!" he said.'

Finn laughed, as if he thought retribution would now claim Farebrother for any sins committed against law and order in connexion with the Szymanski affair.

'Not a Mrs Conyers?'

'That's her name. Very capable lady, I understand. Don't know whether marriage is a good idea at the age Farebrother's reached, but that's his business. Get to work right away on the details of the tour.'

When the day came, the military attachés assembled outside the staff entrance. We did not move off precisely on time, because General Lebedev was a minute or two late. While we waited, another of those quaverings of the air round about took place, that series of intensely rapid atmospheric tremors, followed by a dull boom. This one seemed to have landed somewhere in the direction of the Strand. The military attachés exchanged polite smiles. Van der Voort made a popping sound with finger and mouth. At that very moment Lebedev appeared at the end of the short street, giving the impression that he had just been physically ejected from a rocket-base on to a pin-pointed target just round the corner from where we stood, a method of arrival deliberately chosen by his superiors to emphasize Soviet technical achievement. He was, in truth, less than a couple of minutes behind time, most of the rest having arrived much too early. Possibly the high-collared blue uniform, with breeches, black top-boots and spurs, had taken longer to adjust than the battledress adopted for the occasion by most of the others. Major Prasad, representative of an independent state in the Indian sub-continent, also wore boots, brown ones without spurs. They were better cut than Lebedev's, as were also his breeches, but that was only noticeable later, as Lebedev wore an overcoat. He was greeted with a shower of salutes, the formality of Bobrowski's courteously ironical.

Finn was suffering that morning from one of his visitations of administrative anxiety. He counted the party three times before we entered the cars. I opened one of the doors for General Philidor.

'You accompany us to France, Jenkins—*pour les vacances?*'

'I do, sir.'

'You will find a charming country. I lived there some years ago and was very satisfied.'

He was right about *les vacances*. Undoubtedly the buoyancy of a holiday outing was in the air. Only the V.2 had implied a call to order, a reminder that war was not yet done with. We took the Great West Road, passing the illuminated sign of the diving lady, where I had first kissed Jean Duport years before. I idly wondered what had happened to her, if she were involved in the war; what had happened to Duport, too, whether he had managed to 'sweat it out', the words he had used, in South America.

Although there might be a sense of exhilaration in our party, a crowd of officers unconnected by unit, brought together for some exceptional purpose, always tends to evoke a certain tension. The military attachés were no exception, even if on the whole more at ease than the average collection of British officers might prove in similar circumstances. This comparative serenity was, of course, largely due to the nature of the appointment, the fact that they were individuals handpicked for a job that required flexibility of manner. This was no doubt assisted by a tradition of Continental military etiquette in many respects at variance with our own. Officers of most other armies—so one got the impression—though they might be more formal with each other, were taught to be less verbally crisp, less surly, according to how you chose to assess the social bearing of our own officer corps. I had myself been more than once present at inter-Allied military conferences when the manners of our own people left much to be desired—been, in short, abominable by continental standards—probably more on account of inexperience in dealing with foreign elements than from deliberate rudeness; still less any desire to appear unfriendly—as was apt to be supposed by the foreign officer concerned—for 'political' or 'diplomatic' reasons. However, if individual British officers could at times show themselves unpolished or ill-at-ease with their Allies, other sides of the picture were to be borne in mind. We put up with quite a lot from the Allies too, though usually in the official rather than the personal field.

By the time we entered the Dakota that was to ferry us across the Channel, heavy banter, some of it capable of giving offence among a lot of mixed nationalities, began to take the place of that earlier formality. This change from normal was probably due to nerves being on edge. There was reason for that. It was, indeed, an occasion to stir the least imaginative among those whose country had been involved in the war since the beginning, while he himself, all or most of the time, had been confined in an island awaiting invasion. Such badinage, in fluent but foreign English, was at that moment chiefly on the subject of the imaginary hazards of the flight, some of the party—especially those like Colonel Hlava, with years of flying experience and rows of decorations for bravery in the air—behaving as if they had never entered a plane before. Possibly a hulk like this was indeed a cause for disquiet, if you were used to piloting yourself through the clouds in an equipage of the first order of excellence and modernity. We went up the gangway. Colonel Ramos, the newly appointed Brazilian, swallowed a handful of pills as soon as he reached the top. This precaution was noticed by Van der Voort, whose round florid clean-shaven face looked more than ever as if it peered out of a Jan Steen canvas. Van der Voort was in his most boisterous form, seeming to belong to some anachronistic genre picture, *Boors at an Airport* or *The Airfield Kermesse*, executed by one of the lesser Netherlands masters. He clapped Ramos on the back.

'Been having a night out, Colonel?' he asked.

Ramos, in spectacles with a woollen scarf round his neck, looked a mild academic figure in spite of his military cap. He was obviously not at all well. The sudden impact of London wartime food—as well it might—had radically disordered his stomach. He had explained his case to me as soon as he arrived that morning, indicating this by gesture rather than words, his English being limited. I promised the aid of such medicaments as I carried, when we could get to them.

'I believe you've been having a party with the girls, Colonel Ramos,' said Van der Voort. 'Staying up too late. Isn't that true, old man?'

Ramos having, as already stated, no great command of the language, understood only that some enquiry, more or less kind, had been made about his health. He delighted Van der Voort by nodding his head vigorously in affirmation.

'You're new to London, but, my God, you haven't taken long to make your way about,' Van der Voort went on. 'How do you find it? Do you like the place?'

'Very good, very good,' said Colonel Ramos.

'Where have you been so far? Burlington Gardens? Have you seen the ladies there? Smeets and I always take a look on the way back from lunch. You ought to recce Burlington Gardens, Colonel.'

'Yes, yes.'

Colonel Ramos nodded and smiled, laughing almost as much as Van der Voort himself. By this time we were all sitting on the floor of the plane, which was without any sort of interior furnishing. Finn and I had placed ourselves a little way from the rest, because he wanted to run through the programme again. Colonel Chu, who greatly enjoyed all forms of teasing, edged himself across to Ramos and Van der Voort, evidently wanting to join in. He was not in general very popular with his colleagues.

'Like all his race, he's dreadfully conceited,' Kucherman had said. '*Vaniteux*—you never saw anything like them. I have been there more than once and insist they are the vainest people on earth.'

Chu was certainly pleased with himself. He began to finger the scarf Ramos was wearing. The Brazilian, for a man who looked as if he might vomit at any moment, took the broad witticisms of the other two in very good part. He probably understood very little of what was said. Watching the three of them, one saw what Chu had meant by saying he could 'make himself young'. Probably he would have fitted in very tolerably as a boy at Eton, had we been able to persuade the school authorities to accept him for a while. He left his London appointment before the end of the War and returned to China, where he was promoted major-general. About three years later, so I was told, he was killed commanding one of Chiang Kai-Shek's Divisions at Mukden. Chu must have been in his early forties then, no doubt still prepared to pass as a schoolboy. We floated out over a brilliant shining sea.

'They're not to be shown Pluto,' said Finn. 'I bet one and all of them make a bee-line for it. They're as artful as a cartload of monkeys when it comes to breaking the rules.'

Pluto—Pipe Line Under The Ocean, appropriately recalling the Lord of the Underworld—was the system, an ingenious one, by which troops in a state of mobility were supplied with oil.

'Not a hope they won't see Pluto,' repeated Finn gloomily.

That sort of thing sometimes got on his mind. He was still worrying about Pluto when we landed at the army airfield. Once more the military attachés were packed into cars. I was in the last one with Prasad, Al Sharqui and Gauthier de Graef. Kucherman, in his capacity as great industrial magnate, had been recalled to Brussels to confer with the new Government, so Gauthier had come on the tour in his place. The Belgians were heavily burdened with economic problems. They had had no Quisling figure to be taken seriously during the occupation, but their various Resistance movements were, some of them, inclined to be fractious. Gauthier was for taking a firm line with them. Prasad, next door to him, had only come with us owing to his own personal desire to do so. His creed and status at home made it doubtful whether it were permissible for him to take part in an expedition that would inevitably lead to eating in public. I had special instructions to see his requirements in the way of food and accommodation were strictly observed. Al Sharqui, rather shy in this hurly-burly of nationalities and generals, came from one of the Arab states. Like Prasad, he was a major.

'This is like arriving on another planet,' said Gauthier de Graef.

He was right. It was all very strange, incomparably strange. The company one was with certainly did not decrease this sense of fantasy. More personal sensations were harder to define, took time to resolve. I cannot remember whether it was the day we arrived or later that things crystallized. We were bowling along through Normandy and a region of fortified farms. Afterwards, in memory, the apple orchards were all in blossom, like isolated plantations on which snow for some unaccountable reason had fallen, light glinting between the tree trunks. But it was already November. There can have been no blossom. Blossom was a mirage. Autumnal sunshine, thin, hard, penetrating, must have created that scenic illusion, kindling white and silver sparkles in branches and foliage. What you see conditions feeling, not what is. For me the country was in blossom. At any season the dark ancientness of those massive granges, their stone walls loop-holed with arrow-slits, would have been mesmeric enough. Now, their mysterious aspect was rendered even more enigmatic by a surrounding wrack of armoured vehicles in multiform stages of dissolution. This residue was almost always concentrated within a comparatively small area, in fact wherever, a month or two before, an engagement had been fought out. Then would come stretches of quite different country, fields, woodland, streams, to all intents untouched by war.

In one of these secluded pastoral tracts, a Corot landscape of tall poplars and water meadows executed in light greys, greens and blues, an overturned staff-car, wheels in the air, lay sunk in long grass. The camouflaged bodywork was already eaten away by rust, giving an impression of abandonment by that brook decades before. High up in the branches of one of the poplars, positioned like a cunningly contrived scarecrow, the tatters of a field-grey tunic, black-and-white collar patches just discernible, fluttered in the faint breeze and hard cold sunlight. The isolation of the two entities, car and uniform, was complete. There seemed no explanation of why either had come to rest where it was.

At that moment, an old and bearded Frenchman appeared plodding along the road. He was wearing a beret, and, like many of the local population, cloaked in the olive green rubber of a British army anti-gas cape. As our convoy passed, he stopped and waved a greeting. He looked absolutely delighted, like a peasant in a fairy story who has found the treasure. For some reason it was all too much. A gigantic release seemed to have taken place. The surroundings had suddenly become overwhelming. I was briefly in tears. The others were sunk in unguessable reflections of their own; Prasad perhaps among Himalayan peaks; Al Sharqui, the sands of the desert; Gauthier, in Clanwaert's magic realm, the Porte de Louise. We sped on down the empty roads.

'This car is like travelling in a coffee-grinding machine,' said Gauthier.

'Or a cement-mixer.'

The convoy halted at last to allow the military attachés to relieve themselves. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the worst had happened. We had blundered on a kind of junction of Plutonic equipment. Finn must have instantaneously seen that too. He rushed towards the installation, as if unable to contain himself—perhaps no simulation—taking up his stand in such a place that it would have been doubtful manners to pass in front of him. On the way back to the cars he caught me up.

'I don't think they noticed Pluto,' he whispered.

It was late that night when, after inspecting a mass of things, we reached billets. A clock struck twelve as the cars entered the seaside town where these had been arranged. By the time we arrived I had forgotten the name of the place, evidently a resort in peacetime, because we drew up before the doors of a largish hotel. It was moonlight. We got out. Finn conferred with the Conducting Officer from Army Group, who was still with us. Then he turned to me.

'They can't get us all into the Grand.'

'No room at the inn, sir?'

'Not enough mattresses or something, though it looks big enough. So, Nicholas, you'll attend General Asbjørnsen, General Bobrowski, General Philidor and Major Prasad to La Petite Auberge. Everything's been laid on there for the five of you.'

I never knew, then or later, why that particular quartet was chosen to represent the overflow from the Grand. One would have expected four generals—Lebedev, for example, or Cobb, recently promoted brigadier-general—alternatively, four more junior in rank, Gauthier de Graef, Al Sharqui, a couple of lieutenant-colonels. However, that was how it was. One of the cars took the five of us to La Petite Auberge, which turned out to be a little black-and-white half-timbered building, hotel or pension, in Tudor, or, I suppose, François Premier or Henri Quatre style. Only one of the rooms had a bathroom attached, which was captured by General Asbjørnsen, possibly by being the most senior in rank, more probably because he climbed the stairs first. Obviously I was not in competition for the bath myself, so I did not greatly care who took it, nor by what methods. Prasad, like Asbjørnsen, went straight up to his room, but the other two generals and I had a drink in the bar, presided over by the *patronne*, who seemed prepared to serve Allies all night. Bobrowski and Philidor were talking about shooting wild duck. Then Asbjørnsen came down and had a drink too. He started an argument with Bobrowski about the best sort of skiing boots. Philidor and I left them to it. I had already begun to undress, when there was a knock on the door. It was Prasad.

'Major Jenkins . . .'

'Major Prasad?'

He seemed a little embarrassed about something. I hoped it was nothing like damp sheets, a problem that might spread to the rest of us. Prasad was still wearing breeches and boots and his Sam Browne.

'There's a room with a bath,' he said.

'Yes—General Asbjørnsen's.'

Prasad seemed unhappy. There was a long pause.

'I want it,' he said at last.

That blunt statement surprised me.

'I'm afraid General Asbjørnsen got there first.'

I thought it unnecessary to add that baths were not for mere majors like ourselves, especially when there was only one. Majors were lucky enough to be allowed a basin. I saw how easy it might become to describe the hardness of conditions when one had first joined the army. The declaration was also quite unlike Prasad's apparent appreciation of such things.

'But I need it.'

'I agree it would be nice to have one, but he is a general—a lieutenant-general, at that.'

Prasad was again silent for a few seconds. He was certainly embarrassed, though by no means prepared to give up the struggle.

'Can you ask General Asbjørnsen to let me have it, Major Jenkins?'

He spoke rather firmly. This was totally unlike Prasad, so quiet, easy going, outwardly impregnated with British Army 'good form'. I was staggered. Apart from anything else, the request was not a reasonable one. For a major to eject a general from his room in the small hours of the morning was a grotesque conception. It looked as if it might be necessary to embark on an *a priori* disquisition regarding the Rules and Disciplines of War, which certainly laid down that generals had first option where baths were concerned. It was probably Rule One. I indicated that a major—even a military attaché, in a sense representing his own country—could not have a bathroom to himself, if three generals, themselves equally representative, were all of them at least theoretically, in the running. I now saw how lucky I was that neither Bobrowski nor Philidor had shown any sign of considering himself slighted by being allotted a bathless room. In fact Prasad's claim did not merit serious discussion. I tried to put that as tactfully as possible. Prasad listened respectfully. He was not satisfied. I could not understand what had come over him. I changed the ground of argument, abandoning seniority of rank as a reason, pointing out that General Asbjørnsen had won the bath by right of conquest. He had led the way up the stairs, the first man—indeed, the first general—to capture the position. Prasad would not be convinced. There was another long pause. I wondered whether we should stay up all night. Prasad gave the impression of having a secret weapon, a battery he preferred not to unmask unless absolutely necessary. However, it had to come into action at last.

'It's my religion,' he said.

He spoke now apologetically. This was an entirely unexpected aspect.

'Oh, I see.'

I tried to play for time, while I thought up some answer.

'So I must have it,' Prasad said.

He spoke with absolute finality.

'Of course, I appreciate, Major Prasad, that what you have said makes a difference.'

He did not reply. He saw his projectile had landed clean on the target. I was defeated. The case was unanswerable, especially in the light of my instructions. Prasad looked sorry at having been forced to bring matters to this point. He looked more than sorry; terribly upset.

'So can I have the bathroom?'

I buttoned up my battledress blouse again.

'I'll make certain enquiries.'

'I'm sorry to be so much trouble.'

'Wait a moment, Major Prasad.'

By a great piece of good fortune, General Asbjørnsen was still in the bar. He and Bobrowski had not stopped arguing, though the subject had shifted from skiing boots to tactics.

Asbjørnsen was perhaps getting the worst of it, because his expression recalled more than ever the craggy features of Monsieur Ørn, the Norwegian at La Grenadière, who had such a row with Monsieur Lundquist, the Swede, for sending 'sneaks' over the net at tennis. I hoped no similar display of short temper was in the offing.

'Sir?'

General Asbjørnsen gave his attention.

'Major Prasad has asked me if you would possibly consider surrendering to him the room with the bath?'

General Asbjørnsen looked absolutely dumbfounded. He did not show the smallest degree of annoyance, merely stark disbelief that he had rightly grasped the meaning of the question.

'But—I have the bath.'

'I know, sir. That was why I was asking.'

'I am there.'

'That's just it, sir. Major Prasad wants it.'

'He wants it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'The bathroom?'

'Yes, sir.'

'But—the bathroom—it is for me.'

'It's a very special request, sir.'

General Asbjørnsen's face by now showed at least that he accepted the request as a special one. It was only too easy to understand his surprise, the fact that the idea took some time to penetrate. This was not at all on account of any language difficulty. General Asbjørnsen spoke English with the greatest fluency. As the conception began to take shape in his mind that Prasad's designs on the bath were perfectly serious, the earlier look of wonder had changed to one of displeasure. His face hardened. Bobrowski, who loved action, especially if it offered conflict, grasping that a superbly comic tussle was promised, now joined in.

'You are trying to take General Asbjørnsen's bath away from him, Major Jenkins?'

'It's for Major Prasad, sir, he—'

'I don't believe it, Major Jenkins, I believe you want it for yourself.'

Bobrowski had begun to laugh a lot.

'It is the particular wish of Major Prasad, sir—'

'Look here,' said Asbjørnsen, 'I have the bath. I keep it.'

That was the crux of the matter. There was no arguing. I had hoped, without much conviction, to achieve General Asbjørnsen's dislodgment without playing Prasad's trump card. Now this would have to be thrown on the table. It had become clear that much more discussion of this sort, to the accompaniment of Bobrowski's determination to treat the matter as a huge joke, would make Asbjørnsen more intractable than ever.

'It's a question of religion, sir.'

'What?'

'Major Prasad requires the room for religious reasons.'

That silenced them both. The statement, at least for the moment, made even more impression than I had hoped.

'Religion?' repeated Bobrowski.

I wished he would keep out of it. The bathroom was no business of his. By now I was entirely on Prasad's side, dedicated to obtaining the bathroom for whatever purpose he needed it.

'But this is a new idea,' said Bobrowski. 'I had not thought that was how baths are allotted on this tour. I am Catholic, what chance have I?'

'Sir—'

'Now I see why General Philidor went off to bed without even asking for the bathroom. Like many Frenchmen, he is perhaps free-thinker. He would have no chance for the bath. You would not let him, Major Jenkins. No religion—no bath. That is what you say. It is not fair.'

Bobrowski thought it all the funniest thing he had ever heard in his life. He laughed and laughed. Perhaps, in the long run, the conclusion of the matter owed something to this laughter of Bobrowski's, because General Asbjørnsen may have suspected that, if much more argument were carried on in this frivolous atmosphere, there was danger of his being made to look silly himself. Grasp of that fact after so comparatively short an interlude of Bobrowski's intervention did Asbjørnsen credit.

'You can really assure me then, Major Jenkins, that this is, as you have reported, a question of religion.'

'I can assure you of that, sir.'

'You are in no doubt?'

'Absolutely none, sir.'

'In that case, I agree to the proposal.'

General Asbjørnsen almost came to attention.

'Thank you, sir. Thank you very much indeed. Major Prasad will be most grateful. I will inform Colonel Finn when I see him.'

'Come upstairs and help me with my valise.'

The gruffness of General Asbjørnsen's tone was fully justified. I followed him to the disputed room, and was relieved to see the valise on the floor still unpacked. The bathroom door was open. It seemed an apartment designed for the ablutions of a very thin dwarf, one of Mime's kind. However, spatial content was neither here nor there. The point was, Prasad must have it. I took one end of the valise, Asbjørnsen the other. Prasad was peeping through the crack of his door. When informed of the way the battle had gone, he came out into the passage. Asbjørnsen was not ungracious about his renunciation. Prasad expressed a lot of thanks, but was unaware, I think, that the victory, like Waterloo, had been 'a damned close run thing'. General Asbjørnsen and I carried his valise into Prasad's former room. I helped Prasad with his valise too, on his taking over of the bathroom. As soon as Prasad and I were out in the passage, General Asbjørnsen shut his bedroom door rather loudly. He could not be blamed. My own relations with him, even when we returned to England, never fully recovered from that night. For the rest of the tour I speculated on what arcane rites Prasad conducted in that minute bathroom.

Next morning I rose early to check transport for the day's journey. The cars were to assemble at the entrance of the Grand Hotel, then pick up baggage of the party at La Petite Auberge on the route out of town. The Grand's main entrance was on the far side from the sea-front. It faced a fairly large, more or less oval open space, ornamented with plots of grass and flower beds long untended. From here the ground sloped away towards a little redbrick seaside town, flanked by green downs along which villas were spreading. The cars, on parade early, were all 'correct'. Finn was not due to appear for some minutes. Wondering what the place was like in peacetime at the height of the season, I strolled to the side of the hotel facing the 'front'. On this façade, a section of the building—evidently the hotel's dining-room, with half-a-dozen or more high arched windows—had been constructed so that it jutted out on to the esplanade. This promenade, running some feet above the beach, was no doubt closed to wheeled traffic in normal times. Now, it was completely deserted. The hotel, in café-au-lait stucco, with turrets and balconies, was about fifty or sixty years old, built at a time when the seaside was coming seriously into fashion. This small resort had a pleasantly out-of-date air. One pictured the visitors as well-to-do, though not at all smart, only insistent on good food and bourgeois comforts; the whole effect rather smug, though at the same time possessing for some reason or other an indefinable, even haunting attraction. Perhaps that was just because one was abroad again; and, for once, away from people. In the early morning light, the paint on the side walls of the hotel had taken on a pinkish tone, very subtle and delicate, blending gently with that marine vaporousness of atmosphere so enthusiastically endorsed by the Impressionists when they painted this luminous northern shore. It was time to find Finn. I returned to the steps of the main entrance. The large hall within was in semi-darkness, because all the windows had been boarded up. Some of the military attachés were already about, polishing their boots in a kind of cloakroom, where the greatcoats had been left the night before. They seemed to be doing no harm, so I went back to the hall. Finn, carrying his valise on his shoulder, was descending the stairs.

'Good morning, sir.'

'Good morning, Nicholas. Couldn't use the lift over there. No lift boys in wartime. Didn't sleep too well. Kept awake by the noise of the sea. Not used to it.'

I reported the matter of the bath. Finn looked grave. 'Awkward situation, damned awkward. I've always tried to keep out of religious controversy. You handled it well, Nicholas. I'll have a word with Asbjørnsen and thank him. Any of them down yet?'

'Some are cleaning their boots in the lobby through there.'

'Cleaning their boots? My God, I believe they must have found my polish. Which way? I must stop this at once. It will be all used up.'

He rushed off. The fleet of cars got under way soon after this. That day I found myself with Cobb, Lebedev and Marinko, the Jugoslav. The seating was altered as a matter of principle from time to time. I was beside the driver. Lebedev—the name always reminded one of the character in *The Idiot* who was good at explaining the Apocalypse, though otherwise unreliable—rarely spoke; nor did he usually attend more than very briefly—so our Mission working with the Russians reported—the occasional parties given by their Soviet opposite numbers, where drinking bouts attained classical proportions, it was alleged. He was, indeed, commonly held to derive his appointment from civil, rather than military, eminence at home, his bearing and methods—despite the top boots and spurs—lacking, in the last resort, the essential stigmata of the *officier de carrière*.

'I tried to talk to Lebedev the other day about Dostoievski's Grand Inquisitor,' Pennistone said. 'He changed the subject at once to Nekrassov, of whom I've never read a line.'

Cobb was making notes in a little book. Marinko gazed out of the window, overcome with Slav melancholy, or, more specifically—being of the party that supported the Resistance groups of Mihailoviç—dejection at the course British policy appeared to be taking in that connexion.

'Just spell out the name of that place we stopped over last night, Major Jenkins,' said Cobb.

'C-A-B-O-U-R-G, sir.'

As I uttered the last letter, scales fell from my eyes. Everything was transformed. It all came back—like the tea-soaked madeleine itself—in a torrent of memory... Cabourg... We had just driven out of Cabourg... out of Proust's Balbec. Only a few minutes before, I had been standing on the esplanade along which, wearing her polo cap and accompanied by the little band of girls he had supposed the mistresses of professional bicyclists, Albertine had strolled into Marcel's life. Through the high windows of the Grand Hotel's dining-room—conveying to those without the sensation of staring into an aquarium—was to be seen Saint-Loup, at the same table Bloch, mendaciously claiming acquaintance with the Swanns. A little further along the promenade was the Casino, its walls still displaying tattered playbills, just like the one Charlus, wearing his black straw hat, had pretended to examine, after an attempt at long range to assess the Narrator's physical attractions and possibilities. Here Elstir had painted; Prince Odoacer played golf. Where was the little railway line that had carried them all to the Verdurins' villa? Perhaps it ran in another direction to that we were taking; more probably it was no more.

'And the name of the brigadier at the Battle Clearance Group?' asked Cobb. 'The tall one who took us round those captured guns?'

He wrote down the name and closed the notebook.

'You told me, Major Jenkins, that at the beginning of the war you yourself saw a Royal Engineer colonel wearing a double-breasted service-dress tunic. You can assure me of that?'

'I can, sir—and, on making enquiries, was told that cut was permitted by regulations, provided no objection was taken by regimental or higher authority.'

Proustian musings still hung in the air when we came down to the edge of the water. It had been a notable adventure. True, an actual night passed in one of the bedrooms of the Grand Hotel itself—especially, like Finn's, an appropriately sleepless one—might have crowned the magic of the happening. At the same time, a faint sense of disappointment superimposed on an otherwise absorbing inner experience was in its way suitably Proustian too: a reminder of the eternal failure of human life to respond a hundred per cent; to rise to the greatest heights without allowing at the same time some suggestion, however slight, to take shape in indication that things could have been even better.

Now, looking north into the light mist that hung over the waves, it was at first difficult to know what we were regarding. In the foreground lay a kind of inland sea, or rather two huge lagoons, the further enclosed by moles and piers that seemed exterior and afloat; the inner and nearer, with fixed breakwaters formed of concrete blocks, from which, here and there, rose tall chimneys, rows of cranes, drawbridges. The faraway floating docks delimited smaller pools and basins. Within the two large and separate surfaces, islands were dotted about supporting similar structures, the outlines of which extended into the misty distances as far as the horizon. What, one wondered, could this great maritime undertaking be? Was it planned to build a new Venice here on the waters? Perhaps these were docks constructed on an unusually generous scale to serve some great port—yet no large area of warehouses was at hand to suggest commerce, nor other signs of a big town anywhere along the shore. On the contrary, such houses as were to be seen, near or further inland, were in ruins, their extent in any case not at all resembling the outskirts of a city. The roadstead itself was now all but abandoned, at least the small extent of shipping riding at anchor there altogether disproportionate to the potential accommodation of the harbour—for harbour it must certainly be. There was something unreal, ghostly, even a little horrifying, about these grey marine shapes that seemed to have no present purpose, yet, like battlements of a now ruined castle, implied a violent, bloody history.

'*Tiens*,' said General Philidor. '*C'est bien le Mulberry.*'

The Mulberry it was, vast floating harbour designed for invasion, soon to be dismantled and forgotten, like the Colossus of Rhodes or Hanging Gardens of Babylon. We tramped its causeways out over the sea.

'We'll soon be in Brussels,' said Marinko. 'I hope to get some eau-de-cologne. In London it is unobtainable. Not a drop to be had.'

When we drove into the city's main boulevards, their sedate nineteenth-century self-satisfaction, British troops everywhere, made our cortège somewhat resemble Ensor's *Entry of Christ into Brussels*, with soldiers, bands and workers' delegation. One looked about for the Colman's

'Mustart' advertisement spelt wrong, but it was nowhere to be seen. Our billet was a VIP one, a requisitioned hotel presided over by a brisk little cock-sparrow of a captain, who evidently knew his job.

'We had the hell of a party here the other night,' he said. 'A crowd of senior officers as drunk as monkeys, brigadiers rooting the palms out of the pots.'

His words conjured up the scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*, when arm-in-arm the generals dance on Pompey's galley, a sequence of the play that makes it scarcely possible to disbelieve that Shakespeare himself served for at least a period of his life in the army.

'With thy grapes our hairs be crowned?'

'Took some cleaning up after, I can tell you.'

'Talking of cleanliness, would a cake of soap be any use to yourself?'

'Most acceptable.'

'In return, perhaps you could recommend the best place to buy a bottle of brandy?'

'Leave it to me—a couple, if you feel like spending that amount. I understand your people go to Army Group Main HQ tomorrow.'

'That's it—and we've been promised a visit to the Field-Marshal himself the following day.'

At Army Group Main the atmosphere was taut, the swagger—there was a good deal of swagger—a trifle forced; the court, as it were, of a military Trimalchio. Trimalchio, after all, had been an unusually successful business man; for all that is known, might have proved an unusually successful general. A force of junior staff officers with the demeanour of aggressive schoolboys had to be penetrated.

'You can't park those cars there,' one of them shouted at Finn. 'Get 'em out of the way at once and look sharp about it.'

Finn did as he was told. Indoors, the place was even more like a school, one dominated by specialized, possibly rather cranky theories; efficient, all the same, and encouraging the boys to be independently minded, even self-applauding. Perhaps the last epithet was unfair. This, after all, was a staff that had delivered the goods pretty well so far. They had a right to be pleased with themselves. There was an odd incident while the Chief of Staff, a major-general, addressed the assembled military attachés. In the background a telephone rang. It was answered by a curly haired captain, who looked about fifteen. He began to carry on a long conversation at the top of his voice, accompanied by a lot of laughter. It was on the subject of some more or less official matter, though apparently nothing very weighty. I wondered how long this would be allowed to continue. The Chief of Staff looked up once or twice, but stood it for several minutes.

'Shut down that telephone.'

The captain's chatter was brought to an end. The general had spoken curtly, but most senior officers would have shown far less forbearance, especially in the presence of a relatively distinguished visiting party of Allied officers. Clearly things were run in their own particular way at Army Group Headquarters. I looked forward to seeing whether the same atmosphere would prevail at the Field-Marshal's Tactical HQ.

By this time, the Allied advance into Germany had penetrated about a couple of miles across the frontier at its furthest point. Accordingly, we left Belgium and entered that narrow strip of the Netherlands that runs between the two other countries, travelling towards the town of Roermond, still held by the enemy, against which our artillery was now in action. The long straight roads, leading through minefields, advertised at intervals as 'swept to verges', were lined on either side with wooden crates of ammunition stacked high under the poplars. Armour was moving in a leisurely manner across this dull flat country, designed by Nature for a battlefield, over which armies had immemorially campaigned. The identification flash of my old Division had appeared more than once on the shoulder of infantrymen passed on the route. When we stopped to inspect the organization of a bridgehead, I asked the local Conducting Officer from Lines of Communication if he knew whether any of my former Regiment were to be found in the neighbourhood.

'Which brigade?'

I told him.

'We should be in the middle of them here. Of course we may not be near your particular battalion. Like to see if we can find some of them? Your funny-wunnies will be happy for a few minutes, won't they?'

The military attachés would be occupied for half an hour or more with what they were inspecting. In any case, Finn as usual well ahead with time schedule, it would be undesirable to arrive unduly early for the Field-Marshal.

'I'd like to see if any of them are about.'

'Come along then.'

The L. of C. captain led the way down a road lined with small houses. Before we had gone far, sure enough, three or four soldiers wearing the Regimental flash were found engaged on some fatigue, piling stuff on to a truck. They were all very young.

'These look like your chaps—right regiment anyway, it not your actual battalion. You'd better have a word with them.'

I made some enquiries. Opportunity to knock off work was, as usual, welcome. They turned out to be my own Battalion, rather than the other one of the same Regiment within the brigade.

'Is an officer named Kedward still with you.'

'Captain Kedward, sir?'

'That's the one.'

'Oh, yes, the Company Commander, sir?'

'He actually commands your Company?'

'Why, yes, he does, sir. That's him.'

'You're all in Captain Kedward's Company?'

'We are, sir.'

It seemed astonishing to them that I did not know that already. I could not understand this surprise at first, then remembered that I too was wearing the regimental crest and flash, so that they certainly thought that I belonged to the same brigade as themselves, possibly even newly posted to their own unit. Soldiers often do not know all the officers of their battalion by sight. Indeed, it is not uncommon for the Adjutant to be thought of as the Commanding Officer, because he is the one most often heard giving orders.

'Is Captain Kedward likely to be about?'

'He's in the Company Office just now, sir.'

'Near here?'

'Over there, sir, where the swill tubs are.'

'You stay here, sir,' said one of them. 'I'll get Captain Kedward for you.'

Work was now more or less at a standstill. Cigarettes were handed out. It seemed they had arrived fairly recently in this sector. Earlier, the Battalion had been in action in the Caen area, where casualties had been fairly heavy. I asked about some of the individuals I had known, but they were too young to remember any of them. The L. of C. captain became understandably bored listening to all this.

'Now you're back with your long lost unit, I'll leave you to have a natter,' he said. 'Want to check up on some of my own business round the corner. Be with you again in five minutes.'

He went off. At the same moment Kedward, with the young soldier who had offered to fetch him, appeared from the door of a small farmhouse. It was more than four years since I had set eyes on him. He looked a shade older, though not much; that is to say he had lost that earlier appearance of being merely a schoolboy who had dressed up in uniform for fun, burnt-corking his upper lip to simulate a moustache. The moustache now had a perfectly genuine existence. He saluted, seeming to be rather flustered.

'Idwal.'

'Sir?'

He had not recognized me.

'Don't you remember? I'm Nick Jenkins. We were together in Rowland Gwatkin's Company.'

Even that information did not appear to make any immediate impression on Kedward.

'We last saw each other at Castlemallock.'

'The Castlemallock school of Chemical Warfare, sir?'

On the whole, where duty took one, few captains called a major 'sir', unless they were being very regimental. Everyone below the rank of lieutenant-colonel within the official world in which one moved was regarded as doing much the same sort of job, officers below the rank of captain being in any case rare. Responsibilities might vary, sometimes the lower rank carrying the higher responsibility; for example, the CIGS's ADC, a captain no longer young, being in his way a considerable figure. All the same, this unwonted reminder of having a crown on one's shoulder did not surprise me so much as Kedward's total failure to recall me as a human being. The fragile condition of separate identity, perpetually brought home to one, at the same time remains perpetually incredible.

'Don't you remember the moment when you took over the Company from Rowland—how upset he was at getting the push.'

Kedward's face lighted up at that.

'Why, yes,' he said. 'You were with us then, weren't you, sir? I'm beginning to remember now. Didn't you come from London? . . . Was it Lyn Craddock took over the platoon from you? . . . or Phillpots?'

'Are they still with you?'

'Lyn got it at Caen commanding B Company.'

'Killed?'

'Yes, Lyn caught it. Phillpots? What happened to Phillpots? I believe he went to one of the Regular battalions and was wounded in Crete.'

'What became of Rowland Gwatkin?'

'Fancy your knowing Rowland.'

'But I tell you, we were all in the same Company.'

'So we were, but what a long time ago all that was. Rowland living in my home town makes it seem funny you know him.'

'Is he out here?'

'Rowland?'

Kedward laughed aloud at such an idea. It was apparently unthinkable.

'When I last saw him it looked as if he were due for the Infantry Training Centre.'

'Rowland's been out of the army for years.'

'Out of the army?'

'You never heard?'

Having once established the fact that I knew Gwatkin at all, in itself extraordinary enough, Kedward obviously found it equally extraordinary that I had not kept myself up-to-date about Gwatkin's life history.

'Rowland got invalided,' he said. 'That can't have been long after Castlemallock. I know it was all about the time I married.'

'You got married all right?'

'Father of two kids.'

'What sex?'

'Girls—that's what I wanted. Wouldn't mind a boy next.'

'So Rowland never reached the ITC?'

'I believe he got there, now you mention it, sir, then he went sick.'

'Do, for God's sake, stop calling me "sir", Idwal.'

'Sorry—anyway Rowland was ill about that time. Kidneys, was it? Or something to do with his back? Flat feet, it might have been. Whatever it was, they downgraded his medical category, and then he didn't get any better, and got boarded, and had to leave the army altogether.'

'Rowland must have taken that pretty hard.'

'Oh, he did,' said Kedward cheerfully.

'So what's he doing?'

'Back at the Bank. They're terribly shorthanded. Glad to have him there, you may be sure. I believe somebody here said they had a letter that mentioned Rowland was acting manager at one of the smaller branches. That's quite something for Rowland, who wasn't a great banking brain, I can tell you. Just what a lot of trouble he'll be making for everybody, you bet.'

'And his mother-in-law? Is she still living with them? He told me that was going to happen when we said goodbye to each other. Then, on top of his mother-in-law coming to live with them, having to leave the army himself. Rowland's had the hell of a pasting.'

The thought of Gwatkin and his mother-in-law had sometimes haunted me; the memory of his combined horror and resignation in face of this threatened affliction. To have his dreams of military glory totally shattered as well seemed, as so often in what happens to human beings, out of all proportion to what he had deserved, even if these dreams had, in truth, been impracticable for one of his capacity.

'My God, bloody marvellous what you know about Rowland and his troubles,' said Kedward. 'Mother-in-law and all. Have you come to live in the neighbourhood? I thought you worked in London. Did you hear that Elystan-Edwards got a VC here the other day? That was great, wasn't it?'

'I read about it. He came to the Battalion after I left.'

'It was great for the Regiment, wasn't it?' Kedward repeated.

'Great.'

There was a pause.

'Look here, sir—Nick—I'm afraid I won't be able to talk any more now. Got a lot to do. I thought first when they said a major wanted me, I was going to get a rocket from Brigade. I must make those buggers get a move on with their loading too. They been staging a go-slow since we've been here. Look at them.'

We said goodbye. Kedward saluted and crossed to the truck, where the loading operation had certainly become fairly leisurely. The L. of C. captain reappeared. I waved to Kedward. He saluted again.

'Jaw over?'

'Yes.'

Perhaps as a result of Kedward's exhortations, the fatigue party began to sing. The L. of C. captain and I walked up the road in the direction of the cars, leaving them to move eastward towards the urnfields of their Bronze Age home.

'Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream doth flow:
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through:
Strong Deliverer,
Strong Deliverer
Be thou still my strength and shield.'

'What a mournful row,' said the L. of C. captain, 'I've heard them chant that one before. It's a hymn.'

Finn was already rounding up the military attachés when we reached the place where the convoy was parked. In preparation for the visit to the Field-Marshal's Tactical Headquarters, some of our party were already wearing their pullovers in a manner popularized by the Field-Marshal himself—though not generally accepted as correct army turn-out—that is to say showing several inches below the battledress blouse. Among those thus seeking to be in the height of military fashion were Bobrowski and Van der Voort.

'I think I keep mine inside,' said Chu.

There was remarkably little fuss about the approach—no hint of Trimalchio here—security merely kept at its essential minimum. The accommodation for the Headquarters was a medium-sized house, built within the last ten or twelve years, one would guess, dark red brick, set amongst a few trees. The place had little or no character of its own. It might have been a farm, but had none of the farm's picturesque aspects. Possibly the manager of some local industry lived there. The fact was, it seemed prophetically built to house a Tactical Headquarters. By an inner wall stood the Field-Marshal's two long motor-caravans, sleeping apartment and office respectively. Here everything seemed quieter, far less exhibitionistic than at Main.

'Will you line up, please, gentlemen,' said Finn, 'in order of seniority of your appointment.'

The prelude to almost all happenings in the army, small and great, is an inspection. This visit was to be no exception. The military attachés were drawn up in a single row facing the caravans. Colonel Hlava, their doyen, was at one end: Gauthier de Graef, the most junior, at the other; with myself rounding off the party. There was a moment's pause, while we stood at ease. Then the Field-Marshal appeared from one of the caravans. He had his hands in his pockets, but removed them as he approached. It was instantaneously clear that he no longer chose to wear his pullover showing under his battledress blouse. Indeed, he had by now, it was revealed, invented a form of battledress peculiar to himself, neatly tailored and of service-dress material. There was a moment when we were at attention; then at ease again. The last movement was followed by some rapid fidgeting and tucking up of clothes on the part of Bobrowski, Van der Voort and others with too keen a wish to be in the mode. Finn, out in front, was beaming with excitement. This was the sort of occasion he loved. There was a moment's conference. Then the Field-Marshal proceeded down the line, Finn at his side, presenting the military attachés, one by one. The Field-Marshal said a few words to each. It was quite a long time before he reached Gauthier.

'Captain Gauthier de Graef,' said Finn. 'The Belgian assistant military attaché. Major Kucherman himself was prevented from taking part in the tour. He had to attend a meeting of the new Belgian Government, which he may be joining.'

At the word 'Belgian' the Field-Marshal had begun to look very stern.

'You're the Belgians' man, are you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Some of your people are showing signs of giving trouble in Brussels.'

'Yes, sir,' said Gauthier.

He and Kucherman had often talked of difficulties with the Resistance elements. Gauthier knew the problem all right.

'If they do give trouble,' said the Field-Marshal. 'I'll shoot 'em up. Is that clear? Shoot 'em up.'

'Yes, sir,' said Gauthier.

'It is?'

'Quite clear, sir.'

Gauthier de Graef replied with the deep agreement he certainly felt in taking firm measures. He had already complained of his own irritation with those of his countrymen whom he judged inadequately to appreciate their luck in having got rid of the Germans. The Field-Marshal moved on. He fixed his eyes on my cap badge.

'Prince of Wales's Volunteers?'

The slip was a very permissible one. The two crests possessed a distinct similarity in design. I named the Regiment. He showed no animus, as some generals might, at such a disavowal, however unavoidable.

'Any of 'em here?'

'Yes, sir—one of them got a VC a few weeks ago.'

The Field-Marshal considered the point, but made no move to develop it. Finn smiled very briefly to himself, almost invisibly to those who did not know him, either contemplating the eternal satisfaction his own bronze Maltese cross gave him; more probably, in the same connexion, appreciating this opportunity of recalling a rumour that the Field-Marshal was said to be not in the least impressed by the mystique of that particular award; indeed, alleged to declare its possession hinted at an undesirable foolhardiness on the part of the wearer. Finn, from his personal viewpoint, may even have seen my statement as a disciplined, if deserved, call to order, should that rumour have any basis in truth.

'Speak all these languages?'

'Only a little French, sir.'

'Don't speak any of 'em.'

'No, sir.'

He laughed, seeming pleased by that.

'Now I thought we'd all be photographed,' he said. 'Good thing on an occasion like this. I'll sign 'em for you.'

Smiling like the Cheshire Cat, a sergeant holding a small camera, suddenly came into being. There had been no sign of him a moment before. He seemed risen from the ground or dropped from a tree. We broke ranks and formed up again, this time on either side of the Field-Marshal, who took up a convenient position for this in front of one of the caravans. There was rather a scramble to get next to him, in which Chu and Bobrowski achieved flanking places. Van der Voort, elbowed out of the way by Chu, caught my eye and winked. Photography at an end, we were taken over the caravans, a visit personally conducted by the Field-Marshal, whose manner perfectly fused the feelings of a tenant justly proud of a perfectly equipped luxury flat with those of the lord of an ancient though still inhabited historical monument. Two dogs, not unlike General Liddament's, were making themselves very free of the place, charging about and disregarding the Field-Marshal's shouts. When this was over, the military attachés were led to a spot where a large map hung on a kind of easel.

'You'll want me to put you in the picture.'

With unexpectedly delicate movements of the hands, the Field-Marshal began to explain what had been happening. We were in an area, as I have said, immemorially campaigned over. In fact the map was no less than a great slice of history. As the eye travelled northward, it fell on Zutphen, where Sir Philip Sidney had stopped a bullet in that charge against the Albanian cavalry. One wondered why Albanians should be involved in this part of the world at such a time. Presumably they were some auxiliary unit of the Spanish Command, similar to those exotic corps of which one heard rumours in the current war, anti-Soviet Caucasians enrolled in a German formation, American-Japanese fighting with the Allies. The thought of Sidney, a sympathetic figure, distracted attention from the Field-Marshal's talk. One felt him essentially the kind of soldier Vigny had in mind when writing of the man who, like a monk, submitted himself to the military way of life, because he thought it right, rather than because it appealed to him. Available evidence, where Sidney was concerned, pointed to quite other than military preoccupations:

'Within those woods of Arcadie
He chief delight and pleasure took,
And on the mountain Parthenie,
Upon the crystal liquid brook
The Muses met him every day
That taught him sing, to write and say.'

The Field-Marshal continued his exposition with the greatest clarity, but the place-names of the map continued to stimulate daydreams of forgotten conflicts. Maastricht, for example. It took a moment or two to recall the connexion. Then, oddly enough, another *beau monde* poet was in question, though one of a very different sort to Sidney. Was it Rochester? Certainly a Restoration figure. Something about the moulding of a drinking-cup—boy's limbs entwined, a pederast, and making rather a point of it—with deliberations as to what scenes were to be represented on the vessel? The poet, certainly Rochester, expressed in the strongest terms his disapprobation of army life even in art:

'Engrave not battle on his cheek:
With war I've naught to do.
I'm none of those that took Maestrich,
Nor Yarmouth leaguer knew.'

This feeling that war was something to be avoided at all costs for personal reasons was very understandable; more acceptable, indeed, than many of the sometimes rather suspect moral objections put forward. The references, the engagement at Maastricht and 'Yarmouth leaguer' were obscure to me. The latter was presumably a sort of transit camp, the kind of establishment Dicky Umfraville had formerly been in charge of. Then some memory swam to the surface that d'Artagnan's historical prototype had fallen at Maastricht, though details of the particular campaign remained latent. D'Artagnan was, on the whole, rather a non-Vigny figure, anyway on the surface, insomuch as there seemed little or no reason to suppose he was particularly to the fore when it came to disagreeable and unglamorous army jobs. Musing of this sort had reached Marlborough, his taste for being kept by women, remarks made on that subject to Odo Stevens by Pamela Flitton, the connexion between sex and war in this particular aspect, when the Field-Marshal's discourse terminated. By that time the photographs had been developed. They were signed and handed round. Colonel Hlava, as doyen, made a little speech of thanks on behalf of all the military attachés. The Field-Marshal listened gravely. Then he gave a nod of dismissal. Finn and I packed them once more into the cars.

On the way to Brussels we passed a small cart pulled by a muscular-looking dog.

'Once you would have seen that in my country,' said Hlava. 'Now our standards have risen. Dogs no longer work.'

'That one seems positively to like it.'

This particular dog was making a great parade of how well he was accomplishing his task.

'Dogs are so ambitious,' agreed Hlava.

'The Field-Marshal's dogs seemed so. Do you suppose they were pressing for promotion?'

'A great man, I think,' said Hlava.

I tried to reduce to viable terms impressions of this slight, very exterior contact. On the one hand, there had been hardly a trace of the almost overpowering physical impact of the CIGS, that curious electric awareness felt down to the tips of one's fingers of a given presence imparting a sense of stimulation, also the consoling thought that someone of the sort was at the top. On the other hand, the Field-

Marshal's outward personality offered what was perhaps even less usual, will-power, not so much natural, as developed to altogether exceptional lengths. No doubt there had been a generous basic endowment, but of not the essentially magnetic quality. In short, the will here might even be more effective from being less dramatic. It was an immense, wiry, calculated, insistent hardness, rather than a force like champagne bursting from the bottle. Observed in tranquillity, the former combination of qualities was not, within the terms of reference, particularly uplifting or agreeable, except again in the manner their synthesis seemed to offer dependability in utter self-reliance and resilience. One felt that a great deal of time and trouble, even intellectual effort of its own sort, had gone into producing this final result.

The eyes were deepset and icy cold. You thought at once of an animal, though a creature not at all in the stylized manner of the two colonels at my Divisional Headquarters, reminiscent respectively of the dog-faced and bird-faced Egyptian deities. No such artifical formality shaped these features, and to say, for example, they resembled those of a fox or ferret would be to imply a disparagement not at all sought. Did the features, in fact, suggest some mythical beast, say one of those encountered in *Alice in Wonderland*, full of awkward questions and downright statements? This sense, that here was perhaps a personage from an imaginary world, was oddly sustained by the voice. It was essentially an army voice, but precise, controlled, almost mincing, when not uttering some awful warning, as to Gauthier de Graef. There was a faint and faraway reminder of the clergy, too; parsonic, yet not in the least numinous, the tone of the incumbent ruthlessly dedicated to his parish, rather than the hierophant celebrating divine mysteries. At the same time, one guessed this parish priest regarded himself as in a high class of hierophancy too, whatever others might think.

From the very beginnings of his fame, the Field-Marshal had never ignored Chips Lovell's often repeated reminder that it was a tailor's war. The new spruceness that had now taken the place of the conscious informality of ready-to-hand garments appropriate to desert warfare—to the confusion of those military attachés obliged hurriedly to tuck up their pullovers—was clearly conceived at the same time to avoid any resemblance to the buttoned-up army officer of caricature. It lacked too, probably also deliberately, the lounging smartness of which, for example, Dicky Umfraville, or even in his own fashion, Sunny Farebrother, knew the secret. The Field-Marshal's turn-out had to be admitted to fall short of any such elegance. Correct: neat: practical: unpompous: all that to perfection. Elegant, he was not. Why should he be? It was wholly unnecessary, probably a positive handicap in terms of personal propaganda. Besides, will-power exercised unrelentingly over a lifetime—as opposed to its display in brilliant flashes—is apt on the whole to be the enemy of elegance. One only had to think of the Dictators to see that. Few of the Great Captains of history, with the possible exception of Wellington, had shown themselves particularly elegant in victory; though there, of course, one moved into the world of moral elegance, and, in any case, victory was not yet finally attained.

The cock-sparrow captain, major-domo to VIPs, handed over the brandy bottles in a neat parcel when we arrived back at billets.

'A chap from Civil Affairs was asking for you. I told him when your party was expected back. He said he'd look in again.'

'What name?'

'Duport—a captain. He talked about getting you out for a drink.'

I was off duty that night. Although I had never much liked Duport, an evening together, if he were free, would be better than one spent alone. If he were in Civil Affairs, it was possible that his branch had received an official notification of our being in Brussels and he wanted to discuss some Belgian matter. It could hardly be mere friendliness, as we scarcely knew each other. I asked where was a good place to go.

'The big brasserie on the corner's not too bad. You'll find all ranks there, but not many senior officers. If you're like me, and see a lot of them, that's a bit of a holiday. What's the food like in England now? Custard on everything when I was last on leave.'

Duport turned up later. I had not seen him since the Bellevue. His reddish hair receded from the forehead, getting grey by the ears. He looked tired, perceptibly older. Like Pennistone, he carried a General Service lion-and-unicorn in his cap, and had changed into service-dress. Uniform did not suit him. Instead of building him up, it diminished the aggressive energy his civilian appearance had always indicated. This lessening of aggression was also signified by a more subdued manner. The war had undoubtedly quieted Duport down.

'I saw your name as Belgian Liaison Officer in London on some document passed to us,' he said. 'Then found you were personally conducting this flight of swans. We run here parallel in a curious way with Army Group, and there are one or two things that could be straightened out if we had a talk. The usual stuff, Leopold's marriage, the Resistance lads. When do you go back?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Then if we had a talk tonight we could straighten out some points about policy. We're very full of work at the moment, as I expect you are too.'

This was a rather different tone from the Duport of former days. We went to the recommended brasserie, as he had no better suggestion. He seemed to have lost some of his old interest in material things. For a time we talked Belgian affairs. Dupont knew all about Kucherman, but had not met him.

'He's one of the ablest blokes they've got,' he said. 'However let's give the subject a rest now. You were cremating your uncle when we last met.'

'How did you come to join the army? At the Bellevue you were talking of sweating it out in South America, if war came.'

'South America wasn't on. As you know I was on my uppers at that moment. Then I got a chance of going to Egypt for a firm that wanted to wind up one of their branches there. Donners had an interest and managed to get me out. Getting back was another matter. The chance of a commission turned up. I took it. Wanted to get into one of the secret shows, but didn't bring it off. I was in the Censorship for a time. Not much to be recommended. Then I had a bad go of Gyppy tummy—with complications. That was what ultimately brought me back to Europe and the mob I now belong to.'

'You haven't seen anything of Peter Templer, have you? Donners was helping to fix him up too—something in the cloak-and-dagger line—but I haven't heard what came of it.'

Duport finished his glass.

'Peter's had it,' he said.

'Do you mean he's been killed?'

'Gone for a Burton.'

'On a secret operation?'

'Yes.'

'I suppose nobody knows more than that?'

Duport hesitated.

'It never struck me you wouldn't have heard about Peter,' he said. 'There was a lot of talk about it all in Cairo

—not the best security imaginable, but then Cairo is not a place for the best security. There was certainly a lot of talk.'

'What happened?'

'I daresay Peter's still officially described as missing, but everyone in the know is aware he's dead, even though the details vary. One story was he was murdered by his wireless operator for the money he had on him, but I happen to know that isn't true. We'll go to another place for the next round.'

We left the brasserie and found a café. It was less crowded.

'Does Prince Theodoric mean anything to you?' asked Duport.

'He's done business with our Section once or twice, but not recently—and of course not on the secret operations level.'

'You knew Peter was involved in that quarter?'

'More or less.'

'I always have a fellow feeling for the Prince, though we've never met,' said Duport. 'He and I always seem to be screwing the same ladies. Bijou Ardglass, for example, now, poor girl, in the arms of Jesus. Have you heard of a young woman called Pamela Flitton?'

'Volumes.'

'You know she was the main cause of Peter's trouble?'

'I was told that—but people don't go and get killed because a piece like that won't sleep with them.'

'Well, not exactly, I agree,' said Duport. 'It was more Peter felt he was slowing up, as I see it. The point is that it all builds up round Theodoric. As you know the good Prince's realm is internally divided as to how best repel the invader. One lot wants one thing, the other, another. Peter went in with the Prince's gang.'

'Was someone called Odo Stevens mixed up in all this?'

'I thought you said you didn't deal with the cloak-and-dagger boys?'

'Something Stevens said off the record.'

'You know him? Young Stevens was a bit too fond of making statements off the record.'

'I was on a course with him earlier in the war. Then he was mixed up with a girl I knew, now deceased.'

'Odo the Stoat we used to call him. These boys make me feel my age. That's what got Peter down.'

'Is Stevens missing too?'

'Not he. I met him in Cairo after they'd got him out.'

'Why didn't they get Peter out too?'

Duport gave one of his hard unfriendly laughs.

'There are those in Cairo who allege proper arrangements were never made to get Peter out. At least they were planned, but never put into operation. That's what's said. These things happen sometimes, you know. Little inter-departmental differences. Change of policy at the top. There was a man with an unpronouncable name mixed up with it all too. I don't know which side he was on.'

'Szymanski?'

'Why do you ask about things when you know the whole story already? Are you from MI 5? An agent provocateur, just trying to see what you can get out of me, then shop me for bad security? That's what it sounds like.'

'Was Szymanski with Templer or Stevens?'

'So far as I know, on his own. Not sure it was even ourselves who sent him in. Might have been his own people, whoever they were. He went there in the first instance to knock off someone—the head of the Gestapo or a local traitor. I don't know. It was all lined up, then a signal came down from the top—from the Old Man himself, they say—that war wasn't waged in that manner in his opinion. All that trouble for nothing—but I understand they got Szymanski out. A chap in the Cairo racket told me all this.

He was fed up with the way that particular party was run. It came out I'd been Peter's brother-in-law in days gone by, so I suppose he thought, as a former relation, I'd a right to know why he'd kicked the bucket.'

'And you really think Pamela Flitton caused this?'

'I only stuffed her once,' said Duport. 'Against a shed in the back parts of Cairo airport, but even then I could see she might drive you round the bend, if she really decided to. I'll tell you something amusing. You remember that bugger Widmerpool, who'd got me into such a jam about chromite when we last met?'

'He's a full colonel now.'

'He was in Cairo at one moment and took Miss Pamela to a nightclub.'

'Rumours of that even reached England.'

'That girl gets a hold on people,' said Duport. 'Sad about Peter, but there it is. The great thing is he didn't fall into the hands of the Gestapo, as another friend of mine did. Pity you're going back tomorrow. We might have gone to the Opera together.'

'Didn't know music was one of your things.'

'Always liked it. One of the reasons my former wife and I never really hit it off was because Jean only knew *God Save the King* because everyone stood up. I was always sneaking off to concerts. They put on *La Muette de Portici* here to celebrate the liberation. Not very polite to the Dutch, as when it was first performed, the Belgians were so excited by it, they kicked the Hollanders out. I'm not all that keen on Auber myself, as it happens, but I've met a lot of dumb girls, so I've been to hear it several times to remind myself of them.'

This revelation of Duport's musical leanings showed how, as ever, people can always produce something unexpected about themselves. In the opposite direction, Kernével was equally unforeseen, on my return, in the lack of interest he showed in Cabourg and its associations with Proust. He knew the name of the novelist, but it aroused no curiosity whatever.

'Doesn't he always write about society people?' was Kernével's chilly comment.

I told Pennistone about Prasad, Asbjørnsen and the bath.

'Prasad merely turned the taps on at the hour of prayer. It was perfectly right that he should have the bathroom. Finn should have arranged that through you in the first instance.'

'I see.'

'Thank God Finn's back, and I shall no longer have to deal directly with that spotty Brigadier who always wants to alter what is brought to him to sign. I have had to point out on three occasions that his emendations contradict himself in a higher unity.'

A day or two after our return, Kucherman telephoned early. It was a Friday.

'Can you come round here at once?'

'Of course. I thought you were still in Brussels.'

'I flew in last night.'

When I reached Eaton Square, Kucherman, unusual for him, was looking a little worried.

'This question I am going to put is rather important,' he said.

'Yes?'

'My Government has come to a decision about the army of the Resistance. As you know, the problem has posed itself since the expulsion of the Germans.'

'So I understand.'

'Were you told what the Field-Marshal threatened to Gauthier de Graef?'

'I was standing beside him when the words were said.'

'They are good young men, but they require something to do.'

'Naturally.'

'The proposal is that they should be brought to this country.'

That was an unexpected proposition.

'You mean to train?'

'Otherwise we shall have trouble. It is certain. These excellent young men have most of them grown up under German occupation, with no means of expressing their hatred for it—the feeling that for years they have not been able to breathe. They must have an outlet of some sort. They want action. A change of scene will to some extent accomplish that.'

'What sort of numbers?'

'Say thirty thousand.'

'A couple of Divisions?'

'But without the equivalent in weapons and services.'

'When do you want them to come?'

'At once.'

'So we've got to move quickly.'

'That is the point.'

I thought about the interminable procedures required to get a project of this sort under way. Blackhead, like a huge bat, seemed already flapping his wings about Eaton Square, bumping blindly against the windows of the room.

'Arrangements for two Divisions will take some time. Are they already cadred?'

'Sufficiently to bring them across.'

'I'll go straight back to Colonel Finn. We'll get a minute out to be signed by the General and go at once to the highest level. There will be all sorts of problems in addition to the actual physical accommodation of two extra Divisions in this country. The Finance people, for one thing. It will take a week or two to get that side fixed.'

'You think so.'

'I know them.'

'Speed is essential.'

'It's no good pretending we're going to get an answer by Monday.'

'You mean it may take quite a long time?'

'You are familiar with ministerial machinery.'

Kucherman got up from his chair.

'What are we going to do?'

'I thought I'd better say all this.'

'I know it already.'

'It's a fact, I'm afraid.'

'But we must do something. What you say is true, I know. How are we going to get round it? I want to speak frankly. This could be a question of avoiding civil war.'

There was a pause. I knew there was only one way out—to cut the Gordian Knot—but could not immediately see how to attain that. Then, perhaps hypnotized by Kucherman's intense need for an answer, I thought of something.

'You said you knew Sir Magnus Donners.'

'Of course.'

'But you have not seen much of him since you've been over here?'

'I have spoken to him a couple of times at official parties. He was very friendly.'

'Ring him up and say you want to see him at once—this very morning.'

'You think so?'

'Tell him what you've just told me.'

'And then—'

'Sir Magnus can tell the Head Man.'

Kucherman thought for a moment.

'I insist you are right,' he said.

'It's worth trying.'

'This is between ourselves.'

'Of course.'

'Not even Colonel Finn.'

'Least of all.'

'Meanwhile you will start things off in the normal manner through *les voies hiérarchiques*.'

'As soon as I get back.'

'So I will get to work,' said Kucherman. 'I am grateful for the suggestion. The next time we meet, I hope I shall have had a word with Sir Magnus.'

I returned to Finn. He listened to the proposal to bring the Belgian Resistance Army to this country.

'It's pretty urgent?'

'Vital, sir.'

'We'll try and move quickly, but I foresee difficulties. Good notion to train those boys over here. Get out a draft rightaway. Meanwhile I'll consult the Brigadier about the best way of handling the matter. You'd better have a word with Staff Duties. It's not going to be as easy to settle as Kucherman hopes.'

I got out the draft. Finally a tremendous minute was launched on its way that very afternoon. Bureaucratically speaking, grass had not grown under our feet; but this was only a beginning. That weekend was my free one. I told Isobel what I had suggested to Kucherman.

'If the worst comes to the worst we can invoke Matilda.'

Neither of us had seen Matilda since she had married Sir Magnus Donners.

'It's just a long shot.'

On Monday morning a summons came from Finn as soon as he arrived in his room. I went up there.

'This Belgian affair.'

'Yes, sir?'

Finn passed his hand over the smooth ivory surfaces of his skull.

'The most extraordinary thing has happened.'

'Yes, sir?'

'An order has come down from the Highest Level of All to say it is to be treated as top priority. The chaps are to come over the moment their accommodation is decided upon. Things like financial details can be worked out later. All other minor matters too. Tell Blackhead he can talk to the PM about it, if he isn't satisfied.'

'This is splendid, sir.'

Finn put on the face he usually assumed when about to go deaf, but did not do so.

'Providential,' he said. 'Can't understand it. It just shows how the Old Man's got his finger on every pulse. I don't know whether Kucherman did—well, a bit of intriguing. He's a very able fellow, and in the circumstances it would have been almost justified. You will attend a conference on the subject under the DSD at eleven o'clock this morning, all branches concerned being represented.'

The Director of Staff Duties was the general responsible for planning matters. When I next saw Kucherman, we agreed things had gone through with remarkable smoothness. The name of Sir Magnus Donners was not mentioned when we discussed certain administrative details. Thinking over the incident after, it was easy to see how a taste for intrigue, as Finn called it, could develop in people.

5

During the period between the Potsdam Conference and the dropping of the first atomic bomb, I read in the paper one morning that Widmerpool was engaged to Pamela Flitton. This piece of news was undramatically announced in the column dedicated to such items. It was not even top of the list. Pamela was described as daughter of Captain Cosmo Flitton and Mrs Flavia Wisebite; an address in Montana (suggesting a ranch) showed her father as still alive and living in America. Her mother, whose style indicated divorce from Harrison Wisebite (sunk, so far as I knew, without a trace), had come to rest in the country round Glimber, possibly a cottage on the estate. Widmerpool—'Colonel K. G. Widmerpool, OBE'—was based on a block of flats in Victoria Street. Apart from stories already vaguely propagated by Farebrother and Duport, there was no clue to how this engagement had come about. Surprising as it was, the immediate implications seemed no more than that a piece of colossal folly on both their parts would soon be readjusted by another announcement saying the marriage was 'off'. The world was in such a state of flux that such inanities were only to be expected in one quarter or another. Only later, considered in cold blood, did the arrangement appear credible; even then for less than obvious reasons.

'Drove for the Section, did she?' said Pennistone. 'I never remember those girls' faces. I haven't heard anything of Widmerpool for some time. I suppose he's now passed into a world beyond good and evil.'

I had not set eyes on Widmerpool myself since the day Farebrother had recoiled from saluting him in Whitehall. Although, as an archetypal figure, one of those fabulous monsters that haunt the recesses of the individual imagination, he held an immutable place in my own private mythology, with the passing of Stringham and Templer I no longer knew anyone to whom he might present quite the same absorbing spectacle, accordingly with whom the present conjuncture could be at all adequately discussed. By this time, in any case, changes both inside and outside the Section were so many it was hard to keep pace with them. Allied relationships had become more complex with the defeat of the enemy, especially in the comportment of new political régimes that had emerged in formerly occupied countries—Poland's, for example—some of which were making difficulties about such matters as the 'Victory march'; in general the manner in which Peace was to be celebrated in London. In other merely administrative respects the Section's position was becoming less pivotal than formerly, some of the Allies—France, the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia—sending over special military missions. These were naturally less familiar with the routines of liaison than colleagues long worked with, while the new entities, unlike the old ones, were sometimes authorized to deal directly with whatever branch of the Services specially concerned them.

'Not all the fruits of Victory are appetising to the palate,' said Pennistone. 'An issue of gall and wormwood has been laid on.'

By that time he was himself on the point of demobilization. He had dealt with the Poles up to the end. Dempster and others had gone already. The Old Guard, like the soldiers in the song, were fading away, leaving me as final residue, Finn's second-in-command. In a month or two I should also enter that intermediate state of grace, technically 'on leave', through which in due course civilian life was once more attained. Finn, for reasons best known to himself—he could certainly have claimed early release had he so wished—remained on in his old appointment, where there was still plenty of work to do. Other branches round about were, of course, dwindling in the same manner. All sorts of unexpected individuals, barely remembered, or at best remembered only for acrimonious interchanges in the course of doing business with them, would from time to time turn up in our room to say goodbye, hearty or sheepish, according to temperament. Quite often they behaved as if these farewells were addressed to the only friends they had ever known.

'My Dad's taking me away from this school,' said Borrit, when he shook my hand. 'I'm going into his office. He's got some jolly pretty typists.'

'Wish mine would buck up and remove me too.'

'He says the boys don't learn anything here, just get up to nasty tricks,' said Borrit. 'I'm going to have a room to myself, he says. What do you think of that? Hope my secretary looks like that AT with black hair and a white face who once drove us for a week or two, can't remember her name.'

'Going back to the same job?'

'You bet—the old oranges and lemons/bells of St Clement's.'

As always, after making a joke, Borrit began to look sad again.

'We'll have to meet.'

'Course we will.'

'When I want to buy a banana.'

'Anything up to twenty-thousand bunches, say the word and I'll fix a discount.'

'Will Sydney Stebbings be one of your customers now?'

About eighteen months before, Stebbings, suffering another nervous breakdown, had been invalided out of the army. He was presumed to have returned to the retail side of the fruit business. Borrit shook his head.

'Didn't you hear about poor old Syd? Gassed himself. Felt as browned off out of the army as in it. I used to think it was those Latin-Americans got him down, but it was just Syd's moody nature.'

Borrit and I never did manage to meet again. Some years after the war I ran into Slade in Jermyn Street, by the hat shop with the stuffed cat in the window smoking a cigarette. He had a brown paper bag in his hand and said he had been buying cheese. We had a word together. He was teaching languages at a school in the Midlands and by then a headmastership in the offing. I asked if he had any news, among others, of Borrit.

'Borrit died a few months ago,' said Slade. 'Sad. Bad luck too, because he was going to marry a widow with a little money. She'd been the wife of a man in his business.'

I wondered whether on this final confrontation Borrit had brought off the never realized 'free poke', before the grave claimed him. The war drawing to a close must have something to do with this readiness for marriage on the part of those like Borrit, Widmerpool, Farebrother, no longer in their first youth. These were only a few of them among the dozens who had never tried it before, or tried it without much success. Norah Tolland spoke with great disapproval of Pamela Flitton's engagement.

'Pam must need a Father-Figure,' she said. 'I think it's a tragic mistake. Like Titania and Bottom.'

Not long before the Victory Service, announced to take place at St Paul's, Prasad's Embassy gave a party on their

National Day. It was a bigger affair than usual on account of the advent of Peace, primarily a civilian gathering, though a strong military element was included among the guests. The huge saloons, built at the turn of the century, were done up in sage green, the style of decoration displaying a nostalgic leaning towards Art Nouveau, a period always sympathetic to Asian taste. Gauthier de Graef, ethnically confused, had been anxious to know whether there were eunuchs in the ladies' apartments above the rooms where we were being entertained. Accordingly, to settle the point, on which he was very insistent, Madame Philidor and Isobel arranged to be conducted to their hostess in purdah, promising to report on this matter, though without much hope of returning with an affirmative answer. They had just set out on this visit of exploration, when I saw Farebrother moving purposefully through the crowd. I went over to congratulate him on his marriage. He was immensely cordial.

'I hear Geraldine's an old friend of yours, Nicholas. You knew her in her "Tuffy" days.'

I said I did not think I had ever quite had the courage to address her by that nickname when she had still been Miss Weedon.

'I mean when she was Mrs Foxe's secretary,' said Farebrother. 'Then you knew the old General too. Splendid old fellow, he must have been. Wish I'd met him. Both he and Mrs Foxe opened up a lot of very useful contacts for Geraldine, which she's never lost sight of. They're going to stand me in good stead too. A wonderful woman. Couldn't believe my ears when she said she'd be mine.'

He seemed very pleased about it all.

'She's not here tonight.'

'Too busy.'

'Catching spies?'

'Ah, so you know where she's working? We try to keep that a secret. No, Geraldine's getting our new flat straight. We've actually found somewhere to live. Not too easy these days. Quite a reasonable rent for the neighbourhood, which is a good one. Now I must go and have a word with old Lord Perkins over there. He married poor Peter Templer's elder sister, Babs, as I expect you know.'

'I didn't know.'

'One of the creations of the first Labour Government. Of course he's getting on now—but, with Labour in again, we all need friends at court.'

'Did anything more ever come out as to what happened to Peter?'

'Nothing, so far as I know. He was absolutely set on doing that job. As soon as he heard I was going to work with those people he got on to me to try and get him something of the sort. You ought to meet Lord Perkins. I think Babs found him a change for the better after that rather dreadful fellow Stripling. I ran into Stripling in Aldershot about eighteen months ago. He was lecturing to the troops. Just come from the Glasshouse, where he'd given a talk on the early days of motor-racing. Someone told me Babs had been a great help to her present husband when he was writing his last book on industrial relations.'

He smiled and moved off. Widmerpool arrived in the room at that moment. He stood looking round, evidently deciding where best to launch an attack. Farebrother must have seen him, because he suddenly swerved into a new direction to avoid contact. This seemed a good opportunity to congratulate Widmerpool too. I went over to him. He seemed very pleased with himself.

'Thank you very much, Nicholas. Some people have expressed the opinion, without much delicacy, that Pamela is too young for me. That is not my own view at all. A man is as young as he feels. I had quite a scene with my mother, I'm afraid. My mother is getting an old lady now, of course, and does not always know what she is talking about. As a matter of fact I am making arrangements for her to live, anyway temporarily, with some distant relations of ours in the Lowlands. It's not too far from Glasgow. I think she will be happier with them than on her own, after I am married. She is in touch with one or two nice families on the Borders.'

This was a very different tone from that Widmerpool was in the habit of using about his mother in the old days. It seemed likely the engagement represented one of his conscious decisions to put life on a new footing. He embarked on these from time to time, with consequent rearrangements all round. It looked as if sending Mrs Widmerpool into exile was going to be one such. It was hard to feel wholly condemnatory. I enquired about the circumstances in which he had met Pamela, a matter about which I was curious.

'In Cairo. An extraordinary chance. As you know, my work throughout the war has never given me a second for social life. Even tonight I am here only because Pamela herself wanted to come—she is arriving at any moment—and I shall leave as soon as I have introduced her. I requested the Ambassador as a personal favour that I might bring my fiancée. He was charming about it. To tell the truth, I have to dine with the Minister tonight. A lot to talk about. Questions of policy. Adjustment to new régimes. But I was telling you how Pamela and I met. In Cairo there was trouble about my returning plane. One had been shot down, resulting in my having to kick my heels in the place for twenty-four hours. You know how vexatious that sort of situation is to me. I was taken to a place called Groppi's. Someone introduced us. Before I knew where I was, we were dining together and on our way to a night-club. I had not been to a place of that sort for years. Had, indeed, quite forgotten what they were like. The fact was we had a most enjoyable evening.'

He laughed quite hysterically.

'Then, as luck would have it, Pam was posted back to England. I should have added that she was working as secretary in one of the secret organizations there. I was glad about her return, because I don't think she moved in a very good set in Cairo. When she arrived in London, she sent me a postcard—and what a postcard.'

Widmerpool giggled violently, then recovered himself.

'It arrived one morning in that basement where I work night and day,' he said. 'You can imagine how pleased I was. It seems extraordinary that we hardly knew each other then, and now I've got a great big photograph of her on my desk.'

He was almost gasping. The words vividly conjured up his subterranean life. Photographs on a desk were never without interest. People who placed them there belonged to a special category in their human relationships. There was, for example, that peculiarly tortured-looking midshipman in a leather-and-talc frame in the room of a Section with which ours was often in contact. Some lines of John Davidson suddenly came into my head:

'And so they wait, while empires sprung
  Of hatred thunder past above,
Deep in the earth for ever young
  Tannhäuser and the Queen of Love.'

On reflection, the situation was not a very close parallel, because it was most unlikely Pamela had ever visited Widmerpool's underground office. On the other hand, she herself could easily be envisaged as one of the myriad incarnations of Venus, even if Widmerpool were not much of a Tannhäuser. At least he seemed in a similar way to have stumbled on the secret entrance to the court of the Paphian goddess in the Hollow Hill where his own duties were diurnally enacted. That was some qualification.

'You know she's Charles Stringham's niece?'

'Naturally I am aware of that.'

The question had not pleased him.

'No news of Stringham, I suppose?'

'There has been, as a matter of fact.'

Widmerpool seemed half angry, half desirous of making some statement about this.

'He was captured,' he said. 'He didn't survive.'

Scarcely anything was known still about individual prisoners in Japanese POW camps, except that the lives of many of them had certainly been saved by the Bomb. News came through slowly from the Far East. I asked how Widmerpool could speak so definitely.

'At the end of last year the Americans sank a Jap transport on the way from Singapore. They rescued some British prisoners on board. They had been in the same camp. One of them got in touch with Stringham's mother when repatriated. It was only just in time, because Mrs Foxe herself died soon after that, as you probably saw.'

'I hadn't.'

He seemed to want to make some further confession.

'As I expect you know, Mrs Foxe was a very extravagant woman. At the end, she found it not only impossible to live in anything like the way she used, but was even quite short of money.'

'Stringham himself said something about that when I last saw him.'

'The irony of the situation is that his mother's South African money was tied up on Stringham,' said Widmerpool. 'Owing to bad management, she never got much out of those securities herself, but a lot of South African stock has recently made a very good recovery.'

'I suppose Flavia will benefit.'

'No, she doesn't, as it turns out,' said Widmerpool. 'Rather an odd thing happened. Stringham left a will bequeathing all he had to Pam. He'd always been fond of her as a child. He obviously thought it would be just a few personal odds and ends. As it turns out, there could be a good deal more than that. With the right attention, Stringham's estate in due course might be nursed into something quite respectable.'

He looked rather guilty, not without reason. We abandoned the subject of Stringham.

'I don't pretend Pamela's an easy girl,' he said. 'We fairly often have rows—in fact are not on speaking terms for twenty-four hours or more. Never mind. Rows often clear the air. We shall see it through, whatever my position when I leave the army.'

'You'll go back to the City, I suppose?'

'I'm not so sure.'

'Other plans?'

'I have come to the conclusion that I enjoy power,' said Widmerpool. 'That is something the war has taught me. In this connexion, it has more than once occurred to me that I might like governing . . .'

He brought his lips together, then parted them. This contortion formed a phrase, but, the words inaudible, its sense escaped me.

'Governing whom?'

Leaning forward and smiling, Widmerpool repeated the movement of his lips. This time, although he spoke only in a whisper, the two words were intelligible.

'*Black men . . .*'

'Abroad?'

'Naturally.'

'That's feasible?'

'My reputation among those who matter could scarcely be higher.'

'You mean you could easily get an appointment of that sort?'

'Nothing in life is ever easy, my boy. Not in the sense you use the term. It is one of the mistakes you always make. The point is, we are going to see great changes. As you know, my leanings have always been leftwards. From what I see round me, I have no reason to suppose such sympathies were mistaken. Men like myself will be needed.'

'If they are to be found.'

He clapped me on the back.

'No flattery,' he said. 'No flattery, but I sometimes wonder whether you're not right.'

He looked at his watch and sighed.

'Being engaged accustoms one to unpunctuality,' he went on in rather another tone, a less exuberant one. 'I think I'll have a word with that old stalwart, Lord Perkins, whom I see over there.'

'I didn't know till a moment ago that Perkins was married to Peter Templer's sister.'

'Oh, yes. So I believe. I don't see them as having much in common as brothers-in-law, but one never knows. Unfortunate Templer getting killed like that. He was too old for that sort of business, of course. Stringham, too. I fear the war has taken a sad toll of our friends. I notice Donners over there talking to the Portuguese Ambassador. I must say a word to him too.'

In the seven years or so that had passed since I had last seen him, Sir Magnus Donners had grown not so much older in appearance, as less like a human being. He now resembled an animated tailor's dummy, one designed to recommend second-hand, though immensely discreet, clothes (if the suit he was wearing could be regarded as a sample) adapted to the taste of distinguished men no longer young. Jerky movements, like those of a marionette—perhaps indicating all was not absolutely well with his physical system—added to the impression of an outsize puppet that had somehow escaped from its box and begun to mix with real people, who were momentarily taken in by the extraordinary conviction of its mechanism. The set of Sir Magnus's mouth, always a trifle uncomfortable to contemplate, had become very slightly less under control, increasing the vaguely warning note the rest of his appearance implied. On the whole he had lost that former air of desperately seeking to seem more ordinary than everyone else round him; or, if he still hoped for that, its consolations had certainly escaped him. A lifetime of weighty negotiation in the worlds of politics and business had left their mark. One would now guess at once he was an unusual person, who, even within his own terms of reference, had lived an unusual life. He looked less parsonic than in the days when he had suggested a clerical headmaster. Perhaps that was because he had not, so to speak, inwardly progressed to the archiepiscopal level in that calling; at least his face had not developed the fleshy, theatrical accentuations so often attendant on the features of the higher grades of the clergy. At some moment, consciously or not, he had probably branched off from this interior priestly strain in his make-up. That would be the logical explanation. Matilda, looking decidedly smart in a dress of blue and black stripes, was standing beside her husband, talking with the Portuguese Ambassador. I had not seen her since their marriage. She caught sight of me and waved, then separated herself from the others and made her way through the ever thickening crowd.

'Nick.'

'How are you, Matty?'

'Don't you admire my frock. An unsolicited gift from New York.'

'Too smart for words. I couldn't imagine where it had come from.'

To be rather older suited her; that or being married to a member of the Cabinet. She had dyed her hair a reddish tint that suited her, too, set off the large green eyes, which were always her most striking feature.

'Do you ever see anything of Hugh the Drover?'

She used sometimes to call Moreland that while they had been married, usually when not best pleased with him. I told her we had not met since the night of the bomb on the Café de Madrid: that, so far as I knew, Moreland was still touring the country, putting on musical performances of one sort or another, under more or less official control; whatever happened in the war to make mounting such entertainments possible.

'What's his health been like?'

'I don't know at all.'

'Extraordinary about Audrey Maclintick. Are they married?'

'I don't know that either.'

'Does she look after him all right?'

'I think she does.'

Obviously Matilda still took quite a keen interest in Moreland and his condition. That was natural enough. All the same, one felt instinctively that she had entirely given up Moreland's world, everything to do with it. She had taken on Sir Magnus, lock, stock and barrel. The metaphor made one think of his alleged sexual oddities. Presumably she had taken them on too, though as a former mistress they would be relatively familiar. Perhaps she guessed the train of thought, because she smiled.

'Donners has to be looked after too,' she said. 'I'm rather worried about him at the moment as a matter of fact.'

'His job must be a great strain.'

Matilda brushed such a banal comment aside.

'Will you come and see me?' she said. 'We're going to Washington next week—but when we're back.'

'My Release Group comes up reasonably soon. We'll probably go away for a bit when I get out of the army.'

'Later then. Is Isobel here?'

'Last seen on her way to the harem upstairs.'

Sir Magnus had now begun to make signs indicating that he wanted Matilda to return to him and be introduced to someone. She left me, repeating that we must meet when they came back from America. I had always liked Matilda and felt glad to see her again and hear that her life seemed endurable. Widmerpool reappeared at my side. He seemed agitated.

'I wish Pamela would turn up,' he said. 'I shall be late if she doesn't arrive soon. I can't very well leave until she comes—ah, thank God, there she is.'

Pamela Flitton came towards us. Unlike the night at *The Bartered Bride*, she had this evening taken no trouble whatever about her clothes. Perhaps that was untrue, and she had gone out of her way to find the oldest, most filthy garments she possessed. She was almost in rags. By this time the party had advanced too far for it to be obvious to a newcomer whom to greet as host. She had in any case obviously not bothered about any such formalities.

'Hullo, my dear,' said Widmerpool. 'I didn't guess you'd be so late.'

He spoke in a conciliatory voice, making as if to kiss her. She allowed the merest peck.

'I'll just introduce you to His Excellency,' he said. 'Then I'll have to fly.'

Pamela, who was looking very pretty in spite of her disarray, was having none of that.

'I don't want to be introduced,' she said. 'I just came to have a look round.'

She gave me a nod. I made some conventional remark about their engagement. She listened to this rather more graciously than usual.

'I think you ought to meet the Ambassador, dearest.'

'Stuff the Ambassador.'

The phrase recalled Duport. Widmerpool laughed nervously.

'You really oughtn't to say things like that, darling,' he said. 'Not when you're at a party like this. Nicholas and I think it very amusing, but someone else might overhear and not understand. If you really don't feel like being introduced at the moment, I shall have to leave you. Nicholas or someone can do the honours, if you decide you want to meet your host later. Personally, I think you should. If you do, make my apologies. I shall have to go now. I am late already.'

'Late for what?'

'I told you—I'm dining with the Minister.'

'You're giving me dinner.'

'I only wish I was. Much as I'd love to, I can't. I did explain all this before. You said you'd like to come to the party, even though we couldn't have dinner together after. Besides, I'm sure you told me you were dining with Lady McReith.'

'I'm going to dine with you.'

I was about to move away and leave them to it, feeling an engaged couple should settle such matters so far as possible in private, but Widmerpool, either believing himself safer with a witness, or because he foresaw some method of disposing of Pamela in which I might play a part, took me by the arm, while he continued to speak persuasively to her.

'Be reasonable, darling,' he said. 'I can't cut a dinner I've gone out of my way to arrange—least of all with the Minister.'

'Stand him up. I couldn't care less. That's what you'd do if you really wanted to dine with me.'

She was in a sudden rage. Her usually dead white face now had some colour in it. Widmerpool must have thought that a change of subject would cool her down, also give him a chance of escape.

'I'm going to leave you with Nicholas,' he said. 'Let me tell you first, what you probably don't know, that Nicholas used to be a friend of your uncle, Charles Stringham, whom you were so fond of.'

If he hoped that information would calm her, Widmerpool made a big mistake. She went absolutely rigid.

'Yes,' she said, 'and Charles isn't the only one he knew. He knew Peter Templer too—the man you murdered.'

Widmerpool, not surprisingly, was apparently stupefied by this onslaught; myself scarcely less so. She spoke the words in a quiet voice. We were in a corner of the room behind some pillars, a little away from the rest of the party. Even so, plenty of people were close enough. It was no place to allow a scene to develop. Pamela turned to me.

'Do you know what happened?'

'About what?'

'About Peter Templer. This man persuaded them to leave Peter to die. The nicest man I ever knew. He just had him killed.'

Tears appeared in her eyes. She was in a state of near hysteria. It was clearly an occasion when rational argument was going to do no good. The only thing would be to get her away quietly on any terms. Widmerpool did not grasp that. He could perhaps not be blamed for being unable to consider matters coolly. He had now recovered sufficiently from his earlier astonishment to rebut the charges made against him and was even showing signs of himself losing his temper.

'How could you utter such rubbish?' he said. 'I see now that I ought never to have mentioned to you I had any hand at all in that affair, even at long range. It was a breach of security for which I deserve to be punished. Please stop talking in such an absurd way.'

Pamela was not in the least calmed by this remonstrance.

Quite the contrary. She did not raise her voice, but spoke if possible with more intensity. Now it was me she addressed.

'He put up a paper. That was the word he used—put up a paper. He wanted them to stop supporting the people Peter was with. We didn't send them any more arms. We didn't even bother to get Peter out. Why should we? We didn't want his side to win any more.'

Widmerpool was himself pretty angry by now.

'Because my duties happen to include the promulgation of matters appropriate for general consideration by our committees—perhaps ultimately by the Chiefs of Staff, perhaps even the Cabinet—because, as I say, this happens to be my function, that does not mean the decisions are mine, nor, for that matter, even the recommendations. Matters are discussed as fully as possible at every level. The paper is finalized. The decision is made. I may tell you this particular decision was taken at the highest level. As for not getting Templer out, as you call it, how could I possibly have anything to do with the action, right or wrong, for which the Operational people on the spot are responsible? These are just the sort of disgraceful stories that get disseminated, probably at the direct instance of the enemy.'

'You were in favour of withdrawing support. You said so. You told me.'

'Perhaps I was. Anyway, I was a fool to say so to you.'

His own rage made him able to stand up to her.

'Therefore you represented Peter's people in as bad a light as possible. No doubt you carried the meeting.'

She had absorbed the jargon of Widmerpool's employment in a remarkable manner. I remembered noticing, on occasions when Matilda differed with Moreland about some musical matter, how dexterously women can take in the ideas of a man with whom they are connected, then outmanoeuvre him with his own arguments. Widmerpool made a despairing gesture, but spoke now with less violence.

'I am only a member of the Secretariat, darling. I am the servant, very humble servant, of whatever committees it is my duty to attend.'

'You said yourself it was a rare meeting when you didn't get what you wanted into the finalized version.'

This roused Widmerpool again.

'So it is,' he said. 'So it is. And, as it happens, what I thought went into the paper you're talking about. I admit it. That doesn't mean I was in the smallest degree responsible for Templer's death. We don't know for certain even if he is dead.'

'Yes, we do.'

'All right. I concede that.'

'You're a murderer,' she said.

There was a pause. They glared at each other. Then Widmerpool looked down at his watch.

'Good God,' he said. 'What will the Minister think?'

Without another word, he pushed his way through the crowd towards the door. He disappeared hurriedly through it. I was wondering what on earth to say to Pamela, when she too turned away, and began to stroll through the party in the opposite direction. I saw her smile at the Swiss military attaché, who had rather a reputation as a lady-killer, then she too was lost to sight. Isobel and Madame Philidor reappeared from their visit to our hostess in purdah.

'The first wife looked kind, did you not think?' said Madame Philidor. 'The other perhaps not so kind.'

After this extraordinary incident, it seemed more certain than ever that an announcement would be made stating the engagement had been broken off. However, there were other things to think about, chiefly one's own demobilization; more immediately, arrangements regarding the Victory Day Service, which took place some weeks later at

St Paul's. I was to be on duty there with Finn, superintending the foreign military attachés invited. Among these were many gaps in the ranks of those known earlier. The several new Allied missions were not accommodated in the Cathedral under the Section's arrangements, nor were the dispossessed—Bobrowski and Kielkiewicz, for example—individuals amongst our Allies who had played a relatively prominent part in the war, but now found themselves deprived of their birthright for no reason except an unlucky turn of the wheel of international politics manipulated by the inexorable hand of Fate.

This day of General Thanksgiving had been fixed on a Sunday in the second half of August. Its weather seemed designed to emphasize complexities and low temperatures of Allied relationships. Summer, like one of the new régimes abroad, offered no warmth, but chilly, draughty, unwelcoming perspectives, under a grey and threatening sky. The London streets by this time were, in any case, far from cheerful: windows broken: paint peeling: jagged, ruined brickwork enclosing the shells of roofless houses. Acres of desolated buildings, the burnt and battered City, lay about St Paul's on all sides. Finn and I arrived early, entering by the south door. Within the vast cool interior, traces of war were as evident as outside, though on a less wholesale, less utterly ruthless scale. The Allied military attachés, as such, were to be segregated in the south transept, in a recess lined with huge marble monuments in pseudo-classical style. I had been put in charge of the Allied group, because Finn decided the Neutrals, some of whom could be unreliable in matters of discipline and procedure, required his undivided attention. The Neutrals were to occupy a block of seats nearer the choir, the wooden carving of its stalls still showing signs of bomb damage.

'I'm glad to say no difficulties have been made about Theodoric,' said Finn. 'He's been asked to the Service in a perfectly correct manner. It's not a large return for a lifetime of being pro-British—and accepting exile—but that's all they can do, I suppose. He'd be even worse off if he'd plumped for the other side. By the way, an ambulance party has been provided in the crypt, should any of your boys come over faint. I shall probably need medical attention myself before the day is over.'

I checked the Allied military attachés as they arrived. They were punctual, on the whole well behaved, whispering together with the air of children at a village Sunday school, a little overawed at the promised visit of the bishop of the diocese, glancing uneasily at the enigmatic sculptural scenes looming above them on the tombs. Among them, as I have said, were many absences and new faces. One regretted Van der Voort. A churchly background would have enhanced his pristine Netherlandish countenance. Colonel Hlava had returned to Prague. 'Russia is our Big Brother' (the phrase had not yet developed Orwellian overtones), he had remarked to me some weeks before he left; even so, when the moment came to shake hands for the last time, he said: 'We can only hope'. Hlava was promoted major-general when he got home. Then, a year or two later, he was put under house arrest. He was still under house arrest when he died of heart failure; a flying ace and man one greatly liked.

Kucherman had gone back to a ministerial portfolio in the Belgian Government, his place taken by Bruylant, a quiet professional soldier, with musical leanings, though less marked than Hlava's and not of the sort to be expressed actively by playing duets with Dempster, had Dempster still been with the Section, not returned to his Norwegian timber. In place of Marinko—out of a job like the rest of his countrymen who had supported Mihailovich's Resistance Movement, rather than Tito's—was a newly arrived, long haired, jack-booted young 'Partisan' colonel, who talked a little French and, although possessing a Polish-sounding name, designated himself as 'Macédoin'. Macedonia was perhaps where Szymanski had come from too. One wondered what had happened to him.

Examining the neighbouring monuments more closely, I was delighted to find among them more than one of those celebrated in *The Ingoldsby Legends*, a favourite book of mine about the time when we lived at Stonehurst. There, for example, only a few feet away from where the military attachés sat, several figures far larger than life were enacting a battle scene in which a general had been struck from the saddle by a cannon ball, as his charger bore him at a furious gallop across the path of a kilted private from some Highland regiment. There could be no doubt whatever this was:

' . . . Sir Ralph Abercrombie going to tumble
With a thump that alone were enough to dispatch him
If the Scotchman in front shouldn't happen to catch him.'

Stendhal had seen these monuments when he visited London.

'Style lourd,' he noted. 'Celui d'Abercromby bien ridicule.'

Nevertheless, one felt glad it remained there. It put on record what was then officially felt about death in battle, begging all that large question of why the depiction of action in the graphic arts had fallen in our own day almost entirely into the hands of the Surrealists.

'La jolie figure de Moore rend son tombeau meilleur,' Stendhal thought.

This was against the wall by the side door through which we had entered the Cathedral, at right angles to the Abercrombie memorial. Less enormously vehement, this group too had its own exuberance of style, though in quite another mood. Here a sinister charade was being enacted by several figures not so gigantic in size. What they were doing was not immediately clear, until Barham's lines threw light on them too:

> 'Where the man and the Angel have got Sir John Moore,
> And are quietly letting him down through the floor.

I looked about for 'that queer-looking horse that is rolling on Ponsonby', but disappointingly failed to identify either man or beast in the immediate vicinity of the recess. The field of vision was too limited, only a short length of the nave to be viewed, where it joined the more or less circular area under the dome. However, recognition of these other episodes, so often pictured imaginatively in the past when the book had been read aloud by my mother—yet never for some reason appraised by a deliberate visit to St Paul's to verify the facts—mitigated an atmosphere in other respects oddly frigid, even downright depressing. With a fashionably egalitarian ideal in view, those responsible for such things had decided no mere skimming of the cream from the top echelons, civil and military, should be assembled together to give symbolic thanks for Victory. Everyone was to be represented. The congregation—except for those who had a job to do—had been handpicked from the highest official levels to the lowest.

For some reason this principle, fair enough in theory, had in practice resulted in an extension of that atmosphere of restraint, uneasy nervous tension, common enough in a larger or smaller degree to all such ceremonies. The sense of being present at a Great Occasion—for, if this was not a Great Occasion, then what was?—had somehow failed to take adequate shape, to catch on the wing those inner perceptions of a more exalted sort, evasive by their very nature, at best transient enough, but not altogether unknown. They were, in fact, so it seemed to me—unlike that morning in Normandy—entirely absent. Perhaps that was because everyone was by now so tired. The country, there could be no doubt, was absolutely worn out. That was the truth of the matter. One felt it in St Paul's. It was interesting to speculate who, among the less obvious, had been invited to the Service. Vavassor, for example? If so, was he wearing his blue frockcoat and gold-banded top hat? One of the ordinary security guards could look after the front-door for an hour or two. Had Blackhead been torn from his files to attend this Thanksgiving? If so, it was hard to believe he would not bring a file or two with him to mull over during the prayers. Q. (Ops.) Colonel? Mime? Widmerpool?

Meanwhile, the band of the Welsh Guards strummed away at Holst, Elgar, Grieg, finally Handel's 'Water Music'. Bruylant almost imperceptibly beat time with his forefinger, while he listened to these diversions, of which I felt Moreland would have only partially approved. The Jugoslav Colonel, rather a morose young man, did not seem altogether at ease in these surroundings. Possibly to reassure himself, he produced a pocket-comb and began to smooth his hair. General Cobb, contemplating the verdict on life's court-martial, was frowning darkly. I had all my charges in their seats by now, with a place to spare at the end of the row on which the Partisan could leave his cap. Someone might have failed to turn up because he was ill; possibly Colonel Ramos indisposed again. Then I saw Ramos in the back row, anxiously studying the service paper. I checked the list. They all seemed to be there. The Neutrals, in their position further east of the transept, had some of them shown inferior mastery of the drill; at least, not all were in their places in such good time as the Allies. Finn had rightly estimated them a more tricky crowd to manipulate. He appeared to be finding difficulty in fitting his party into the available seats. It was too far to see for certain, but looked as if some flaw had been revealed in the organization. Finn came across the transept.

‘Look here, Nicholas. I seem to have a South American too many.’

He clenched his teeth as if some appalling consequence were likely to overtake us as a result of that.

‘Which one, sir?’

‘Colonel Flores.’

‘Can’t place his country for the moment, sir.’

‘You probably haven’t heard of him. His predecessor, Hernandez, was recalled in a hurry for political reasons. It was thought Flores would not be in London in time for this show. There was a misunderstanding. The fact is things have never been the same with Latin America since we lost Borrit. You haven’t a spare place?’

‘As a matter of fact, I have, sir. I don’t know why, because I’ve checked the list and no one seems ill or late.’

‘They may have allowed for the Grand Duchy, whose military representative is in the Diplomatic block. The situation’s saved. I’ll bring Flores across.’

He returned a moment later with an officer wearing a heavy gold aiguillette, though without the sword that had survived the war in some South American ceremonial turnouts. Finn, evidently suffering stress at this last minute rearrangement, had taken Colonel Flores firmly by the arm—rather in the manner of General Conyers, with whom perhaps he had, after all, something in common—as if he were making an arrest and a dangerous customer at that. Flores, obviously appreciating the humour of this manhandling, was smiling. Dark, blue-chinned, with regular features, rather a handsome Mediterranean type, his age was hard to assess. He gave a quick heel-click and handshake on introduction.

‘Major Jenkins will look after you, Colonel,’ said Finn. ‘Must leave you now or your colleagues will get out of hand.’

Flores laughed, and turned to me.

‘I’m really frightfully sorry to be the cause of all this muddle,' he said. 'Especially as a bloody Neutral. Can you indeed accommodate me with your boys over here?'

This speech showed a rather surprising mastery of the English language, not to say unexpected psychological grasp of the British approach in such matters. One never knew what to expect from the South Americans. Sometimes they would speak perfect English like Colonel Flores, were sophisticated to a degree; alternatively, they would know not a word of any language but their own, seemed to find any ways but their own incomprehensible. Neutral military attachés were required to give notification of journeys made further than a given distance from London. The Latin Americans did not always observe this regulation. We would receive official reports from MI 5 chronicling jaunts with tarts to Maidenhead and elsewhere. Colonel Flores, one saw in a moment, was much too spry to be caught out in anything like that. He had only the smallest trace of an accent, that hard Spanish drawl that can be so attractive on the lips of a woman. The Flores manner was not unlike Theodoric's, shorn of Theodoric's ever present sense of his own royalty. In fact, anglicization was if anything almost too perfect, suggesting a smoothness comparable almost with Farebrother's. All the same, I immediately liked him. I caused the Jugoslav to take his cap from the spare seat and put it under his own chair, fitting in Flores next to him. If the Jugoslav came from Macedonia, he must be used to rubbing shoulders with all sorts of merging races, ought to have learnt early in life to be a good mixer. Perhaps in Macedonia things did not work that way. If he had not learnt the art, he would have to do so pretty soon, or give up hope of getting the best out of his London appointment. Flores, smiling and apologizing, edged his way along the row, like a member of the audience arriving late for his stall at the opera. He safely reached the place at the end only a minute or two before the fanfare from Household Cavalry trumpets announced the arrival of the Royal Party on the steps of the Cathedral.

There was an impression of copes and mitres, vestments of cream and gold, streaks of ruby-coloured velvet, the Lord Mayor bearing the City Sword point upward, khaki uniforms and blue, a train of royal personages—the phrase always recalled Mr Deacon speaking of Mrs Andriadis's past—the King and Queen, the Princesses, King of the Hellenes, Regent of Iraq, King and Queen of Jugoslavia, Prince Theodoric. Colonel Budd, as it happened, was in attendance. The years seemed to have made no impression on him. White-moustached, spruce, very upright, he glanced about him with an air of total informality, as if prepared for any eventuality from assassination to imperfect acoustics. When the Royal Party reached their seats, all knelt. Prayers followed. We rose for a hymn.

'Angels in the height, adore him;
  Ye behold him face to face;
Saints triumphant, bow before him,
  Gather'd in from every race.'

Under the great dome, saints or not, they were undoubtedly gathered in from every race. Colonel Flores and the Partisan Colonel were sharing a service paper. General Asbjørnsen, legitimately proud of his powerful baritone, sang out with full lungs. Hymns always made me think of Stringham, addicted to quoting their imagery within the context of his own life.

'Hymns describe people and places so well,' he used to say. 'Nothing else quite like them. What could be better, for example, on the subject of one's friends and relations than:

Some are sick and some are sad,
And some have never loved one well,
And some have lost the love they had.

The explicitness of the categories is marvellous. Then that wonderful statement: "fading is the world's best pleasure". One sees very clearly which particular pleasure its writer considered the best.'

Thoughts about Singapore: the conditions of a Japanese POW camp. Cheesman must have been there too, the middle-aged subaltern in charge of the Mobile Laundry Unit, that bespectacled accountant who had a waistcoat made to fit under his army tunic, and renounced the Pay Corps because he wanted to 'command men'. Had he survived? In any case there were no limits to the sheer improbability of individual fate. Templer, for instance, even as a boy innately opposed to the romantic approach, dying in the service of what he himself would certainly regard as a Musical Comedy country, on account of a Musical Comedy love affair. On the subject of death, it looked as if George Tolland was not going to pull through. An ecclesiastic began to read from Isaiah.

'The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose... Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees... And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water: in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes. And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein...'

The habitation of dragons. Looking back on the V.1's flying through the night, one thought of dragons as, physically speaking, less remote than formerly. Probably they lived in caves and came down from time to time to the banks of a river or lake to drink. The ground 'where each lay' would, of course, be scorched by fiery breath, their tails too, no doubt, giving out fire that made the water hiss and steam, the sedge become charred. Not all the later promises of the prophecy were easily comprehensible. An intense, mysterious beauty pervaded the obscurity of the text, its assurances all the more magical for being enigmatic. Who, for example, were the wayfaring men? Were they themselves all fools, or only some of them? Perhaps, on the contrary, the wayfaring men were contrasted with the fools, as persons of entirely different sort. One thing was fairly clear, the fools, whoever they were, must keep off the highway; 'absolutely *verboten*', as Biggs, Staff Officer Physical Training, used to say. Brief thoughts of Biggs, hanging by the neck until he was dead in that poky little cricket pavilion; another war casualty, so far as it went. The problem of biblical exegesis remained. Perhaps it was merely a warning: wayfaring men should not make fools of themselves. Taking the war period, limiting the field to the army, one had met quite a few wayfaring men. Biggs himself was essentially not of that category: Bithel, perhaps: Odo Stevens, certainly. Borrit? It was fascinating that Borrit should have remembered Pamela Flitton's face after three years or more.

'I've been in Spain on business sometimes,' Borrit said. 'A honeymoon couple would arrive at the hotel. Be shown up to their bedroom. Last you'd see of them. They wouldn't leave that room for a fortnight—not for three weeks. You'd just get an occasional sight of a brassed-off chambermaid once in a way lugging off a slop-pail. They've got their own ways, the Spaniards. "With a beard, St Joseph; without, the Virgin Mary." That's a Spanish proverb. Never quite know what it means, but it makes you see what the Spaniards are like somehow.'

There were more prayers. A psalm. The Archbishop unenthrallingly preached. We rose to sing *Jerusalem*.

'Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire;

Bring me my spear; O Clouds unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!'

Was all that about sex too? If so, why were we singing it at the Victory Service? Blake was as impenetrable as Isaiah; in his way, more so. It was not quite such wonderful stuff as the Prophet rendered into Elizabethan English, yet wonderful enough. At the same time, so I always felt, never quite for me. Blake was a genius, but not one for the classical taste. He was too cranky. No doubt that was being ungrateful for undoubted marvels offered and accepted. One often felt ungrateful in literary matters, as in so many others. It would be interesting to know what the military attachés made of the poem. General Asbjørnsen certainly enjoyed singing the words. He was quite flushed in the face, like a suddenly converted Viking, joining in with the monks instead of massacring them.

Reflections about poetry, its changes in form and fashion, persisted throughout further prayers. 'Arrows of desire', for example, made one think of Cowley. Cowley had been an outstanding success in his own time. He had been buried in Westminster Abbey. That was something which would never have happened to Blake. However, it was Blake who had come out on top in the end. Pope was characteristically direct on the subject.

'Who now reads Cowley? If he pleases yet,
His moral pleases, not his pointed wit;
Forgot his epic, nay Pindaric art,
But still I love the language of his heart.'

But, admitting nobody read the *Pindarique Odes*, surely the pointed wit was just what did survive? In Cowley's quite peculiar grasp of the contrasted tenderness and brutality of love, wit was just the quality he brought to bear with such remarkable effect:

'Thou with strange adultery
Doest in each breast a brothel keep;
Awake, all men do lust for thee,
And some enjoy thee when they sleep.'

No poet deserved to be forgotten who could face facts like that, the blending of conscious and unconscious, Love's free-for-all in dreams. You only had to compare the dream situation with that adumbrated by poor old Edgar Allan Poe—for whom, for some reason, I always had a weakness—when he trafficked in a similar vein:

'Now all my days are trances
And all my nightly dreams
Are where thy grey eye glances,
And where thy footstep gleams—
  In what ethereal dances
  By what eternal streams.'

Ethereal dances would have been no good to Cowley, by eternal streams or anywhere else. He wanted substance. That verse used to run in my head when in love with Jean Duport—her grey eyes—though she laid no claims to being a dancer, and Poe's open-air interpretive choreography sounded unimpressive. However, there were no limits when one was in that state. We rose once more for another hymn, 'Now thank we all our God', which was, I felt pretty sure, of German origin. Whoever was responsible for choosing had either forgotten that, or judged it peculiarly apposite for this reason. We had just prayed for the 'United Nations' and 'our enemies in defeat'. In the same mood, deliberate selection of a German hymn might be intended to indicate public forgiveness and reconciliation. Quite soon, of course, people would, in any case, begin to say the war was pointless, particularly those, and their associates, moral and actual, who had chalked on walls, 'Strike now in the West' or 'Bomb Rome'. Political activities of that kind might by now have brought together Mrs Andriadis and Gypsy Jones. The Te Deum. Then the National Anthem, all three verses:

'God save our gracious King!
Long live our noble King!
God save the King!
Send him victorious,
Happy and glorious
Long to reign over us;
God save the King!

O Lord our God arise
Scatter his enemies,
And make them fall.
Confound their politics,
Frustrate their knavish tricks,
On thee our hopes we fix;
God save us all.

Thy choicest gift in store
On him be pleased to pour;
Long may he reign!
May he defend our laws,
And ever give us cause
To sing with heart and voice,
God save the King!'

Repetitive, jerky, subjective in feeling, not much ornamented by imagination nor subtlety of thought and phraseology, the words possessed at the same time a kind of depth, an unpretentious expression of sentiments suited somehow to the moment. It would be interesting to know whether, at the period they were written, 'reign' had been considered an adequate rhyme to 'king'; or whether the poet had simply not bothered to achieve identity of sound in the termination of the last verse. Language, pronunciation, sentiment, were always changing. There must have been advantages, moral and otherwise, in living at an outwardly less squeamish period, when the verbiage of high-thinking had not yet cloaked such petitions as those put forward in the second verse, incidentally much the best; when, in certain respects at least, hypocrisy had established less of a stranglehold on the public mind. Such a mental picture of the past was no doubt largely unhistorical, indeed totally illusory, freedom from one sort of humbug merely implying, with human beings of any epoch, thraldom to another. The past, just as the present, had to be accepted for what it thought and what it was.

The Royal Party withdrew. There was a long pause while photographs were taken outside on the steps. The Welsh Guards turned their attention to something in Moreland's line, Walton's 'Grand March'. Orders had been issued that the congregation was to leave by the south portico, the door just behind us. It was now thrown open. Finn and I drove the military attachés like sheep before us in that direction. Once in the street, they would have to find their own cars. The last of them disappeared into the crowd. Finn drew a deep breath.

'That appeared to go off all right.'

'I think so, sir.'

'Might have been trouble when we couldn't fit that fellow in.'

'He was quite happy with my lot.'

'Nice chap.'

'He seemed to be.'

'Going back now?'

'I was, sir. Shall I get the car?'

Something was troubling Finn.

'Look here, Nicholas, will you operate under your own steam—leave me the car?'

'Of course, sir.'

Finn paused again. He lowered his voice.

'I'll make a confession to you, Nicholas.'

'Yes, sir?'

'A friend of mine has sent me a salmon from Scotland.'

That was certainly a matter for envy in the current food situation, though hardly basis for the sense of guilt that seemed to be troubling Finn. There was no obvious reason why he should make such a to-do about the gift. His voice became a whisper.

'I've got to collect the fish.'

'Yes, sir?'

'At Euston Station.'

'Yes?'

'I'm going to take the Section's car,' said Finn. 'Risk court-martial if I'm caught. Be stripped of my VC. It's the only way to get the salmon.'

'I won't betray you, sir.'

'Good boy.'

Finn nodded his head several times, laughing to himself, looking even more than usual like a Punchinello.

'After all, we've won the war,' he said. 'We've just celebrated the fact.'

He thought for a moment.

'Another thing about Flores,' he said. 'Just while I think of it. The Foreign Office are very anxious to keep in with his country. They want us to give him a decoration. He's going to get a CBE.'

'But he's only just arrived.'

'I know, I know. It's just to improve relations between the two countries.'

'But we were frightfully stingy in what we handed out to the Allies in the way of decorations after six years. Hlava told me he didn't know how he was going to face his people when he reported what we offered. Foreigners expect something after they've worked with you for ages.'

'The argument is that we like to make our decorations rare.'

'And then we hand one out to a chap who's just got off the plane.'

'It's all a shambles,' said Finn. 'You get somebody like myself who does something and gets a VC. Then my son-in-law's dropped in France and killed, and no one ever hears about him at all, or what he's done. It's just a toss-up.'

'I didn't know about your son-in-law.'

'Long time ago now,' said Finn. 'Anyway, Flores is going to get a CBE. Don't breathe a word about the car.'

He turned away and stumped off towards the car park. It had evidently been a heavy decision for him to transgress in this manner; use a War Department vehicle for a private purpose, even over so short a distance. This was an unexpected piece of luck so far as I was concerned. Just what I wanted. There had seemed no avoiding going back with Finn to duty, when in fact some sort of a break was badly required. Now it would be possible to walk, achieve adjustment, after the loaded atmosphere of the Cathedral. One was more aware of this need outside in the open air than within, when the ceremony was just at an end. After all, one did not every day of the week attend a Thanksgiving Service in St Paul's for Victory after six years of war. It was not unreasonable to experience a need to mull things over for half an hour or so. The ritual itself might not have been exactly moving, too impersonal for that, too well thought out, too forward-looking in the fashionable sense (except for the invocation to confound their politics and frustrate their knavish tricks), but I was aware of some sort of inner disturbance, though its form was hard to define. There were still large crowds round the Cathedral. I hung about for a while by the west door, waiting for them to disperse.

'So you were lucky enough to be invited to the Service?'

It was Widmerpool.

'I've been superintending the military attachés.'

'Ah, I wondered how you got here—though of course I knew they selected at all levels.'

'Including yours.'

'I did not have much trouble in arranging matters. What a splendid ceremony. I was carried away. I should like to be buried in St Paul's—would prefer it really to the Abbey.'

'Make that clear in your will.'

Widmerpool laughed heartily.

'Look, Nicholas,' he said. 'I'm glad we met. You were present at a rather silly incident when Pam and I had a tiff. At that embassy. I hope you did not attribute too much seriousness to the words that passed.'

'It was no business of mine.'

'Of course not—but people do not always understand her moods. I flatter myself I do. Pamela is undoubtedly *difficile* at times. I did not wish you to form a wrong impression.'

'All's made up?'

'Perfectly. I am glad to have this opportunity of putting you right, if you ever supposed the contrary. The very reckless way she was talking about official matters was, of course, the sheerest nonsense. Perhaps you hardly took in how absurd she was being. One can forgive a lot to a little person who looks so decorative, however. Now I must hurry off.'

'The Minister again?'

'The Minister showed the utmost good humour about my lateness on that occasion. I knew he would, but I thought it was right for Pam to be apprised that official life must take precedence.'

He went off, infinitely pleased with himself, bringing back forcibly the opinion once expressed by General Conyers:

'I can see that fellow has a touch of exaggerated narcissism.'

The scene with Pamela had been altogether dismissed from Widmerpool's mind, as he had risen above failure with Mrs Haycock. Just then I had other things to ponder: Isaiah: Blake: Cowley: the wayfaring men: matters of that sort that seemed to claim attention.

A lot of people were still about the streets, making progress slow, so at the foot of Ludgate Hill I turned into New Bridge Street in the direction of the river. There was no need to hurry. A stroll along the Embankment might be what was required. Then my mind was suddenly recalled to duty. Colonel Flores was walking in front of me. Seeing a foreign military attaché, even a Neutral one, was at once to experience the conditioned reflex, by now second-nature, that is to say instant awareness that he must be looked after to the best of my ability, although not one of my own particular charges. I caught him up and saluted.

'I think you're going the wrong way for the official car park, Colonel, it's—'

Flores seized my hand and smiled.

'None of my arrangements have been official today,' he said. 'In fact none of them have been properly conducted at all. My car had another job to do after dropping me at the Cathedral, so I arranged to meet it, when all was over, in one of the turnings off the Embankment. I thought there would be no parking difficulties there, whatever happened elsewhere. Was not that a brilliant idea? You must admire my knowledge of London topography.'

'I do, sir.'

'Come with me. I'll give you a lift to wherever you want to go.'

It was no use explaining that I only wanted to walk by the river for a while, to be left alone briefly, to think of other things for a time, before returning to our room to complete whatever remained to be done. There was a fair amount of that too.

'You know London well, Colonel?'

'Not really. It was all done with a map, this great plan for the car. Am I not a credit to our Staff College?'

'It's your first visit?'

'I was here—what—fifteen years ago, it must be. With all my family, an absolute tribe of us. We stayed at the Ritz, I remember. Now we will cross the road and advance west along the line of the Thames.'

He led the way to a side turning.

'The car should be somewhere near this spot. Ah, here they are. It had to go and pick up my wife and stepdaughter.'

An oldish Rolls, displaying a CD number plate, was drawn up by the pavement in one of the streets running north and south. It was a little way ahead. As we approached, two ladies stepped out and walked towards us. They both looked incredibly elegant. In fact their elegance appalled one. Nobody in England had been able to get hold of any smart clothes for a long time now—except for the occasional 'unsolicited gift' like Matilda's—and the sight of these two gave the impression that they had walked off the stage, or from some display of exotic fashions, into the street. Colonel Flores shouted something in Spanish. We came up with them.

'This is Major—'

'Jenkins.'

'Major Jenkins was incredibly kind to me in St. Paul's.'

Madame Flores took my hand. In spite of the sunlessness of the day, she was wearing spectacles with dark lenses. When I turned to the younger one, her charming figure immediately renewed those thoughts of Jean Duport the atmosphere of the Cathedral had somehow generated. This girl had the same leggy, coltish look, untaught, yet hinting at the same time of captivating sophistications and artifices. She was much tidier than Jean had been when I first set eyes on her, tennis racquet against her hip.

'But why was it necessary to be so kind to Carlos?' asked her mother.

She spoke English as well as her husband, the accent even less perceptible.

'Major Jenkins allowed me to sit in his own special seats.'

'How very grand of him to have special seats.'

'Otherwise there would have been nowhere but the steps of the altar.'

'A most unsuitable place for you, Carlos.'

'We are going to take Major Jenkins as far as Whitehall.'

The tone of Colonel Flores with his wife was that of a man in complete control. She seemed to accept this. All the same, she began to laugh a lot.

'Nick,' she said. 'You look so different in uniform.'

'You know each other already?' asked Flores.

'Of course we do,' said Jean.

'But we haven't met for a long time.'

'This is perfectly splendid,' said Colonel Flores. 'Come along. Let's jump into the car.'

It was not only the dark lenses and changed hair-do. Jean had altered her whole style. Even the first impression, that she had contracted the faint suggestion of a foreign accent, was not wholly imaginary. The accent was there, though whether result of years in foreign parts, or adopted as a small affectation on return to her own country as wife of a foreigner, was uncertain. Oddly enough, the fact of having noticed at once that Polly Duport looked so like her mother when younger, made the presence of Jean herself less, rather than more, to be expected. It was if the mother was someone different; the daughter, the remembered Jean. About seventeen or eighteen, Polly Duport was certainly a very pretty girl; prettier, so far as that went, than her mother at the same age. Jean's attraction in those days had been something other than mere prettiness. Polly had a certain look of her father, said to be very devoted to her. She seemed quite at ease, obviously brought up in a rather old-fashioned tradition, Spanish or exported English, that made her seem older than her age. Relations with her step-father appeared cordial. The whole story began to come back. Duport himself had spoken of the South American army officer his wife had married after her affair with Brent.

'He looks like Rudolph Valentino on an off day,' Duport had said.

Colonel Flores did not fall short of that description; if anything, he rose above it. He seemed not at all surprised that his wife and I knew each other. I wondered what sort of a picture, if any, Jean had given him of her life before their marriage. Probably reminiscence played no part whatever in their relationship. It does with few people. For that matter, one did not know what the former life of Flores himself had been. We exchanged conversational banalities. Formal and smiling, Jean too was perfectly at ease. More so than myself. I suddenly remembered about Peter. She had always been fond of her brother, without anything at all obsessive about that affection. His death must have upset her.

'Poor Peter, yes. I suppose you heard over here before we did. He didn't write often. We were rather out of touch in a way. Babs was sent the official thing, being rather in with that sort of world, and as . . .'

She meant that, in the circumstances, her elder sister had been informed of Templer's death, rather than his wife.

'Used you to see anything of him?' she asked.

'Once or twice at the beginning of the war. Not after he went into that secret show.'

'I don't even know where it was.'

'Nor me—for certain.'

One suddenly remembered that she was the wife of a Neutral military attaché, with whom secret matters must even now not be discussed.

'It's all too sad. Why did he do it?'

This was not really a question. In any case, to speak of Pamela Flitton would be too complicated. Bob Duport was better unmentioned too. The car was not an ideal place for conversations of that sort, especially with her husband present.

'You must come and see us,' she said. 'We're really not properly moved in yet. I expect you know we've only just arrived. The appointment was quite a surprise—due to a change of Government.'

She mentioned an address in Knightsbridge, as it happened not far from the flat at the back of Rutland Gate, where once, quite naked, she had opened the door when we were lovers. Like so many things that have actually taken place, the incident was now wholly unbelievable. How could this chic South American lady have shared with me embraces, passionate and polymorphous as those depicted on the tapestry of Luxuria that we had discussed together when we had met at Stourwater? Had she really used those words, those very unexpected expressions, she was accustomed to cry out aloud at the moment of achievement? Once I had thought life unthinkable without her. How could that have been, when she was now only just short of a perfect stranger? An absurd incident suddenly came into my head to put things in proportion. Representatives of the Section had to attend an official party the Greeks were giving at the Ritz. In the hall, a page-boy had said to another: 'General de Gaulle's in that room over there'. The second boy had been withering. He had simply replied: 'Give me news, not history.' Jean, I remembered, had become history. Perhaps not so much history as legend, the story true only in a symbolical sense; because, although its outlines might have general application to ourselves, or even to other people, Jean and I were no longer the persons we then had been.

'Where would you like the chauffeur to drop you?' asked Colonel Flores.

'Just on this corner would be perfect.'

There were a lot more assurances, endless ones, that we must meet again, in spite of difficulties about getting the flat straight in the midst of such shortage of labour, and the imminence of demobilization, which would be followed by absence from London. I got out. The car drove off. Jean turned and waved, making that particular gesture of the hand, the palm inwards, the movement rather hesitating, that I well remembered. Vavassor had not been at the Service. He was on duty in the hall when I came through the door. We had a word together.

'Big crowd?'

'Pretty big.'

'Dull day for an affair like that.'

'Very dull.'

'How did the King look.'

'I was too far away to see.'

'All your foreigners?'

'Yes.'

Later in the afternoon I took some letters up to Finn for signature. He was sitting in his chair looking straight ahead of him.

'I got that fish.'

'You did, sir?'

'Home and dry.'

'A great relief?'

Finn nodded.

'Did I tell you David Pennistone is going to join our Paris firm?' he said.

Pennistone, though he would not reveal before he left what his post-war plans were, had said they would make me laugh when I heard them.

'I think the work will appeal to him,' said Finn. 'He wants a change. Tired of all that . . .'

He paused, searching for the right word.

'Liaison?'

'No, no,' said Finn. 'I don't mean his work here. All that . . . philosophy.'

He smiled at the absurdity of the concept.

'Any idea what you're going to do yourself when you get out of uniform, Nicholas?'

I outlined a few possibilities. Even on my own ears, they sounded grotesque figments of a fevered imagination. Finn accepted them apparently; anyway for what they were worth. I excused myself by adding that the whole idea of starting up all that sort of thing again after six years seemed strange enough.

'Remember Borrit?' asked Finn.

It already seemed a hundred years since Borrit had been with the Section, but I admitted his image faintly lingered on. Finn pushed back his chair. He spoke slowly.

'Borrit told me when he was serving on the Gold Coast, one of the Africans said to him: "What is it white men write at their desks all day?"'

Finn nodded his head several times.

'It's a question I've often asked myself,' he said. 'Ah, well. Let's see those files, Nicholas.'

Just before my own release was due, I went to take formal leave of General Philidor, whose staff by this time lived in one of the streets off Grosvenor Square. I looked in on Kernével's room on the way out, but he was not at home. Then, when I reached the pavement outside, someone shouted from a top storey window. It was Kernével himself.

'Wait a moment—I'm coming down.'

I returned to the hall. Kernével came clattering down the stairs. Travelling at high speed, he was red in the face.

'Some wine's arrived from France. Come and have a glass. We're in one of the upper rooms.'

We climbed the stairs. I told him this was probably the last time we should meet officially.

'You know that French writer you spoke about? Something to do with a *plage*—in *Normandie*?'

'Proust?'

'That's the one. I've been into it about him. He's not taught in the schools.'

Kernével looked severe. He implied that the standards of literature must be kept high. We reached a room on the top floor with which I was not familiar. Borda, Kernével's assistant—who came from Roussillon and afterwards married an English girl—was there, with a French captain called Montsaldy, who seemed responsible for the wine. There were several bottles. It was a red Bordeaux, soft and fruity after the Algerian years. We talked about demobilization.

'It is true your army gives you a suit of clothes when you retire?' asked Borda.

'More than just a suit—shirt, tie, vest, pants, socks, shoes, hat, mackintosh.'

'Some of the uniform I wore in North Africa will do for civilian life, I think,' said Borda. 'In the hot weather.'

'I carried tropical uniform in the other war,' said Montsaldy, who looked a grizzled fifty. 'It wears out quickly.'

'Me, too,' said Kernével. 'Tropical uniform always makes me think of Leprince. He was a big fellow in our platoon. Ah, Leprince, *c'était un lapin*. What a fellow. We used to call him *le prince des cons*. That man was what you call well provided. I remember we were being inspected one day by a new officer. As I say, we were in tropical uniform. The major came to the end of the line where Leprince stood. He pointed to Leprince. "A quoi, cet homme?"'

Kernével jumped to attention and saluted, as if he were the platoon sergeant.

'"C'est son sexe, mon commandant."

"C'est dégoûtant!"'

Kernével made as if to march on, now acting the outraged major.

'He was an old fellow,' he said, 'white haired and very religious.'

We all laughed.

'Borda's blushing,' said Kernével. 'He's going to be married quite soon.'

That was the last time Kernével and I met in uniform, but we used to see each other occasionally afterwards, because he continued to work in London. Indeed, we shared a rather absurd incident together a few years after the war was over. Kernével had been awarded an MBE for his work with us, but for some reason, the delay probably due to French rather than British red tape, this decoration did not 'come through' for a long time. Kernével, at last told by his own authorities he could accept the order, was informed by ours that it would be presented by the CIGS; not, of course, the same one who had held the post during the war. Kernével, also notified that he might bring a friend to witness the ceremony, invited me to attend. We were taken to the Army Council Room—Vavassor, too, seemed by now to have faded away—where it turned out the investiture consisted of only half-a-dozen recipients, of whom Kernével was the only Frenchman. When the citations were read out, it appeared the rest had performed prodigies of bravery. There were two Poles, an American, an Australian and New Zealander, perhaps one or two more, all equally distinguished operationally, but whose awards had for one reason or another been deferred. The Field-Marshal now CIGS—again not the one whose Tactical HQ we had visited—was a very distinguished officer, but without much small talk. Huge, impressive, *sérieux* to a degree, he was not, so it appeared, greatly at ease in making the appropriate individual remark when the actual medal was handed out. Before this was done, an officer from the Military Secretary's branch read aloud each individual citation:

'In the face of heavy enemy fire . . . total disregard for danger . . . although already twice wounded . . . managed to reach the objective . . . got through with the message . . . brought up the relief in spite of . . . silenced the machine-gun nest . . .'

Kernével came last.

'Captain Kernével,' announced the MS officer.

He paused for a second, then slightly changed his tone of voice.

'Citation withheld for security reasons.'

For a moment I was taken by surprise, almost immediately grasping that a technicality of procedure was involved. Liaison duties came under 'Intelligence', which included all sorts of secret activities; accordingly, 'I' awards were automatically conferred without citation. It was one of those characteristic regulations to which the routine of official life accustoms one. However, the CIGS heard the words with quite other reactions to these. Hitherto, as I have said, although perfectly correct and dignified in his demeanour, his cordiality had been essentially formal, erring if anything on emphasis of the doctrine that nothing short of unconditional courage is to be expected of a soldier. These chronicles of the brave had not galvanized him into being in the least garrulous. Now, at last, his face changed and softened. He was deeply moved. He took a step forward. A giant of a man, towering above Kernével, he put his hand round his shoulder.

'You people were the real heroes of that war,' he said.

Afterwards, when we walked back across the Horse Guards, Kernével insisted I had arranged the whole incident on purpose to rag him.

'It was a good leg-pull,' he said. 'How did you manage it?'

'I promise you.'

'That's just what you pretend.'

'I suppose it would be true to say that there were moments when the Vichy people might have taken disagreeable measures if they had been able to lay their hands on you.'

'You never know,' said Kernével.

The final rites were performed the day after I took wine with the Frenchmen in Upper Grosvenor Street. Forms were signed, equipment handed in, the arcane processes of entering the army enacted, like one of Dr Trelawney's Black Masses, in reverse continuity with an unbelievable symmetry of rhythm. I almost expected the greatcoat, six years before seeming to symbolize induction into this world through the Looking Glass, would be ceremonially lifted from my shoulders. That did not take place. Nevertheless, observances similarly sartorial in character were to close the chapter. This time the *mise-en-scène* was Olympia, rather than the theatrical costumier's, a shop once more, yet at the same time not a shop.

Olympia, London's equivalent of colosseum or bull-ring, had been metamorphosed into a vast emporium for men's wear. Here, how often as a child had one watched the Royal Tournament, horse and rider deftly clearing the posts-and-rails, sweating ratings dragging screw-guns over dummy fortifications, marines and airmen executing inconceivably elaborate configurations of drill. Here, in the tan, these shows had ended in a grand finale of historical conflict, Ancient Britons and Romans, Saxons and Normans, the Spanish Armada, Malplaquet, Minden, Waterloo, the Light Brigade. Now all memory of such stirring moments had been swept away. Rank on rank, as far as the eye could scan, hung flannel trousers and tweed coats, drab macintoshes and grey suits with a white line running through the material. If this were not a shop, what was it? Perhaps the last scene of the play in which one had been performing, set in an outfitter's, where you 'acted' buying the clothes, put them on, then left the theatre to give up the Stage and find something else to do. Or were those weird unnerving shapes on the coat-hangers anonymous cohorts of that 'exceedingly great army', who would need no demob suits, but had come to watch the lucky ones?

'Ropey togs,' said a quartermaster-captain.

'The hats are a bit *outré*,' agreed a Coldstreamer with a limp. 'But one of those sports jackets, as I believe they're called, will come in useful in the country.'

Assistants round about were urbane and attentive. They too seemed to be acting the part with almost passionate dedication, recommending the garments available with the greatest enthusiasm. Was this promise of a better world? Perhaps one had reached that already and this was a celestial haberdasher's. The place was not even at all crowded. Most of the customers, if that was what they ought to be called, looked about forty, demobilization groups taking precedence on points gained by age, length of service, period overseas and so on. We wandered round like men in a dream. As one moved from suits to shoes, shoes to socks, socks back again to suits, the face of a Gunner captain seemed familiar. In due course we found ourselves side by side examining ties.

'This pink one with a criss-cross pattern might not look too bad for occasions,' he said thoughtfully. 'We used to meet sometimes, didn't we?'

'Aren't you called Gilbert?'

'At dances years ago.'

Archie Gilbert had been the 'spare man' *par excellence* for every hostess in need, perfectly dressed, invariably punctual, prepared to deal with mothers or daughters without prejudice regarding looks or age, quietly conversational, unthinkable as taking a glass too much or making unwelcome advances in a taxi. His work had been believed to be in a firm concerned with non-ferrous metals, whatever they might be, though it had never been easy to imagine him in day clothes doing an ordinary job. However, in spite of that outward appearance, he had somehow or other taken on a world war. His fair moustache was a shade thicker, he himself had filled out, indeed become almost portly. Otherwise, more closely examined, he had not greatly changed. His appearance, always discreetly military, had, as it were, camouflaged him from instant recognition at first sight. His uniform—he wore very neat battledress, of normal material, otherwise cut rather like the Field-Marshal's—was as spick and span as his evening clothes had always been. We talked of our respective war careers. He had been in an anti-aircraft battery stationed in one of the northern suburbs of London. One pictured a lot of hard, rather dreary work, sometimes fairly dangerous, sometimes demanding endurance in unexciting circumstances. Perhaps experience in the London ballrooms had stood him in good stead in the latter respect. It was impossible to remain incurious about the question of marriage; which of the scores of girls with whom he used to dance he had finally chosen. Perhaps his bachelor gifts were still too overwhelming to be extinguished in matrimony. I crudely asked the question. Archie Gilbert nodded, smiling gently.

'Used I to meet your wife in those days?'

He shook his head, smiling again.

'We ran across each other when I was with the battery,' he said. 'Her family lived just over the road.'

There the matter rested. He divulged no more. We talked of some of the girls we had known in the past.

'Haven't seen any of them for ages,' he said. 'One hears their names occasionally. Usen't you to know Barbara Goring, who married Johnny Pardoe? He was rather odd for a time—melancholia or something—then he went back to the army and did well in Burma, I believe. Rosie Manasch had a lot of ups-and-downs, they say, with Jock Udall. Of course, he was shot by the Germans after that mass attempt to escape from a POW camp. Rosie was a great character. I used to like her a lot.'

He unfolded an evening paper.

'If you were doing liaison work with the Poles, you may know the one who's just married Margaret Budd. Do you remember her? What a beauty. I don't know what happened to her husband, whether he was killed or whether it didn't work. He was quite a bit older than her and distilled whisky.'

He held out the paper. Margaret Budd's bridegroom was Horaczko; the marriage celebrated at a registry office. The paragraph below recorded another wedding at the same place. It was that of Widmerpool and Pamela Flitton. Archie Gilbert pointed a finger towards this additional item.

'That name always sticks in my mind,' he said. 'Barbara Goring once poured sugar over his head at a ball of the Huntercombes'. It was really too bad. Made an awful mess too. Have you decided what you're going to take from the stuff here? It might be much worse. I think everything myself.'

'Except the underclothes.'

Praise for the novels
in the Fourth Movement
of A Dance to the Music of Time*:*

"One of the most important works of fiction since the Second World War. . . . The novel looked, as it began, something like a comedy of manners; then, for a while, like a tragedy of manners; now like a vastly entertaining, deeply melancholy, yet somehow courageous statement about human existence."
– Naomi Bliven, *New Yorker*

"A unique joy to read. The main characters are now middle-aged [in *Temporary Kings*]; the gang, old and new, meet up at a cultural conference in Venice. The elegance of the style draws you in like incense to reverie."
– *The (London) Sunday Times*

"The decline and fall of Kenneth Widmerpool is the main theme of *Hearing Secret Harmonies*. . . . The various stages are precisely charted in terms both comic and horrible. It has been a distinction of this author to blend the two, but he has never before achieved so rich a mixture as here."
– Kingsley Amis, *Observer*

"Mr. Powell is writing an enormously long, varied, intelligent and funny narrative that will be a joy to us all for years to come."
– Philip Larkin, *New Statesman*

"Since 1951, *The Music of Time* has sounded not only the mostly comic harmonies of social change in a very particular English set but the deeper harmonies of life as it is lived elsewhere in the Western world. . . . To the question: 'What have civilized Westerners been like in the first 70 years of the twentieth century?' worse answers might be given than: read *A Dance to the Music of Time*."
– Charles Michener, *Newsweek*

Phoenix Fiction titles from Chicago

The Bridge on the Drina by Ivo Andrić
Concrete by Thomas Bernhard
Correction by Thomas Bernhard
Gargoyles by Thomas Bernhard
The Lime Works by Thomas Bernhard
Old Masters by Thomas Bernhard
Wittgenstein's Nephew by Thomas Bernhard
Woodcutters by Thomas Bernhard
Yes by Thomas Bernhard
The Last, Long Journey by Roger Cleeve
Acts of Theft by Arthur A. Cohen
A Hero in His Time by Arthur A. Cohen
In the Days of Simon Stern by Arthur A. Cohen
Solomon's Folly by Leslie Croxford
The Old Man and the Bureaucrats by Mircea Eliade
In the Time of Greenbloom by Gabriel Fielding
Through Streets Broad and Narrow by Gabriel Fielding
Convergence by Jack Fuller
Concluding by Henry Green
Pictures from an Institution by Randall Jarrell
The Survival of the Fittest by Pamela Hansford Johnson
A Bird in the House by Margaret Laurence
The Diviners by Margaret Laurence
The Fire-Dwellers by Margaret Laurence
A Jest of God by Margaret Laurence
The Stone Angel by Margaret Laurence
Fiela's Child by Dalene Matthee
The Conquerors by André Malraux
The Walnut Trees of Altenberg by André Malraux
The Bachelor of Arts by R. K. Narayan
The Dark Room by R. K. Narayan
The English Teacher by R. K. Narayan
Swami and Friends by R. K. Narayan
A Dance to the Music of Time (in four *Movements*) by Anthony Powell
A Father's Words by Richard Stern
Golk by Richard Stern
An Innocent Millionaire by Stephen Vizinczey
In Praise of Older Women by Stephen Vizinczey
Lord Byron's Doctor by Paul West
The Painted Canoe by Anthony Winkler
A Coin in Nine Hands by Marguerite Yourcenar
Fires by Marguerite Yourcenar
Two Lives and a Dream by Marguerite Yourcenar

South San
Francisco
Public
Library

FICTION

Includes these novels:

The Valley of Bones ✦ *The Soldier's Art* ✦ *The Military Philosophers*

In this third volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time,* we again meet Widmerpool, doggedly rising in rank; Jenkins, shifted from one dismal army post to another; Stringham, heroically emerging from alcoholism; Templer, still on his eternal sexual quest. Here, too, we are introduced to Pamela Flitton, one of the most beautiful and dangerous women in modern fiction. Wickedly barbed in its wit, uncanny in its seismographic recording of human emotions and social currents, this saga stands as an unsurpassed rendering of England's finest yet most costly hour.

"A great chronicle . . . absolutely fascinating and the most important fiction since the war. . . . I would rather read Powell than any English novelist now writing."—Kingsley Amis

"When the time comes for the historian to get a sense of what life was like for the British between and during the two wars he can wrap up the whole era with Anthony Powell's incalculably brilliant series."—*Time*

"What makes Powell's work so exciting is the ability to create truth, emotional, evocative, revealing . . . so that reading Powell is like living someone else's life, inextricably entangled with one's own."
—Elizabeth Janeway, *New York Times*

ANTHONY POWELL'S recent works include *Miscellaneous Verdicts* and *Under Review,* both available from the University of Chicago Press.

Cover illustration: Nicholas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (detail). c. 1639–40. The Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.

Cover design: Toni Ellis.

ISBN 0-226-67717-6

90000>

9 780226 677170

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

A dance to the music of time

ANTHONY POWELL ◆ 4TH MOVEMENT

P871
1995
v.4

Praise for the novels in the **Fourth Movement** *of Anthony Powell's comic masterpiece:*

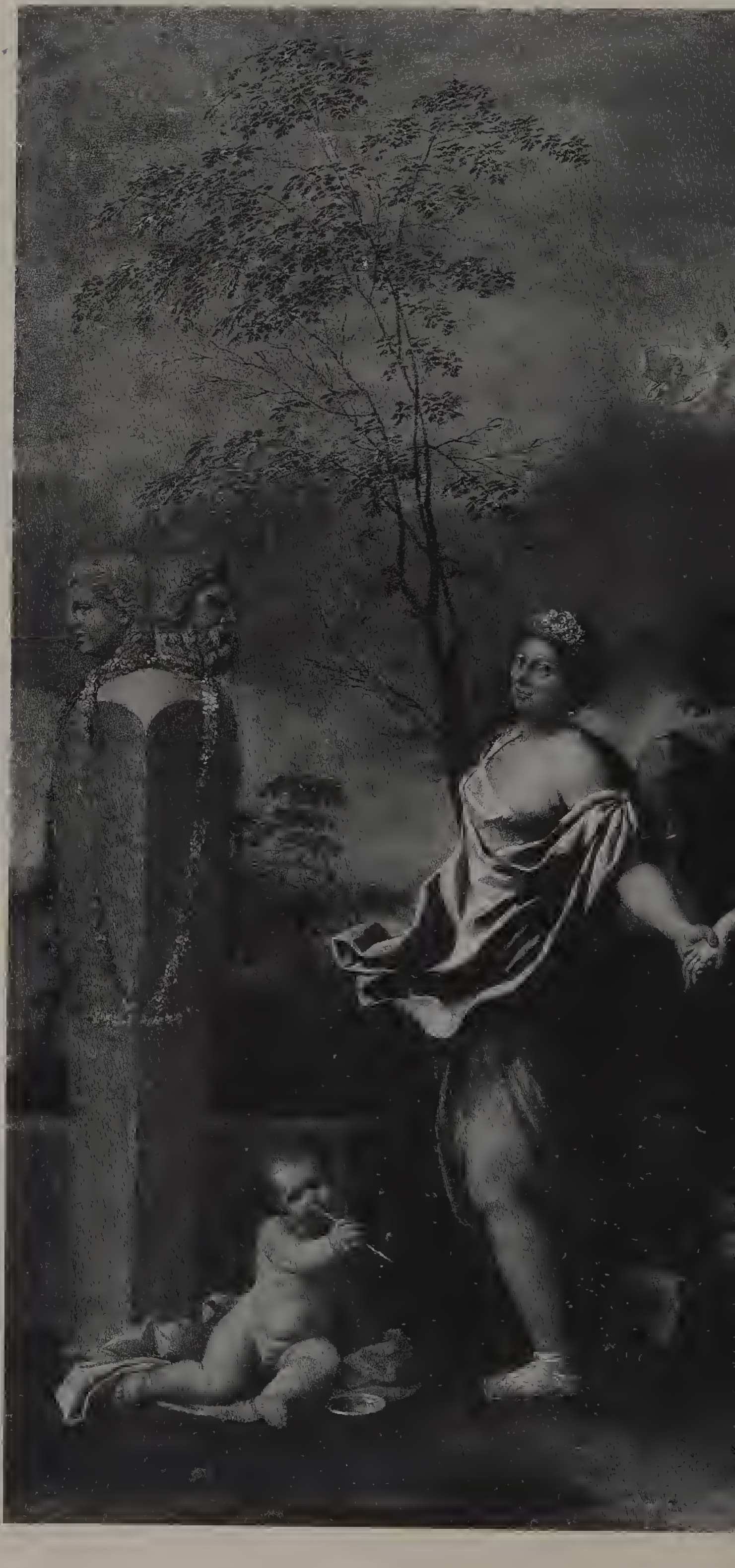
"One of the most important works of fiction since the Second World War. . . . The novel looked, as it began, something like a comedy of manners; then, for a while, like a tragedy of manners; now like a vastly entertaining, deeply melancholy, yet somehow courageous statement about human existence."
– Naomi Bliven, *New Yorker*

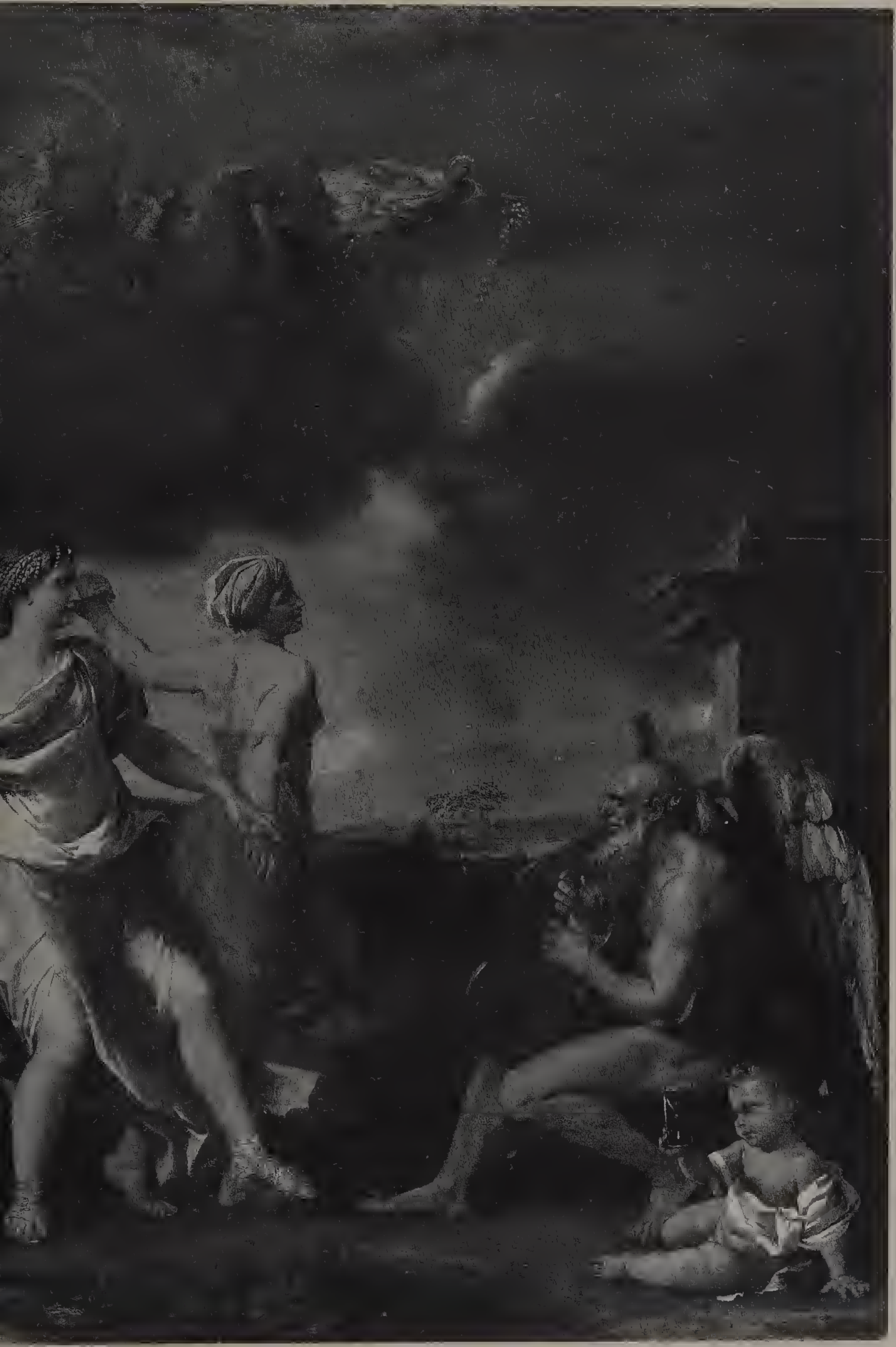
"A unique joy to read. The main characters are now middle-aged [in *Temporary Kings*]; the gang, old and new, meet up at a cultural conference in Venice. The elegance of the style draws you in like incense to reverie."
– The (London) Sunday Times

"The decline and fall of Kenneth Widmerpool is the main theme of *Hearing Secret Harmonies*. . . . The various stages are precisely charted in terms both comic and horrible. It has been a distinction of this author to blend the two, but he has never before achieved so rich a mixture as here."
– Kingsley Amis, *Observer*

"Mr. Powell is writing an enormously long, varied, intelligent and funny narrative that will be a joy to us all for years to come."
– Philip Larkin, *New Statesman*

"Since 1951, *The Music of Time* has sounded not only the mostly comic harmonies of social change in a very particular English set but the deeper harmonies of life as it is lived elsewhere in the Western world. . . . To the question: 'What have civilized Westerners been like in the first 70 years of the twentieth century?' worse answers might be given than: read *A Dance to the Music of Time*."
– Charles Michener, *Newsweek*





Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time,* c. 1639–40. The Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.

A Dance to the Music of Time

Fourth Movement

MARYGROVE COLLEGE
LIBRARY
DETROIT, MICH.

Books by

Anthony Powell

A Dance to the Music of Time, First Movement
(including the following three novels)
A Question of Upbringing
A Buyer's Market
The Acceptance World

A Dance to the Music of Time, Second Movement
(including the following three novels)
At Lady Molly's
Casanova's Chinese Restaurant
The Kindly Ones

A Dance to the Movement of Time, Third Movement
(including the following three novels)
The Valley of Bones
The Soldier's Art
The Military Philosophers

A Dance to the Music of Time, Fourth Movement
(including the following three novels)
Books Do Furnish a Room
Temporary Kings
Hearing Secret Harmonies

OTHER NOVELS
Afternoon Men
Venusberg
From a View to a Death
Agents and Patients
Fisher King
O, How the Wheel Becomes It!
What's Become of Waring

OTHER WORKS
To Keep the Ball Rolling: The Memoirs of Anthony Powell
Volume I: *Infants of the Spring*
Volume II: *Messengers of Day*
Volume III: *Faces in My Time*
Volume IV: *The Strangers Are All Gone*
John Aubrey and His Friends
Brief Lives: And Other Selected Writings of John Aubrey
Miscellaneous Verdicts: Writings on Writers
Under Review: Further Writings on Writers, 1946–1990

PLAYS
The Garden God
The Rest I'll Whistle

A Dance to the Music of Time

Fourth Movement

BOOKS DO FURNISH A ROOM
TEMPORARY KINGS
HEARING SECRET HARMONIES

BY

Anthony Powell

★ ★ ★ ★

The University of Chicago Press

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
Copyright © 1971, 1973, 1975 by Anthony Powell
Copyright renewed 1979, 1983 by Anthony Powell
All rights reserved. Originally published 1976
University of Chicago Press Edition 1995
Printed in the United States of America

01 00 99 98 97 96 95 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0-226-67718-4 (pbk.)

The *Fourth Movement* of *A Dance to the Music of Time* includes the final three of the twelve novels which make up the entire opus. *Books Do Furnish a Room* was first published in 1971. *Temporary Kings* was first published in 1973, and *Hearing Secret Harmonies* was first published in 1975. The three novels were first published in one volume in the United States in 1976.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Powell, Anthony, 1905–
A dance to the music of time / by Anthony Powell.
p. cm.
Contents: 1st movement. A question of upbringing ; A buyer's market ; The acceptance world — 2nd movement. At Lady Molly's ; Casanova's Chinese restaurant ; The kindly ones — 3rd movement. The valley of bones ; The soldier's art ; The military philosophers — 4th movement. Books do furnish a room ; Temporary kings ; Hearing secret harmonies.
1. England—Social life and customs—20th century—Fiction.
2. Autobiographical fiction, English. I. Title.
PR6031.074D33 1995
823′.912—dc20 94-47228
CIP

Cover image credit: Bridgeman/Art Resource, NY

♾ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Books Do Furnish a Room

for
Rupert

1

Reverting to the university at forty, one immediately recaptured all the crushing melancholy of the undergraduate condition. As the train drew up at the platform, before the local climate had time to impair health, academic contacts disturb the spirit, a more imminent gloom was re-established, its sinewy grip in a flash making one young again. Depressive symptoms, menacing in all haunts of youth, were in any case easily aroused at this period, to be accepted as delayed action of the last six years. The odd thing was how distant the recent past had also become, the army now as stylized in the mind—to compare another triumphal frieze—as the legionaries of Trajan's Column, exercising, sacrificing, sweating at their antique fatigues, silent files on eternal parade to soundless military music. Nevertheless, shades from those days still walked abroad. Only a week before, the peak of a French general's khaki képi, breaking rather too abruptly through the winter haze of Piccadilly, had by conditioned reflex jerked my right hand from its overcoat pocket in preparation for a no longer consonant salute, counterfeiting the gesture of a deserter who has all but given himself away. A residuum of the experience was inevitable.

Meanwhile, traditional textures of existence were laboriously patched together in an attempt to reaffirm some sort of personal identity, however blurred. Even if—as some thought—the let-up were merely temporary, it was no less welcome, though the mood after the earlier conflict—summarized by a snatch Ted Jeavons liked to hum when in poor form—was altogether absent:

'Après la guerre,
There'll be a good time everywhere.'

That did not hinder looking forward to engrossment during the next few weeks amongst certain letters and papers deposited in the libraries here. Solitude would be a luxury after the congestions of wartime, archaic folios a soothing drug. War left, on the one hand, a passionate desire to tackle a lot of work: on the other, never to do any work again. It was a state of mind Robert Burton—about whom I was writing a book—would have well understood. Irresolution appealed to him as one of the myriad forms of Melancholy, although he was, of course, concerned in the main with no mere temporary depression or fidgetiness, but a 'chronic or continued disease, a settled humour'. Still, post-war melancholy might have rated a short sub-section in the great work:

THE ANATOMY OF MELANCHOLY
What it is, with all the Kindes, Causes, Symptomes,
Prognostickes, and severall cures of it. Three Maine Partitions
with their severall Sections, Members and Sub-sections,
Philosophically, Medicinally, Historically, Opened and cut up
by Democritus Junior. With a Satyricall Preface, conducing to
the following Discourse. Anno Dom. 1621.

The title page showed not only Burton's own portrait in ruff and skull cap, but also figures illustrative of his theme; love-madness; hypochondriasis; religious melancholy. The emblems of jealousy and solitude were there too, together with those sovereign cures for melancholy and madness, borage and hellebore. Burton had long been a favourite of mine. A study of him would be a change from writing novels. The book was to be called *Borage and Hellebore.*

As the forlorn purlieus of the railway-station end of the town gave place to colleges, reverie, banal if you like, though eminently Burtonesque, turned towards the relatively high proportion of persons known pretty well at an earlier stage of life, both here and elsewhere, now dead, gone off their rocker, withdrawn into states of existence they—or I—had no wish to share. The probability was that even without cosmic upheaval some kind of reshuffle has to take place halfway through life, a proposition borne out by the autobiographies arriving thick and fast—three or four at a time at regular intervals—for review in one of the weeklies. At this very moment my bag was weighed down by several of these volumes, to be dealt with in time off from the seventeenth century: *Purged Not in Lethe . . . A Stockbroker in Sandals . . . Slow on the Feather . . . Moss off a Rolling Stone . . .* chronicles of somebody or other's individual fate, on the whole unenthralling enough, except insomuch as every individual's story has its enthralling aspect, though the essential pivot was usually omitted or obscured by most autobiographers.

However, nearly all revealed, if not explicitly in every case, a similar reorientation towards the sixth climacteric, their narrative supporting, on the whole, evidence already noticeably piling up, that friends, if required at all in the manner of the past, must largely be reassembled at about this milestone. The changeover might improve consistency, even quality, but certainly lost in intimacy; anyway that peculiar kind of intimacy that is consoling when you are young, though probably too vulnerable to withstand the ever increasing self-regard of later years.

Accommodation was in college. The place looked much the same as ever. Only one porter, his face unfamiliar, was on duty at the lodge. After studying a list for a long time, he signified a distant staircase for the rooms allotted. The traditional atmosphere, tenuously poised between a laxly run boarding-school and seedy residential club, now leant more emphatically towards the former type of institution. The rooms, arctic as of old, evidently belonged to a fairly austere young man, whose only picture was an unframed photograph of a hockey team. It stood curling on the mantelpiece. In the bookcase, a lot of works on economics terminated with St John Clarke's *Dust Thou Art*, rather a recondite one about the French Revolution, which might be pleasurable to reassess critically. I pushed on into the bedroom. Here a crisis declared itself. The bed was unmade. Only a sombrely stained blue-grey mattress, folded in three, lay on the rusty wires of the frame. Back at the porter's lodge, the inconceivable difficulties of remedying lack of bedclothes at this hour were radically discussed. Later, in hall, a few zombie-like figures collected together to consume a suitably zombie-sustaining repast.

This was the opening of a routine of days in the library, nights collating notes, the monotony anodyne. One became immediately assimilated with other dim, disembodied, unapproachable entities, each intent on his own enigmatic preoption, who flit through the cobbled lanes and gothic archways of a university in vacation. It was what Burton himself called 'a silent, sedentary, solitary private life', and it well suited me during the middle of the week. For weekends, I returned to London. Once Killick, a hearty rugby-playing philosophy don of my college, now grunting and purple, came bustling up the street, a pile of books under his arm, and I accosted him. There were explanations. Killick issued an abstracted invitation to dinner. The following week, when I turned up, it was to be told Professor Killick had gone to Manchester to give two lectures. This oversight hardly came as a surprise. In a city of shadows, appointments were bound to be kept in a shadowy fashion.

At the same time something very different, something perfectly substantial, not shadowy at all, lay ahead as not to be too long postponed, even if a latent unwillingness to face that fact might delay taking the plunge. A moral reckoning had to be discharged. As the days passed, the hypnotic pull to pay a call on Sillery grew increasingly strong, disinclination—that was, of course, far too strong a word, indeed not the right word at all—scarcely lessening, so much as the Sillery magnetism itself gathering force. Pretendedly heedless enquiries revealed that, although retired for some time from all administrative duties in his own college, Sillery still retained his old rooms, receiving visitors willingly, even avidly, it was reported, with so far as possible the traditional elements of welcome.

To enter Sillery's sitting-room after twenty years was to drive a relatively deep fissure through variegated seams of Time. The faintly laundry-cupboard odour, as one came through the door, generated in turn the taste of the rock-buns dispensed at those tea-parties, their gritty indeterminate flavour once more dehydrating the palate. The props round about designed for Sillery's nightly performance remained almost entirely unaltered. Eroded loose-covers of immemorially springless armchairs still precariously endured; wide perforations frayed long since in the stretch of carpet before the door, only a trifle more hazardous to the unwary walker. As might be expected, the framed photographs of jaunty young men had appreciably increased, several of the new arrivals in uniform, one in a turban, two or three American.

In this room, against this background, Sillery's machinations, such as they were, had taken shape for half a century. Here a thousand undergraduate attitudes had been penitentially acted out. Youth, dumb with embarrassment, breathless with exhibitionism, stuttering with nerves, inarticulate with conceit; the socially flamboyant, the robustly brawny, the crudely uninstructed, the palely epicene; one and all had obediently leapt through the hoop at Sillery's ringmaster behest; one and all submitted themselves to the testing flame of this burning fiery furnace of adolescent experience. Such concepts crowded in only after a few minutes spent in the room. At the moment of entry no more was to be absorbed than the fact that another guest had already arrived, to whom Sillery, with much miming and laughter, was narrating an anecdote. Any immediate responses on my own part were cut short at once, for Sillery, as if ever on his guard against possible assassination, sprang from his chair and charged forward, ready to come to grips with any assailant.

'Timothy? . . . Mike? . . . Cedric? . . .'

'Nick—'

'Carteret-Owen? . . . Jelf? . . . Kniveton? . . .'

'Jenkins—how are you, Sillers?'

'So you've come all the way from New South Wales, Nick?'

'I—'

'No—of course— you were appointed to that headmastership after all, Nick?'

'It's—'

'I can see you haven't quite recovered from that head wound . . .'

The question of identification was finally established with the help of the other caller, who turned out to be Short, a member of Sillery's college a year senior to myself. Short had been not only a great supporter of Sillery's tea-parties, but also vigorously promulgated Sillery's reputation as—Short's own phrase— a 'power in the land'. We had known each other as undergraduates, continued to keep up some sort of an acquaintance in early London days, then drifted into different worlds. I had last heard his name, though never run across him, during the war when Short had been working in the Cabinet Office, with which my War Office Section had occasional dealings. He had probably transferred there temporarily from his own Ministry, because he had entered another branch of the civil service on leaving the University.

Short's demeanour, now a shade more portentous, more authoritarian, retained, like the sober suit he wore, the same consciously buttoned-up character. This mild, well-behaved air concealed a good deal of quiet obstinacy, a reasonable amalgam of malice. Always of high caste in his profession, now almost a princeling, he stemmed nevertheless from the same bureaucratic ancestry as a mere tribesman like Blackhead, prototype of all the race of *fonctionnaires*, and, anthropologically speaking, might be expected to revert to the same atavistic obstructionism if roused.

Sillery, moustache a shade more ragged and yellow, blue bow tie with its white spots, more likely than ever to fall undone, was not much changed either. Perhaps illusorily, his body and face had shrunk, physical contraction giving him a more simian look than formerly, though of no ordinary monkey; Brueghel's Antwerp apes (admired by Pennistone) rather than the Douanier's homely denizens of *Tropiques*, which Soper, the Divisional Catering Officer, had resembled. Even the real thing, Maisky, defunct pet of the Jeavonses, could not compare with Sillery's devastating monkeylike shrewdness. So strong was this impression of metempsychosis that he seemed about to bound up on to the bookcases, scattering the photographs of handsome young men, and pile of envelopes (the top one addressed to the Home Secretary) as he landed back on the table. He looked in glowing health. No one had ever pronounced with certainty on the subject of Sillery's age.

Year of birth was omitted in all books of reference. He was probably still under eighty.

'Sit down, Nick, sit down. Leonard and I were talking of an old friend—Bill Truscott. Remember Bill? I'm sure you do. Of course he was a wee bit older than you both'—Sillery had now perfectly achieved his chronological bearings—'but not very much. These differences get levelled out in the sands of time. They do indeed. Going to do great things was Bill. Next Prime Minister but three. We all thought so. No use denying it, is there, Leonard?'

Short smiled a temperate personal acquiescence that could not at the same time be interpreted for a moment as in any way committing his Department.

'Wrote some effective verse too,' said Sillery. 'Even if it was a shade derivative. Mark Members always sneered at Bill as a poet, even when he respected him as a coming man. Rupert Brooke at his most babbling, Mark used to say, Housman at his most lad-ish. Mark's always so severe. I told him so when he was here the other day addressing one of the undergraduate societies. You know Mark's hair's gone snow white. Can't think what happened to cause that, he's always taken great care of himself. Rather becoming, all the same. Gives just that air of distinction required by the passing of youth—and nobody got more out of being a professional young man than Mark when the going was good. He was talking of his old friend—*our* old friend—J. G. Quiggin. JG's abandoned the pen, I hear, perhaps wisely. A literary caesarean was all but required for that infant of long gestation *Unburnt Boats*, which I often feared might come to birth prematurely as a puling little magazine article. Now JG's going to promote literary works rather than write them himself. In brief, he's to become a publisher.'

'So I heard,' said Short. 'He's starting a new firm called Quiggin & Craggs.'

'To think I used to sit on committees with Howard Craggs discussing arms embargoes for Bolivia and Paraguay,' said Sillery. 'Sounds like an embargo on arms for the Greeks and Trojans now. Still, I read a good letter from Craggs the other day in one of the papers about the need for Socialists and Communists hammering out a common programme of European reconstruction.'

'Craggs was a temporary civil servant during the war,' said Short. 'Rationing paper, was it? Something of the sort.'

'That was when JG made himself useful as caretaker at Boggis & Stone,' said Sillery. 'I expect that explains why JG dresses like a partisan now, a man straight from the *maquis*, check shirts, leather jackets, ankle-boots. "Well, Quiggin's always been in the forefront of the Sales Resistance where clothes were concerned." That was Brightman's comment. "Even if he did live 'reservéd and austere' during hostilities—'reservéd' anyway." We all enjoy Brightman's rather cruel wit. Brightman and I are buddies now, by the way, all forgiven and forgotten. Besides, I expect JG's circumscribed by lack of clothing coupons. All right for such as me, still wearing the suit I bought for luncheon with Mr Asquith at Downing Street before the Flood, but then it was a good piece of cloth to start off with, not like those sad old reach-me-downs of JG's we're all so familiar with. No doubt they disintegrated under the stress of war conditions. Why not ankle-boots, forsooth? I'd be glad of a pair myself in winter here.'

Sillery paused. He seemed to feel he had allowed himself to rattle on rather too disconnectedly, at the same time could not remember what exactly had been the subject in hand. Like a conjuror whose patter for a specific trick has become misplaced, he had to go back to the beginning again.

'We were talking of Bill Truscott and his verse. I expect

Bill has abandoned the Muse now, though you never know. It's a hard habit to break. Would you believe it, I produced a slim volume myself when a young man? Did you know that, either of you? Suggested the influence of Coventry Patmore, so the pundits averred. I suppose most of us think of ourselves as poets at that age. No harm done. Well, that shouldn't be such a bad job at the Coal Board for Bill, if things are constituted as you prophesy, Leonard. Once Bill's been well and truly inducted there, he should be safe for a lifetime.'

Again Short allowed polite agreement to be inferred, without prejudice to official discretion, or additional evidence that might be subsequently revealed.

'But what mysterious mission brings you to our academic altars, Nick? We don't even know what you are doing these days. Back writing those novels of yours? I expect so. I used to hear something of your activities when you were a gallant soldier looking after those foreign folk. You know what an interest I take in old friends. Leonard and I were just speaking of poor Prince Theodoric, who was once going to perform all sorts of benefits for us here, endow scholarships and whatnot. Donners-Brebner was to co-operate, Sir Magnus Donners having interests in those parts. Now, alas, the good Prince is in exile, Sir Magnus gathered to his fathers. The University will never see any of those lovely scholarships. But we must march with the times. There's a new spirit abroad in Prince Thedoric's country, and, whatever people may say, there's no doubt about Marshal Stalin's sincerity in desire for a good-neighbour policy, if the West allows it. What I wrote to *The Times*. Those Tolland relations of yours, Nick? That unsatisfactory boy Hugo, how is he?'

I dealt with these personal matters as expeditiously as possible, explaining my purpose in staying at the University.

'Ah, Burton?' said Sillery. 'An interesting old gentleman, I've no doubt. Many years since I looked into the *Anatomy*.'

That was undoubtedly true. Sillery was not a great reader. He was also wholly incurious about the byways of writing, indeed not very approving of writing at all, unless books likely to make a splash beyond mere literary consideration, of which there was no hope here. He abandoned the subject, satisfied apparently that the motive alleged was not designed to conceal some less pedestrian, more controversially viable activity, and the unexciting truth had been told. A pause in his talk, never an opportunity to be missed, offered a chance, the first one, of congratulating him on the peerage conferred in the most recent Honours List. Sillery yelled with laughter at such felicitations.

'Ain't it absurd?' he shouted. 'As you'll have guessed, my dear Nick, I didn't want the dratted thing at all. Not in the least. But it looked unmannerly to refuse. Doesn't do to look unmannerly. Literal case of *noblesse oblige*. So there it is. A Peer of the Realm. Who'd have prophesied that for crude young Sillers, that happy-go-lucky little fellow, in the days of yore? It certainly gave some people here furiously to think. Ah, the envies and inhumanities of the human heart. You wouldn't believe. I keep on telling the college servants to go easy with all that my-lording. Makes me feel as if I was acting in Shakespeare. They will have it, good chaps that they are. Fact is they seem positively to enjoy addressing their old friend in that majestic way, revel in it even. Strange but true. Genuinely glad to see old Sillers a lord. Ah, when you're my age, dear men, you'll know what an empty thing is worldly success and human ambition—but we mustn't say that to an important person like Leonard, must we, Nick? And of course I don't want to seem ungrateful to the staunch movement that ennobled me, of which I remain the most loyal of supporters. Indeed, we've just been talking of some of Labour's young lions, for Leonard has forgone his former Liberal allegiances in favour of Mr Attlee and his merry men.'

'Of course, as a civil servant, I'm strictly speaking neutral,' said Short primly. 'I was merely talking with Sillers of my present Minister's PPS, who happens to live in the same block of flats as myself—one Kenneth Widmerpool. You may have come across him.'

'I have—and saw he got in at a by-election some months ago.'

'This arose from speaking of Bill Truscott and his troubles,' said Sillery. 'I was telling Leonard how I always marvelled at the quietly dextrous way Mr Widmerpool had poor Bill sacked from Donners-Brebner, just at the moment Bill thought himself set for big things. Between you and me, I would myself have doubted whether Bill offered serious rivalry by that time, but, extinct volcano or not, Widmerpool accepted him as a rival, and got rid of him. It was done in the neatest manner imaginable. That was where the rot set in so far as Bill was concerned. Put him on the downward path. He never recovered his status as a coming man. All this arose because I happened to mention to Leonard that Mr Widmerpool had written to me about joining a society—in fact two societies, one political, one cultural—to cement friendship with the People's Republic where Theodoric's family once held sway.'

'I ran across Widmerpool when I was on loan to the Cabinet Office from my own Ministry,' said Short. 'We first met when I was staying in the country one weekend with a person of some import. I won't mention names, but say no more than that the visit was one of work rather than play. Widmerpool came down on Sunday about an official matter, bringing some highly secret papers with him. We played a game of croquet in the afternoon as a slight relaxation. I always remember how Widmerpool kept his briefcase under his arm—he was in uniform, of course—throughout the game. He nearly won it, in spite of that. Our host joked with him about his high regard for security, but Widmerpool would not risk losing his papers, even when he made his stroke.'

Sillery rocked himself backwards and forwards in silent enjoyment.

'A very capable administrator,' said Short. 'Of course one can't foretell what prospects such a man can have on the floor of the House. He may not necessarily be articulate in those very special surroundings. I've heard it suggested Widmerpool is better in committee. His speeches are inclined to alienate sympathy. Nevertheless, I am disposed to predict success.'

Neither of them would listen to assurances that I had known Widmerpool for years, which had indeed no particular relevance to his election to the House of Commons some little time before this. The event had taken place while I was myself still submerged in the country, getting through my army gratuity. At the time, Widmerpool's arrival in Parliament seemed just another of the many odd things taking place roundabout, no concern of mine after reading of it in the paper. Back in London, occupied with sorting out the débris, physical and moral, with which one had to contend, Widmerpool's political fortunes—like his unexpected marriage to Pamela Flitton—had been forgotten in attempts to warm up, as it were, charred fragments left over from the pre-war larder.

'He'd probably have become a brigadier had hostilities continued,' said Short. 'I'm not at all surprised by the course he's taken. At one moment, so he told me, he had ambitions towards a colonial governorship—was interested in those particular problems—but Westminster opens wider fields. The question was getting a seat.'

Sillery dismissed such a doubt as laughable for a man of ability.

'Elderly trade unionists die, or reap the reward of years of toil by elevation to the Upper House—better merited, I add in all humility, than others I could name. The miners can spare a seat from their largesse, those hardy crofters of Scotland show a canny instinct for the right candidate.'

'Between ourselves, I was able to do a little liaison work in the early stages,' said Short. 'That was after return to my old niche. I'd been told there was room for City men who'd be sensibly co-operative, especially if of a Leftward turn to start. Widmerpool's attitude to Cheap Money made him particularly eligible.'

'Cheap Money! Cheap Money!'

The phrase seemed to ravish Sillery by its beauty. He continued to repeat it, like the pirate's parrot screeching 'Pieces of eight', while he clenched his fist in the sign of the old Popular Front.

Then suddenly Sillery's manner changed. He began to rub his hands together, a habit that usually indicated the launching of one of his anti-personnel weapons, some explosive item of information likely to be brought out with damaging effect to whoever had just put forward some given view. Short, still contemplating Widmerpool's chances, showed no awareness that danger threatened.

'I don't think he'll be a back-bencher long," he said. 'That's my view.'

Sillery released the charge.

'What about his wife?'

After that question Sillery paused in one of his most characteristic attitudes, that of the Chinese executioner who has so expertly severed a human head from the neck that it remains still apparently attached to the victim's shoulders, while the headsman himself flicks an infinitesimal, all but invisible, speck of blood from the razor-sharp blade of his sword. Short coughed. He gave the impression of being surprised by a man of such enlightened intelligence as Sillery asking that.

'His wife, Sillers?'

Short employed a level requisitive tone, suggesting he had indeed some faint notion of what was behind the enquiry, but it was one scarcely worthy of answer. There could be little doubt that, in so treating the matter, Short was playing for time.

'You can't close your ears to gossip in this University, however much you try,' said Sillery. 'It's rampant, I regret to say. Even at High Table in this very college. Besides, it's always wise to know what's being bruited abroad, even if untrue.'

He rubbed his hands over and over again, almost doubling up with laughter.

'I haven't the pleasure of knowing Mrs Widmerpool so well as her husband,' said Short severely. 'We sometimes see each other where we both live, in the hall or in the lift. I understand the Widmerpools are to move from there soon.'

'Comely,' said Sillery. 'That's what I've been told—comely.'

He was more convulsed than ever.

'Certainly, certainly,' allowed Short. 'She is generally agreed to be good looking. I should myself describe her as a little—'

Short's power to define feminine beauty abandoned him at this point. He simply made a gesture with his hand. Unmarried himself, he spoke as if prepared to concede that good looks in a wife, anyway the wife of a public man, might reasonably be regarded as a cause for worry.

'I expect she'll make a good canvasser, an admirable canvasser.'

Sillery rocked.

'Sillers, what are you getting at?'

Short spoke quite irritably. I laughed.

'I see Nick knows what I mean,' said Sillery.

'What does Nick know?'

'I met her during the war, when she was called Pamela Flitton. She was an ATS driver.'

'What's your story, Sillers? I see you must have a story.'

Short spoke in a tone intended to put a stop to frivolous treatment of what had been until then a serious subject, Widmerpool's career. Being in the last resort rather afraid of Sillery, he was clearly not too sure of his ground. No doubt even Short had heard rumours, however muffled, of Pamela's goings-on. Sillery decided to play with him a little longer.

'My information about Mrs Widmerpool brought in a few picturesque details, Leonard. Just a few picturesque details—I say no more than that. I call her young Mrs Widmerpool because I understand she is appreciably junior to her spouse.'

'Yes, she's younger.'

'The name of a certain MP on the Opposition benches has been mentioned as a frequent escort of hers.'

'By whom?'

'I happen to have a friend who knows Mrs W quite well.'

Sillery sniggered. Short pursed his lips.

'A man?'

The question seemed just worth asking.

'No, Nick, not a man. A young lady. You didn't think an old fogey like me knew any young ladies, did you? You were quite wrong. This little friend of mine happens also to be a friend of Mrs Widmerpool—so you see I am in a strong position to hear about her doings.'

Sillery's own sexual tastes had, of course, been endlessly debated by generations of undergraduates and dons. It was generally agreed that their physical expression was never further implemented than by a fair amount of arm-pinching and hair-rumpling of the young men with whom he was brought in contact; not necessarily even the better-looking ones, if others had more substantial assets to offer in the power world. More ardent indiscretions charged against him had either no basis, or were long forgotten in the mists of the past. Certainly he was held never to have taken the smallest physical interest in a woman, although at the same time in no way setting his face against all truck with the opposite sex. Sillery's attitude might in this respect be compared with the late St John Clarke's, both equally appreciative of invitations from ladies of more or less renowned social status and usually mature age; 'hostesses', in short, now an extinct species, though destined to rise again like Venus from a sea of logistic impediment. Accordingly, Sillery was right to suppose his boast would cause surprise. The scandal-mongering female friend would probably turn out to be a young married woman, I thought, the wife of a don. Before Sillery had time further to develop his theme, from which he showed signs of deriving a lot of pleasure in the form of teasing Short, a knock sounded on the door.

'Come in, come in,' cried Sillery indulgently. 'Who is this to be? What a night for visitors. Quite like old times.'

He must have expected another version of Short or myself to enter the room. If so, he made a big mistake. A far more dramatic note was struck; dramatic, that is, for those used to the traditional company to be met in Sillery's rooms, also in the light of his words immediately before. A young woman, decidedly pretty, peeped in. Leaning on the door knob, she smiled apologetically, registering a diffidence not absolutely convincing.

'I'm sorry, Sillers. I see you're engaged. I'll come round in the morning. I'd quite thought you'd be alone.'

This was certainly striking confirmation of Sillery's boast that he had contacts with young women. However, its corroboration in this manner did not seem altogether to please him. For once, a rare thing, he appeared uncertain how best to deal with this visitor: dismiss her, retain her. He grinned, but with a sagging mouth. The intrusion posed a dilemma. Short looked embarrassed too, indeed went quite pink. Then Sillery recovered himself. 'Come in, Ada, come in. You've arrived at just the right moment. We all need the company of youth.'

Irresolution, in any case observable only to those accustomed to the absolute certainty of decision belonging to Sillery's past, had only been momentary. Now he was himself again, establishing by these words that, for all practical purposes, there was no difference between his own age and that of Short and myself, anyway so far as 'Ada' was concerned. He settled down right away to get the last ounce out of this new puppet, if puppet she were. The girl was in her twenties, fair, with a high colour, a shade on the plump side, though only enough to suggest changes in the female figure then pending.

'I didn't want to disturb you, Sillers. I didn't really, but I'm almost sure you gave me the wrong notebook yesterday. There were two years missing at least.'

Her manner, self-possessed, was also forthcoming. She smiled round at all of us, not at all displeased at finding unexpected company in Sillery's rooms. It looked as if some twist of post-war academic administration had committed Sillery to aspects of tutoring that included the women's colleges. In the old days that would have been much against all his known principles, but changed conditions, possibly in the line of post-graduate courses, might have brought about some such revolutionary situation in the University as now constituted.

'Two years missing?' said Sillery. 'That will never do, Ada, that will never do, but I must introduce you to two old friends of mine. Mr Short, one of our most cultivated and humane of bureaucrats, and Mr Jenkins who is—you just explained to me, Nick, but I can't recall for the minute—no, no, don't tell me, I'll remember in a second—come here to do some research of a very scholarly kind, something he is planning to write—Burton, yes, Burton, melancholy and all that. This is Miss Leintwardine, my—well—my secretary. That's what you are, Ada, ain't you? Sounds rather fast. All sorts of jokes about us, I'm sure. Sit 'ee down, Ada, sit 'ee down. I'll look into your complaints forthwith.'

Miss Leintwardine took a chair. Clearly well used to Sillery's ways and diction, she accepted this presentation of herself as all part of the game. In the role of secretary she was a little more explicable, though why on earth Sillery should require a secretary was by no means apparent. Perhaps a secretary went with being made a peer. Whatever it was, he now retired to a corner of the room, where, lowering himself on to the floor, he squatted on the worn carpet, while he began to rummage about amongst a lot of stuff stored away in the bottom of a cupboard. All the time he kept up a stream of comment.

'What a way to preserve sacred memories. Isn't that just like me? Might be a lot of old boots for all the trouble I've taken. Nineteen-eight . . . nineteen-four . . . here we are, I think, here we are.'

Miss Leintwardine, who had sat down as requested, showed willingness to make herself agreeable by a laudatory reference to a novel I had written before the war. She was about to expand her views on this subject, but, whatever other modifications had taken place in Sillery's approach, tolerance of his guests' books being discussed in front of him was not among them. Sillery's enemies were inclined to imply that aversion to other people writing was the fruit of pure envy, but it was much more probable that talk about 'writing' simply bored him, unless arousing a sense of conflict. He began a loud confused monologue to put a stop to all other conversation, then suddenly found what he sought, closed the cupboard and rose without effort, holding two or three tattered exercise books. He cast these on the table.

'Here they are. I don't know what I can have been thinking about, Ada. Was it the nineteen-twelve volume I gave you? Let me have a look. Ah, no, I think I understand now. This is supplementary. Ada's helping me get my old diaries in order. Not only typing them, but giving me her valuable—I should say invaluable—advice. I'm pleading as a suppliant before the inexorable tribunal of Youth. That's what it comes to. Don't know what I'd do without her. I'd be lost, wouldn't I, Ada?'

'You certainly would, Sillers.'

'Diaries?' said Short. 'I didn't know you kept a diary, Sillers?'

Sillery, laughing heartily, lowered himself again into a vast collapsed armchair in which he lay crouched.

'Nobody did, nobody did. Strict secret. Of course it's possible nothing will appear until old Sillers is dead and gone. That's no reason why the diaries shouldn't be put in proper order. Then perhaps a few selections might be published. Who can tell until Ada has done her work—and who should help make the decision better than Ada?'

'But, Sillers, they'll be absolutely . . .'

Short was again without words. Only an ingrained professional habit of avoiding superlatives, so he implied, prevented him from giving more noisy expression to welcome a Journal kept by Sillery.

'You've met *everybody*, Sillers. They'll be read as the most notable chronicle of our time.'

Sillery made no attempt to deny that judgment. He screwed up his eyes, laughed a great deal, blew out his moustache. Miss Leintwardine took up the exercise books from the table. She glanced through them with cold professional competence.

'That's better, Sillers. These are the ones. I'd better bear them away with me.'

She rose from the chair, smiling, friendly, about to leave. Sillery held up his right hand, as if to swear a solemn oath.

'Stay, Ada. Stay and talk with us a while. You must meet people younger than myself sometimes, eligible bachelors like Mr Short. By the way, these gentlemen are contemporaries of another friend of ours, Mark Members, whom you talked of when he was up the other day lecturing on whatever it was. He's left the Ministry of Information now.'

'*Kleist, Marx, Sartre, the Existentialist Equilibrium.*'

'Of course,' said Sillery.' One of Vernon Gainsborough's *jeux d'esprit*. I can't remember, Leonard, whether you've met our latest Fellow. He's a German—or rather was—a "good" German, of course, called Werner Guggenbühl, but Gainsborough's better, we all agree. Of patrician background, but turned early to the Left.'

'You're interested in German literature, Miss Leintwardine?' asked Short.

He must have hoped to gloss over Sillery's rather malicious reference to 'eligible bachelors', but notably failed in this attempt to guide conversation into intellectual channels.

'We were talking of old friends like Mark,' said Sillery. 'J. G. Quiggin, Bill Truscott, all names with which you are familiar from my reminiscing, Ada. Conversation led from them to that interesting couple the Widmerpools, about whom you were speaking when we last met. How goes that union? Well, I hope.'

These last sentences put an end to doubt, explaining Sillery's momentary uncertainty at Ada Leintwardine's arrival. He was well satisfied at the surprise she caused, the confirmation by her presence that he numbered 'young ladies' amongst his acquaintance, but at the same time he had been faced with the decision whether or not to reveal her as his source of Widmerpool information. It was in the Sillery tradition to brag of a great spy network, while keeping secret the names of individual agents. At the same time, with an audience like Short and myself, fullest advantage might be derived from Miss Leintwardine by admitting her as fount of that information, now she was on the spot. That at any rate was what happened. Sillery had decided the veil of mystery was not worth sustaining, especially as Miss Leintwardine herself might at any moment give the show away. However, it turned out she was well aware that contacts with the Widmerpool ménage were too profitable to be squandered in casual enquiry. She was giving nothing away that evening. This attitude was probably due also to other matters connected with her relationship with Sillery which only came to light some minutes later.

'They're both all right so far as I know, Sillers.'

'Leonard here lives in the same block of flats.'

'Oh, do you?'

She spoke politely, no more.

'You were saying Mrs W finds the place rather poky,' persisted Sillery.

Miss Leintwardine did not choose to answer that one. Instead, she addressed herself to me.

'I think you know Pam and Kenneth, Mr Jenkins. They spoke of you. Like so many people, Pam's been having rather a painful reaction now the war's over. Tired, I mean, and listless. Always ill. We've been friends since we were in the ATS together.'

'She was a driver in the ATS when I first met her.'

'Then we both went into secret shows, different ones, and always kept in touch—but for God's sake don't let's talk about the war. Such a boring subject.'

Sillery shouted assent to that, showing distinct signs of displeasure at this interchange. What was the good of presenting Ada Leintwardine as a woman of mystery, if she shared a crowd of acquaintances in common with another guest? Besides, long experience of extracting information out of people must have warned him she was not prepared to furnish anything of great interest that evening, unless matters took an unexpected turn. Grasp of the fact was to Sillery's credit, in some degree justifying the respect paid him in such traffickings by Short and others. He rose once more from his chair, again throwing himself to the floor with surprising suppleness of movement, to scrabble further at the stuff in the cupboard.

'You're sure you've got the right notebooks now, Ada? I'm putting away the ones you brought back, ere worse befall. Don't want to lose them, do we?'

Miss Leintwardine chose this moment of Sillery's comparative detachment on the floor to announce something probably intended to take a less abrupt form. Possibly she had even paid the visit for this purpose, the diaries only an excuse. Since she had not found Sillery alone, she had to take the best opportunity available.

'Talking of J. G. Quiggin, you've heard about this new publishing firm of his?'

She spoke rather self-consciously. Sillery, swivelling round where he squatted orientally on a hole in the carpet, was attentive to this.

'Have you any piquant details, Ada? I should like to know more of JG's publishing venture.'

'I'm rather committed myself. Perhaps you heard that too, Sillers?'

Whatever this meant, clearly Sillery had not heard. He sat up sharply. Miss Leintwardine's manner of asking the question strongly suggested he had been given no opportunity to hear anything of the sort.

'How so, Ada?'

'As it happens, I'm joining the firm myself. I've been reading manuscripts for them since they started. I thought I told you.'

'No, Ada, no. You never told me.'

'I thought I had.'

This showed Sillery in the plainest terms he was not the only one to discharge bombshells. He took it pretty well, though there could be no doubt he was shaken. His eyes showed that.

'Craggs brought in the goodwill of Boggis & Stone, together with such Left Wing steadies as survive. Of course the new firm won't be nearly so limited as Boggis & Stone. We're hoping to get the young writers. We've signed up X. Trapnel, for example.'

She spoke all this quickly, more than a little embarrassed, even upset, at having to break the news to Sillery. He did not say anything. She continued in the same hurried tone.

'I was wondering whether the possibility wasn't worth exploring for publication of your own Journal, Sillers. You haven't decided on a publisher yet, have you? There's often something to be said for new and enterprising young firms.'

Sillery did not pledge himself on that point.

'Does this mean you're going to live in London, Ada?'

'I suppose so, Sillers. I can't very well commute from here. Of course it won't make any difference to my work for you. I shall always have time for that. I do think it should be an interesting job, don't you?'

Again Sillery made no pronouncement on such expectations. His face provisionally suggested that the future for those entering publishing offices was anything but optimistic. There could be no doubt the whole matter was intensely displeasing to him. His annoyance, together with Miss

Leintwardine's now very definitely troubled manner, confirmed that in a peculiar way they must have been having some sort of flirtation, an hypothesis scarcely to be guessed by even the most seasoned Sillery experts. The girl's nervousness, now confession had been made, well illustrated that odd contradictory feminine lack of assurance so typical of the moment when victory has been won—for there could be little doubt that progression on to the staff of Quiggin & Craggs represented a kind of victory over Sillery on her part, escape from his domination. It looked as if she had half dreaded telling him, half hoped to cause him to suffer. Sillery had been made the object of a little affectionate feminine sadomasochism. That was the grotesque presumption. She jumped up.

'I must go now, Sillers. I've got an awful lot of work waiting at home. I thought I'd just bring those wrong notebooks along as they were worrying me.'

She laughed, almost as though near tears. This time Sillery made no effort to detain her.

'Goodnight, Ada.'

'Goodnight, Mr Short. Goodnight, Mr Jenkins. Goodnight, Sillers.'

However much put out by her unexpected arrival, refusal to discuss the Widmerpools, final news that she was abandoning him, Sillery's usual resilience, his unyielding capacity for making the best of things, was now displayed, though he could not conceal relief at this withdrawal. He grinned at Short and myself after the door closed, shaking his head whimsically to show he still retained a sense of satisfaction in knowing such a wench. Short, on the other hand, was anxious to forget about Miss Leintwardine as soon as possible.

'Tell us something about your diaries, Sillers. I'm more interested than I can say.'

Sillery, anyway at that moment, did not want to talk about the diaries. Ada Leintwardine was still his chosen theme. If she had displeased him, all the more reason to get full value out of her as an attendant personality of what remained of the Sillery court.

'Local doctor's daughter. Clever girl. Keen on making a career in—what shall we say?—the world of letters. Writing a novel herself. All that sort of thing. Just the person I was looking for. Does the work splendidly. Absolutely reliable. We mustn't have pre-publication leaks, must we? That would never do. I hope she's aware of Howard Craggs's little failings. Just as bad as ever, even at the age he's reached, so I'm told. All sorts of stories. She must know. Everyone knows that.'

His manner of enunciating the remark about pre-publication leaks made one suspect Sillery meant the opposite to what he said. Pre-publication leaks were what he aimed at, Miss Leintwardine the ideal medium for titbits proffered to stimulate interest. The Diary was to be Sillery's last bid for power, imposing his personality on the public, as an alternative to the real thing. However, he had no wish to talk to Short about this. If the Journal was of interest, it was likely Sillery would have published its contents, at least a selection, before now. Even if the interest were moderate, there would be excitement in preparation and advance publicity, whetting the appetite of the public. When, in due course, Short and I left the rooms—Sillery admitted he went to bed now earlier than formerly—it was only after solemn assurances we would call again. Outside, the night was mild for the time of year.

'I'm staying in college,' said Short. 'Sillers is always talking of my becoming an Honorary Fellow, I don't know how serious he is. I'll walk with you as far as the gate. Sillers is wonderful, isn't he? What did you make of that young woman? I didn't much care for her style. Too florid. Still, Sillers must need a secretary if he has all that diary material to weld into order. Rather inconsiderate of her to give up work for him, as she seems to be doing. Interesting your knowing Widmerpool. I wouldn't have thought you'd much in common. I believe myself he's got a future. You must lunch with me one day at the Athenaeum, Nicholas. I'm rather full of work at the moment, but I'll tell my secretary to make a note.'

'Is she as pretty as Miss Leintwardine?'

Short accepted that pleasantry in good part, leaving the question in the air.

'Brightman calls Sillers the last of the Barons. Pity there'll be no heir to that ancient line, he says. Brightman's wit, as Sillers remarked, can be a shade cruel. Nice to have met in these peaceful surroundings again.'

Traversing obscure byways on the way back to my own college, I had to admit the evening had been enjoyable, although there was a kind of relief in escaping from the company of Sillery and Short, into the silent night. One had to concur, too, in judging Sillery 'wonderful'; wonderful anyway in categorical refusal to allow neither age nor anything else to deflect him from the path along which he had chosen to approach life. That was impressive, to be honoured: at least something the world honoured, capacity for sticking to your point, whatever it might be, through thick and thin.

'There have never been any real salons in England,' Moreland once said. 'Everyone here thinks a salon is a place for a free meal. A true salon is conversation—nothing to eat and less to drink.'

Sillery bore out the definition pretty well. The following day I was to knock off Burton, and go back to London. That was a cheering thought. When I reached my own college there was a telegram at the porter's lodge. It was from Isobel. Erridge, her eldest brother, had died suddenly. This was a contingency altogether unexpected, not only dispersing from the mind further speculation about Sillery and his salon; but necessitating reconsideration of all immediate plans.

Erridge, a subject for Burton if ever there was one, had often complained of his health, in this never taken very seriously by the rest of his family. Lately, little or nothing had been heard of him. He lived in complete seclusion. The inter-service organization, a secret one, which had occupied Thrubworth during the earlier years of the war had been later moved, or disbanded, the place remaining requisitioned, but converted into a camp for German prisoners-of-war. Administrative staff and stores occupied most of the rooms, except the small wing at the back of the building that Erridge, on succeeding his father, had adapted for his own use; quarters where his sister Blanche had later joined him to keep house. This suited Blanche well enough, because she preferred a quiet life. She undertook, when feasible, the many local duties unwelcome to Erridge himself whose dedication to working for the public good never mitigated an unwillingness to burden himself with humdrum obligations. This disinclination to play a part in local affairs owed something to his innate uneasiness in dealing with people, together with an aversion from personal argument and opposition, unless such contentiousness was 'on paper'. What Erridge disliked was having to wrangle with a lot of not very well-informed adversaries face to face. In these attitudes poor health may well have played a part, for even unhampered by 'pacifist' convictions, his physical state would never have allowed any very active participation in the war.

However much recognized as, anyway in his own eyes, living in a more or less chronic convalescence, Erridge was certainly not expected to die in his middle-forties. George Tolland, next brother in point of age, was another matter. George, badly wounded in the Middle East, had long been too ill to be brought home. From the first, it seemed unlikely he would survive. Back in England, he made some sort of recovery, then had a relapse, almost predictable from the manner in which Death had already cast an eye on him. The funeral had been only a few months before. George's wife Veronica, pregnant at the time, had not yet given birth. The question of the baby's sex, in the light of inheritance, added another uncertainty to the present situation.

The following morning I set out for London. The train was late. Waiting for it like myself was a man in a blue-grey mackintosh, who strolled rather furtively up and down the platform. His movements suggested hope to avoid recognition, while a not absolutely respectable undertaking was accomplished. At first the drooping moustache disguised him. It was an adjunct not at all characteristic. Then, a minute or two after, the nervous swinging walk gave this figure away. There could be no doubt. It was Books-do-furnish-a-room Bagshaw.

The cognomen dated back to the old Savoy Hill days of the BBC, though we had not known each other in that very remote period. A year or two older than myself, Bagshaw had been an occasional drinking companion of Moreland's. They shared a taste for white port. Possibly Bagshaw had even served a brief stint as music critic. The memory persisted—at our first encounter—of Bagshaw involved in an all but disastrous incident on top of a bus, when we were going home after Moreland had been conducting a performance of *Pelleas and Melisande*. If Bagshaw, at no moment in his past, had ever written music criticism, that must have been the sole form of journalism he had omitted to tackle. We had never seen much of each other, nor met for seven or eight years. Bagshaw's war turned out to have been waged in the Public Relations branch of the RAF. He had grown the moustache in India. Like a lot of acquaintances encountered at this period, his talk had become noticeably more authoritative in tone, product of the war itself and its demands, or just the ponderous onset of middle age. At the same time he had surrendered none of his old wheedling, self-deprecatory manner, which had procured him a wide variety of jobs, extracted him from equally extensive misadventures. He was in the best of spirits.

'The subcontinent has its moments, Nicholas. It was a superlative experience, in spite of the Wingco's foul temper. I had to tell that officer I was not prepared to be the Gunga Din of Royal Air Force Public Relations in India, even at the price of being universally accepted as the better man. There were a lot of rows, but never mind. There was much to amuse too.'

This clearcut vignette of relations with his Wing-Commander defined an important aspect of Bagshaw's character, one of which he was very proud.

'You're a professional rebel, Bagshaw,' some boss-figure had remarked when sacking him.

That was true in a sense, though not in such an entirely simple sense as might be supposed at first sight. All the same, Bagshaw had obtained more than one subsequent job merely on the strength of repeating that estimate of himself. The label gave potential employers an enjoyable sense of risk. Some of them lived to regret their foolhardiness.

'After all, I warned him at the start,' Bagshaw used to say.

The roots of this revolutionary spirit lay a long way back. Did he not boast that on school holidays he had plastered the public lavatories of Cologne with anti-French stickers at the time of the occupation of the Rhineland? There were all sorts of later insurgent activities, 'chalkings', marchings, making policemen's horses shy at May Day celebrations, exertions which led, logically enough, to association with Gypsy Jones. Bagshaw was even reckoned to have been engaged to Gypsy at one time. His own way of life, the fact that she herself was an avowed Party Member, made it likely he too had been 'CP' in his day, possibly up to the Spanish Civil War. At that period Quiggin used to talk a lot about him, and had probably learnt a good deal from him. Then Bagshaw was employed on some sort of eyewitness reporting assignment in Spain. Things went wrong. No one ever knew quite what happened. There had been one of Bagshaw's rows. He came back. Some people said he was lucky to get home. Politically speaking, life were never the same again. Bagshaw had lost his old enthusiasms. Afterwards, when drunk, he would attempt to expound his changed standpoint, never with great clarity, though he would go on by the hour together to friends like Moreland, who detested talking politics.

'There was a chap called Max Stirner . . . You've probably none of you ever heard of *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* . . . You know, *The Ego and his Own* . . . Well, I don't really know German either, but Stirner believed it would be all right if only we could get away from the tyranny of abstract ideas . . . He taught in a girls' school. Probably what gave him the notion. Abstract ideas not a bit of use in a girls' school . . .'

Whatever Bagshaw thought about abstract ideas when drunk—he never reached a stage when unable to argue—he was devoted to them when sober. He resembled a man long conversant with racing, familiar with the name of every horse listed in *Ruff's Guide to the Turf*, who has now ceased to lay a bet, even feel the smallest desire to visit a racecourse; yet at the same time never lost his taste for talking about racing. Bagshaw was for ever fascinated by revolutionary techniques, always prepared to explain everybody's standpoint, who was a party-member, fellow-traveller, crypto, trotskyist, anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist, every refinement of marxist theory, every subtle distinction within groups. The ebb and flow of subversive forces wafted the breath of life to him, even if he no longer believed in the beneficial qualities of that tide.

Bagshaw's employment at the BBC lasted only a few years. There were plenty of other professional rebels there, not to mention Party Members, but somehow they were not his sort. All the same, the Corporation left its mark. Even after he found more congenial occupations, he always spoke with a certain nostalgia of his BBC days, never entirely losing touch. After abdicating the air, he plunged into almost every known form of exploiting the printed word, where he always hovered between the sack and a much more promising offer on the horizon. He possessed that opportune facility for turning out several thousand words on any subject whatsoever at the shortest possible notice: politics: sport: books: finance: science: art: fashion—as he himself said, 'War, Famine, Pestilence or Death on a Pale Horse'. All were equal when it came to Bagshaw's typewriter. He would take on anything, and—to be fair—what he produced, even off the cuff, was no worse than what was to be read most of the time. You never wondered how on earth the stuff had ever managed to be printed.

All this suggests Bagshaw had a brilliant journalistic career ahead of him, when, as he described it, he set out 'with the heart of a boy so whole and free'. Somehow it never came off. A long heritage of awkward incidents accounted for much of the furtiveness of Bagshaw's manner. There had been every sort of tribulation. Jobs changed; wives (two at least) came and went; once DT was near at hand; from time to time there were periods 'on the waggon'; all the while legend accumulating round this weaker side, which Bagshaw's nickname celebrated. Its origin was lost in the mists of the past, but the legend emphasized aspects of Bagshaw that could make him a liability.

There were two main elucidations. One asserted that, the worse for drink, trying to abstract a copy of *The Golden*

Treasury from a large glass-fronted bookcase in order to verify a quotation required for a radio programme, Bagshaw overturned on himself this massive piece of furniture. As volume after volume descended on him, it was asserted he made the comment: 'Books do furnish a room.'

Others had a different story. They would have it that Bagshaw, stark naked, had spoken the words conversationally as he approached the sofa on which lay, presumably in the same state, the wife of a well-known dramatic critic (on duty at the theatre that night appraising the First Night of *The Apple Cart*), a clandestine meeting having reached emotional climax in her husband's book-lined study. Bagshaw was alleged to have spoken the words, scarcely more than muttered them—a revolutionary's tribute to bourgeois values—as he rapidly advanced towards his prey: 'Books do furnish a room.'

The lady, it could have been none other, was believed later to have complained to a third party of lack of sensibility on Bagshaw's part in making such an observation at such a juncture. Whichever story were true—probably neither, the second had all the flavour of having been worked over, if not invented, by Moreland—the nickname stuck.

'There'll be a stampede of dons' wives,' said Bagshaw, as we watched the train come in 'Let's be careful. We don't want to be injured for life.'

We found a compartment, crowded enough, but no impediment to Bagshaw's flow of conversation.

'You know, Nicholas, whenever I come away from this place, I'm always rather glad I skipped a novitiate at a university. My university has been life. Many a time I've put that in an article. Tell me, have you read a novel called *Camel Ride to the Tomb*?'

'I thought it good—who is X. Trapnel? Somebody else mentioned him.'

'The best first novel since before the war,' said Bagshaw.

'Not that that's in itself particularly high praise. Trapnel was a clerk in one of our New Delhi outfits—the people who used to hand out those pamphlets about Civics and The Soviet Achievement, all that sort of thing. I was always rapt in admiration at the way the Party arranged to have its propaganda handled at an official level. As a matter of fact Trapnel himself wasn't at all interested in politics, but he was always in trouble with the authorities, and I managed to help him one way and another.'

Although not in the front rank of literary critics—there might have been difficulty in squeezing him into an already overcrowded and grimacing back row—Bagshaw had reason in proclaiming Trapnel's one of the few promising talents thrown up by the war; in contrast with the previous one, followed by no marked luxuriance in the arts.

'Then he got a poisoned foot. Trapnel was a low medical category anyway, that's why he was doing the job at his age. He got shipped back to England. By the end of the war he'd winkled himself into a film unit. He's very keen on films. Wants to get back into them, I believe, writing novels at the same time—but what about your own novels, Nicholas? Have you started up at one again?'

I told him why I was staying at the University, and how work was going to be disrupted during the following week owing to Erridge's funeral. The information about Erridge at once disturbed Bagshaw.

'Lord Warminster is no more?'

'Heard it last night.'

'This is awful.'

'I'd no idea you were a close friend.'

Bagshaw's past activities, especially at the time when he was seeing a good deal of Quiggin, might well have brought him within Erridge's orbit, though I had never connected them in my mind.

'I didn't know Warminster well. Always liked him when we met, and of course sorry to hear the sad news, but why it might be ominous for me was quite apart from personal feelings. The fact was he was putting up the money for a paper I'm supposed to be editing. I was on the point of telling you about it.'

At this period there was constant talk of 'little magazines' coming into being. Professionally speaking, their establishment was of interest as media for placing articles, reviewing books, the various pickings of literary life. Erridge had toyed with some such project for years, although the sort of paper he contemplated was not likely to be of much use to myself. It was no great surprise to hear he had finally decided to back a periodical of some sort. The choice of Bagshaw as editor was an adventurous one, but, if they knew each other already, Bagshaw's recommendation of himself as a 'professional rebel' might well have been sufficient to get a job in Erridge's gift.

'A new publishing firm, Quiggin & Craggs, is going to produce the magazine. Warminster—Erry, as you call him—was friends with both directors. You must know J. G. Quiggin. Doubt if he's ever been CP, but Craggs has been a fellow-traveller for years, and my old friend Gypsy toes the Party line as consistently as anyone could.'

'What's Gypsy got to do with it?'

'As Craggs's wife.'

'Gypsy married to Craggs?'

'Has been for a year or two. Quiggin's an interesting case. He's always had Communist leanings, but afraid to commit himself. JG doesn't like too many risks. He feels he might get into more trouble as a Party Member than outside. He hasn't got Craggs's staying power.'

'But Erry wasn't a Communist at all. In many ways he disapproved, I believe, though he never came out in the open about it.'

'No, but he got on all right with JG and Howard Craggs. There was even a suggestion he did more than get on well with Gypsy at one time. He was going to back the publishing firm too, though they are to be run quite separately.'

'What's the magazine to be called?'

'*Fission*. That was thought to strike the right note for the Atomic Age. Something to catch the young writers coming out of the services—Trapnel, for example. That was why I mentioned him. The firm would, of course, be of a somewhat Leftward tendency, given its personnel, but general publishing, not like Boggis & Stone. The magazine was to be Warminster's toy to do more or less what he liked with. I hope his demise is not going to wreck things. It was he who wanted me to edit it. There were one or two others after the job. Gypsy wasn't all that keen for me to get it, in spite of old ties. I know a bit too much.'

Bagshaw's lack of orthodoxy, while at the same time soaked in Left-Wing lore, was something to make immediate appeal to Erridge, once considered. Then another idea occurred to me. It was worth firing a shot at random.

'You've been seeing Miss Ada Leintwardine about all this?'

Bagshaw was not in the least taken aback. He stroked his moustache, an utterly unsuitable appendage to his smooth round somewhat priest-like face, and smiled.

'You know Ada? I thought she was my secret. Where did you run across her?'

He listened to an account of what had taken place in Sillery's rooms; then nodded, as if understanding all.

'Sillery's an interesting case too. I've heard it suggested he's been in the Party himself for years. Myself I think not, though there's no doubt he's given quite a bit of support from time to time in his day. I'd be interested to know where he really stands. So the little witch has ensnared this venerable scholar?'

'She's kept that to herself so far as you were concerned?'

'Absolutely.'

'Is she a Party Member too?'

Bagshaw laughed heartily.

'Ada's ambitions are primarily literary. Within that area she'll take any help she can get, but I doubt if she'd get much from the Party. What did you think of her?'

'All right.'

'She's got a will of her own. Quiggin & Craggs did right to sign her up. JG was much taken.'

'You produced her?'

'We met during the war—all too briefly—but have remained friends. She's to be on the publishing side, not *Fission*. I'd like you to meet Trapnel. I really do think there's promise there. I'll call you up, and we'll have a drink together. I won't be able to arrange anything next week, as I'm getting married on Tuesday—thanks very much, my dear fellow, thanks very much . . . yes, of course . . . nice of you to put it that way . . . I just didn't want to be a bore about a lot of personal matters . . .'

2

RATHER UNEXPECTEDLY, ERRIDGE WAS FOUND to have paid quite recent attention to his will. He had replaced George Tolland (former executor with Frederica) by their youngest, now only surviving brother, Hugo. Accordingly, by the time I reached London, Hugo and Frederica had already gone down to Thrubworth. Accommodation in Erridge's wing of the house was limited. The rest of the family, as at George's funeral, had to make up their minds whether to attend as a day's expedition, or stay at The Tolland Arms, a hostelry considerably developed from former times, since the establishment in the neighbourhood of an RAF station. Norah, Susan and her husband Roddy Cutts, with Isobel and myself, chose The Tolland Arms. As it happened Dicky Umfraville had just arrived on leave from Germany, where he was serving as lieutenant-colonel on the staff of the Military Government (a job to which he was well disposed), but he flatly refused to accompany Frederica.

'I never met your brother,' he said. 'Therefore it would be an impertinence on my part to attend his funeral. Besides—in more than one respect the converse of another occasion—there's room at the inn, but none at the stable. Nobody would mind one of the Thrubworth loose-boxes less than myself, but we should be separated, my love, so near and yet so far, something I could not bear. In addition

—far more important—I don't like funerals. They remind me of death, a subject I always try to avoid. You will have to represent me, Frederica, angel that you are, and return to London as soon as possible to make my leave a heaven upon earth.'

Veronica, George Tolland's widow, was not present either. She was likely to give birth any day now.

'Pray God it will be a boy,' Hugo said. 'I used to think I'd like to take it all on, but no longer—even though I'd hardly make a scruffier earl than poor old Erry.'

His general demeanour quietened by the war, Hugo's comments tended to become grimmer. He had remained throughout his service bombardier in an Anti-Aircraft battery, not leaving England, but experiencing a reasonably lively time, for example, one night the only man on the gun not knocked out. Now he had returned to selling antiques, a trade at which he became increasingly proficient, recently opening a shop of his own with a former army friend called Sam—he seemed to possess no surname—not a great talker, but good-natured, of powerful physique, and said to be quick off the mark when a good piece came up at auction.

Like Hugo—although naturally in terms of his own very different temperament and approach to life—Roddy Cutts had also quietened. There was sufficient reason for that. The wartime romance at HQ Persia/Iraq Force, with the cipherine he had at one moment planned to marry, had collapsed not long after disclosure of the situation in a letter to his wife. While on leave in Teheran the cipherine had suddenly decided to abscond with a rich Persian, abandoning Roddy to his own resources. Susan, who had behaved impeccably during this unhappy interlude, now took over. When Roddy came back to England for the 1945 election, she worked exceptionally hard. He retained his seat by a few hundred votes. As a consequence, Susan's ascendancy was now complete, Roddy utterly under her control. She made him toil like a slave. That was no doubt right, what he wanted himself. All the same, these factors were calculated to reduce high spirits, even in one so generally appreciative of his own good qualities as Roddy Cutts. His handsome, rather too large features were now marked with signs of stress, everything about him a shade less strident, even the sandy hair. At the same time he retained the forceful manner, half hectoring, half subservient, common to representatives of all political parties, together with the politician's endemic hallmark of getting hold of the wrong end of the stick. He was almost pathetically thankful to be back in the House of Commons.

When George Tolland had been buried a few months before, Erridge had not been present at the funeral. He had, in fact retired to bed with an attack of gastritis—then very prevalent—but from the start this absence had been assumed almost as a matter of course by his sisters. That was not because any of them accepted too seriously Erridge's own complaint about chronic ailments, but on the general principle that for an eldest son, no matter how progressive his views, it was reasonable to avoid a ceremony where a younger brother must inevitably occupy the limelight; in this case additionally so in the eyes of those—however much Erridge himself might deplore such sentiments—who felt an end such as George's traditionally commendable; as Stringham had commented, 'awfully smart to be killed'. This last factor was likely to be emphasized by the religious service, in itself distasteful to Erridge. There was therefore more than one reason to keep him away, as of late years he had become all but incapable of doing anything he disliked. It was agreed that, even without illness, he would never have attended.

'A psychosomatic attack was a foregone conclusion,' said Norah. 'Anyway all parties go better without Erry.'

Nevertheless George's death had undoubtedly agitated his eldest brother. Blanche, in her sad, willing, never wholly comprehending way of describing things, had been insistent about that. At least Blanche always appeared uncomprehending. Possibly she really grasped a great deal more than her own relations supposed. The local doctor, Erridge's sole confidant in the neighbourhood, had not seen him for a month, a most uncharacteristic omission. Blanche repeated Dr Jodrill's words.

'The coronary thrombosis revealed by the post-mortem could owe something to emotional disturbance. I venture to suggest Lord Warminster was greatly unsettled by Colonel Tolland's death.'

Perhaps Jodrill was right. Long submerged sentiments might all at once have taken charge. Even Erridge's indisposition at the time of the funeral could have had something to do with these. Still, it was hard to contradict Norah in thinking Erridge better absent. Several army friends turned up at the church, Tom Goring, always a crony—'Rifleman notwithstanding', as George used to say—who had commanded a brigade in the sector where George was wounded. Ted Jeavons was there too, punctilious observance on the part of an uncle by marriage, whose own health was notoriously poor. For obscure reasons of his own, Jeavons made the journey by a different railway line from the rest of the family, returning the same night. The church had not been full, fog and rationed petrol keeping people away.

At George's funeral, as so often on such occasions, the sharp contrast between life and death was emphasized by one of those incongruous incidents that seem to bear on the character or habits of the deceased. So far from diminishing the nature of the ceremony, their aptness often increases its intensity, by-passing, so to speak, ingenuities of ritual and music, bridging with some peculiar fitness the gulf presented to the imagination by the fact of death. The sensibilities are brought up with a start to accept what has happened by action or scene, outwardly untimed, inwardly apposite.

George's coffin had been committed to the moss-lined earth, the mourners moving away, when a party of German prisoners-of-war from the camp, their guard equipped with a tommy-gun (carried with the greatest nonchalance), straggled across the churchyard on the way back from a local excursion. They seemed quite unaware of what had been taking place a moment before, mingling, as it were, with the mourners, at whom they sheepishly gazed. During the service there had been, in fact, no music, a minimum of anything that could be called ritual. The POWs seemed in a manner to take the place of whatever had been lacking in the way of external effects, forming a rough-and-ready, unknowing guard-of-honour; final reminder of the course of events that had brought George's remains to that quiet place.

The church, at the end of the village, was a few hundred yards from the gates of the park. On the day of Erridge's interment, though the weather was not cold for the time of year, rain was pouring down in steely diagonals across the gravestones. Within the mediaeval building, large for a country church, the temperature was lower than in the open, the interior like a wintry cave. Isobel and Norah sat on either side of me under the portrait medallion, lilac grey marble against an alabaster background, of the so-called 'Chemist-Earl', depicted in bas relief with sidewhiskers and a high collar, the accompanying inscription in gothic lettering. A scientist of some distinction and FRS, he had died unmarried in the eighteen-eighties.

'My favourite forebear,' Hugo said. 'He did important research into marsh gases, and something called alcohol-radicles. As you may imagine, there were a lot of contemporary witticisms about the latter, also jokes within the family about his work on the deodorization of sewage, which was, I believe, outstanding.'

Heraldry had evidently been considered inappropriate for the Chemist-Earl, but two or three escutcheons in the chancel displayed the Tolland gold bezants—'talents', in the punning connotation of the arms—over the similarly canting motto: *Quid oneris in praesentia tollant.* The family's memorials went back no further than the middle of the eighteenth century, when the Hugford heiress (only child of a Lord Mayor) had inhabited Thrubworth; her husband, the Lord Erridge of the period, migrating there from a property further north. On the other side of the aisle, almost level with where we sat, a tomb in white marble, ornate but elegant, was surmounted with sepulchral urns and trophies of arms.

Sacred to the Memory of
Henry Lucius 1st Earl of Warminster,
Viscount Erridge, Baron Erridge of Mirkbooths,
G.C.B., Lieutenant-General in the Army, etc.

'Be of good courage and let us behave ourselves valiantly
for our people, and for the cities of our God:
and let the Lord do that which is good in his sight.'
I. Chronicles. XIX. 13.

Even if Wellington were truly reported in expressing reservations about his abilities as a commander, Henry Lucius had left some sort of a legend behind him. An astute politician, he had voted at the right moment for Reform. 'Lord Erridge made a capital speech,' wrote Creevey, 'causing the damn'dest surprise to the Tory waverers, and as I have heard he is soon to retire with an earldom, he must have decided to present his valedictions with a flourish before devoting the remaining years of his life to his *hobbies*.' Gronow's Memoirs throw light on this last comment, endorsing the caution displayed by the commemorative text in fields other than military. After noting that Brummell paid Henry Lucius the compliment of asking who made his driving-coat, Captain Gronow adds: 'His Lordship was not indifferent to the charms of the fair sex, but the exquisitely beautiful Creole of sixteen, who was under his immediate protection when he breathed his last in lodgings at Brighton, was believed by many people in society to be his daughter.'

It looked as if Erridge, long shut away from everyday life, would bring together an even smaller gathering of mourners than his brother George. Two or three elderly neighbours were there as a matter of form, a couple of Alfords from his mother's side of the family, a few tenants and people from the village. Most of this congregation stole in almost guiltily, as if—like Bagshaw—they hoped to draw the least possible attention to themselves, choosing pews at the back of the church in which they sat hunched and shivering. There was a longish, rather nerve-racking wait, emphasized by much coughing and clearing of throats. Then came manifestations from the porch. At last something was happening. There was a noise, quite a commotion. It sounded as if the coffin-bearers—just enough men of required physique had been found available on the estate for that duty—were encountering difficulties. The voices outside were raised in apparent argument, if not altercation. From among these tones of dissension a female note was perceptible; perhaps the protests of more than one woman. A pause of several minutes followed before whoever was arguing in the porch entered the church. Then the steps of several persons sounded on the uncarpeted flagstones. A general turning of heads took place to ascertain whether the moment had come to stand up.

A party of six persons, four men and two women, were advancing up the aisle in diamond formation. Widmerpool was at the head. Carrying a soft black hat between his hands and in front of his chest, he was peering over it as he proceeded slowly, reverently, rather suspiciously, up the unlighted interior of the church. His appearance at this moment was wholly unexpected. George, in his City days, had done business with Donners-Brebner when Widmerpool worked there, but, so far as I knew, Widmerpool had no contacts with Erridge. There had been no sign of Widmerpool at George's funeral. At first sight, the rest of the group seemed equally unlooked for, even figments of a dream, as faces became recognizable in the gloom. A moment's thought revealed their presence as explicable enough, even if singular in present unison. To limit examination of this cluster of figures to a mere glance over the shoulder was asking too much, even to pretend any longer that the glance was only a requisite precaution for keeping abreast of the progress of the service. In fact most of the congregation settled down to a good stare.

A man in his sixties, tall, haggard, bent, bald, walked behind Widmerpool, his untidy self-satisfied air for some reason suggesting literary or journalistic affiliations. Beside him was a woman about twenty years younger, short, wiry, her head tied up in a red handkerchief, somehow calling to mind old-fashioned Soviet posters celebrating the Five Year Plan. Too stocky and irritable in appearance, in fact, to figure in pictorial propaganda, she had the right sort of aggressiveness. This was Gypsy Jones. Oddly enough, the look of King Lear on the heath attached to Mr Deacon, when, years before, I had seen him selling *War Never Pays!* with Gypsy at Hyde Park Corner, was suddenly recalled. However different his sexual tastes, Howard Craggs had developed much of the same wandering demented appearance. It was almost as if association with Gypsy—they had lived together years before the marriage reported by Bagshaw—brought about this mien.

Behind these two walked another couple unforeseen as proceeding side by side up the aisle of a church One of these was J. G. Quiggin, certainly an old friend of Erridge's, in spite of many ups and downs. It was also natural enough that he should have travelled here with Craggs, co-director of the new publishing firm. Sillery's description of Quiggin's current Partisan-style dress was borne out by the para-military overtones of khaki shirt, laced ankle boots, belted black leather overcoat. To be fair, the last dated back at least to the days when Quiggin was St John Clarke's secretary. Beside Quiggin, contrasted in a totally achieved funereal correctness, smoothing his grey moustache in unmistakable agonies of embarrassment—either at arriving at the church so late, or presenting himself on such an occasion in the company of mourners so unconformist in dress—walked the Tollands' Uncle Alfred.

However, the last figure in the cortège made the rest seem humdrum enough. At the rear of this wedge-shaped phalanx, a long way behind the others, moving at a stroll that suggested she was out by herself on a long lonely country walk, her thoughts far away in her own melancholy daydreams, walked, almost glided, Widmerpool's wife. Her eyes were fixed on the ground as she advanced slowly, with extraordinary grace, up the aisle. As centre of attention she put the rest of the procession utterly in the shade. That was not entirely due, to her slim figure and pent-up sullen beauty. Another beautiful girl could have created no more than the impression that she was a beautiful girl. It was not easy to say what marked out Pamela Widmerpool as something more than that. Perhaps her absolute self-confidence, her manner of expressing without words that to be present at all was a condescension; to have allowed herself to be one of that particular party, an accepted abasement of the most degrading sort. Above all, she seemed an appropriate attendant on Death. This was not an account of her clothes. They were far from sombre. They looked—so Isobel remarked afterwards—as if bought for a cold day's racing. This closeness to Death was carried within herself. Even in his chastened state, Roddy Cutts could not withhold an audible drawing in of breath.

When they were halfway up the aisle, level with a fairly wide area of unoccupied seats, Widmerpool turned sharply, grinding his heel on the stone in a drill-like motion, a man intentionally emphasizing status as military veteran. His back to the altar, he barred the way, almost as if about to stage an anti-liturgical, even anti-clerical demonstration. However, instead of creating any such untoward disturbance, he shot out the hand of a policeman directing traffic, to indicate where each was to sit of the group apparently under his command.

This authority was by no means unquestioned. Discussion immediately arose among the others, no doubt similar in bearing to whatever disagreements had taken place in the porch. Jeavons, from where he was sitting up at the front of the church, beckoned vehemently to Alfred Tolland in an effort to show where a place could be found among the family. The two of them knew each other not only as relations, but also as fellow air-raid wardens, duties during the course of which an inarticulate friendship may have been obscurely cemented. However, Alfred Tolland was at that moment too dazed by the journey, or oppressed by other circumstances in which he found himself, to be capable of reaching a goal so far afield. He stood there patiently awaiting Widmerpool's instructions, scarcely noticing Jeavons's arms swinging up and down at semaphore angles.

These directions of Widmerpool's had not yet been fully implemented, when Pamela, pushing past the others, precipitately entered the pew her husband was allotting to Alfred Tolland. She placed herself at the far end, under the marble fascicles of standards, lances and sabres that encrusted the Henry Lucius tomb. Whether or not this seating arrangement accorded with Widmerpool's intention could only be guessed; probably not, from the expression his face at once assumed. Nevertheless, now it had happened, he curtly directed Alfred Tolland to follow, without attempting to reclassify this order of precedence. There was a moment of gesturing between them, Alfred Tolland putting forward some contrary suggestion—he may just have grasped the meaning of Jeavons's signals—so that very briefly it looked as if a wrestling match were about to take place in the aisle. Then Widmerpool shoved Alfred Tolland almost bodily into the pew, where, leaving a wide gap between himself and Pamela, Tolland immediately knelt, burying his face in his hands like a man in agonies of remorse. At Widmerpool's orders, Quiggin went in next; Craggs and Gypsy into the pew behind. They were followed by Widmerpool himself.

The last time I had seen Pamela in church had been at Stringham's wedding, child bridesmaid of six or seven, an occasion when, abandoning responsibilities in holding up the bride's train, she had walked away composedly, later, so it was alleged, causing herself to be lifted in order to be sick into the font. 'That little girl's a fiend,' someone had remarked afterwards at the reception. Now she sat, so to speak, between Henry Lucius and his descendant Alfred Tolland. Would Henry Lucius, 'not indifferent to the charms of the fair sex', rise from the dead? She had closed her eyes, either in prayer, or to express the low temperature of the nave, but did not kneel. Neither did Quiggin, Craggs or Gypsy kneel, but Widmerpool leant forward for a few seconds in a noncommittally devotional attitude that did not entirely abandon a sitting posture, and might have been attributable merely to some interior discomfort.

The dead silence that had momentarily fallen was broken by Widmerpool levering himself back on the seat. He removed his spectacles and began to wipe them. He was rather thinner, or civilian clothes gave less impression of bulk than the 'utility' uniform that enclosed him when last seen. The House of Commons had already left its indefinable, irresoluble mark. His thick features, the rotundities of his body, always amenable to caricature, now seemed more than ever simplified in outline, positively demanding treatment in political cartoon. The notion that a few months at Westminster had brought this about was far fetched. Alteration, if alteration there were, was more likely to be accountable to marriage.

Craggs too shared some of this air of a figure from newspaper caricature, a touch of the Mad Hatter mingling with that of King Lear. His shabbiness, almost griminess, was certainly designed to convey to the world that he was a person of sufficient importance to rise above bourgeois convention, whatever its form. Smiling to himself, snuffling, fidgeting, he gazed round the church in a manner to register melodramatic wonder that such places could still exist, even for the purpose that had brought him there. Such views were certainly held by Gypsy too—who had refused to attend her old friend Mr Deacon's funeral on strictly anti-religious grounds—but unmitigated anger now appeared to prevent her from knowing, or caring, where she found herself. Quiggin looked as if his mind were occupied with business problems. On the other hand, he might have been thinking of the time when Erridge had taken Mona, Quiggin's girl, to the Far East. That difference had been long made up, but circumstances could have recalled it, giving Quiggin a strained uneasy expression.

One of the least resolvable problems posed by Widmerpool's presence was his toleration of Gypsy as member of the party. Once—haunted by that dire incident in the past when he had paid for her 'operation'—he would have gone to any lengths to avoid even meeting her. If, as Craggs's wife, she had to come, that would have been sufficient to keep Widmerpool away. Some overriding political consideration must explain this, such as the idea of attaching himself to a kind of unofficial deputation paying last respects to a 'Man of the Left'. In Widmerpool's case that would be a way of establishing publicly his own *bona fides*, sentiments not sufficiently recognized in himself. Acceptance of Gypsy could be regarded as a gesture of friendship to the extremities of Left Wing thought, an olive branch appropriate (or not) to Erridge's memory.

The more one thought about it, the more relevant—to employ one of their own favourite terms—were Quiggin and Craggs, in fact the whole group, to consign Erridge to the tomb; in certain respects more so than his own relations. It was true that Erridge's abnegation of the family as a social unit was capable of exaggeration, by no means so total as he himself liked to pretend, or his cronies, many of those unsympathetic to him too, prepared to accept. The fact remained that it was with Quiggin and Craggs he had lived his life, insomuch as he had lived it with other people at all, sitting on committees, signing manifestoes, collaborating in pamphlets. (Burton—who provided instances for all occasions, it was hard not to become obsessed with him—spoke of those who 'pound out pamphlets on leaves of which a poverty-stricken monkey would not wipe'.) In fact, pondering on these latest arrivals, they might be compared with the squad of German POWs straying across the face of George Tolland's obsequies, each group a visual reminder of seamy realities—as opposed to idealistic aspirations—the former of war, the latter, politics.

The train of thought invited comparison between the two brothers, their characters and fates. Erridge, high-minded, willing to endure discomfort, ridicule, solitude, in a fervent anxiety to set the world right, had at the same time, as a comfortably situated eldest son, a taste for holding on to his money, except for intermittent doles—no doubt generous ones—to Quiggin and others who represented in his own eyes what Sillery liked to call The Good Life. Erridge was wholly uninterested in individuals; his absorption only in 'causes'.

George, on the other hand, had never shown much concern with righting the world, except that in a sense his death might be regarded as stemming from an effort at least to prevent the place from becoming worse. He had not been at all adept at making money, but never, so to speak, set the glass of port he liked after lunch—if there were any excuse—before, say, educating his step-children in a generous manner. A competent officer (Tom Goring had praised him in that sphere), his target was always the regular soldier's (one thought of Vigny) to do his duty to the fullest extent, without, at the same time seeking supererogatory burdens or looking out for trouble.

With newsprint still in short supply, Erridge's obituaries were briefer than might have been the case in normal times, but he received some little notice: polite reference to lifelong Left-Wing convictions, political reorientations in that field, final pacifism; the last contrasted with having 'fought' (the months in Spain having by now taken mythical shape) in the Spanish Civil War. George was, of course, mentioned only in the ordinary death announcements inserted by the family. Musing on the brothers, it looked a bit as if, in an oblique manner, Erridge, at least by implication, had been given the credit for paying the debt that had in fact been irrefutably settled by George. The same was true, if it came to that, of Stringham, Templer, Barnby—to name a few casualties known personally to one—all equally indifferent to putting right the world.

The sound came now, unmistakable, of the opening Sentences of the burial service. Everyone rose. Coughing briefly ceased. The parson, a very old man presented to the living by Erridge's grandfather, moved slowly, rather painfully forward, intoning the words in a high quavering chant. The heavy boots of the coffin-bearers shuffled over the stones. The faces of the bearers were set, almost agonizingly concentrated, on what they were doing, that of Skerrett, the old gamekeeper, of gnarled ivory, like a skull. He was not much younger than the parson. A boy of sixteen supporting one of the back corners of the coffin was probably his grandson. The trembling prayers raised a faint echo throughout the dank air of the church, on which the congregation's breath floated out like steam. Such moments never lose their intensity. A cross-reference had uncovered Herbert's lines a few days before.

> The brags of life are but a nine-days wonder:
>   And after death the fumes that spring
> From private bodies, make as big a thunder
>   As those which rise from a huge king.

One thought of Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Reference to bodily corruption was a natural reaction from 'Whom none should advise, thou hast persuaded'. Ralegh might be grandiloquent, he was also authoritative, even hypnotic, no less resigned than Herbert, as well. I thought about death. It seemed most unlikely Burton had really hanged himself, as rumoured, to corroborate the accuracy of the final hour he had drawn in his own horoscope. The fact was he was only mildly interested in astrology.

By this time the bearers were showing decided strain from the weight of the coffin. They had reached a stage about halfway up the aisle, and were going fairly slowly. Suddenly a commotion began to take place in one of the pews opposite this point. Pamela was attempting to make her way out. Her naturally pale face was the colour of chalk. She had already thrust past Alfred Tolland and Quiggin, but Widmerpool, an absolutely outraged expression on his face, stepped quickly from the pew behind to delay her.

'I'm feeling faint, you fool. I've got to get out of here.'

She spoke in quite a loud voice. Widmerpool seemed to make a momentary inner effort to decide for himself the degree of his wife's indisposition, whether she were to be humoured or not, but she pushed him aside so violently that he nearly fell. As she hurried into the aisle he recovered himself, for a second made as if to follow her, then decided against any such action. Had he seriously contemplated pursuit, there had been in any case too great delay. Although Pamela herself managed to skirt the procession advancing with the coffin, it was doubtful whether anyone of more considerable bulk could have freely negotiated the available space in the same manner, especially after the disruption caused. She had brushed past the vicar so abruptly that he gasped and lost the thread of his words. A second later the bearers, recovering themselves, were level with Widmerpool, blocking his own egress from the pew. Pamela's heels clattered away down the flags. When she reached the door, there was difficulty in managing the latch. It gave out discordant rattles; then a creak and loud slam.

'My God,' said Norah.

She spoke the words softly. They recalled her own troubles with Pamela. The service continued. I tried to recompose the mind by returning to Ralegh and Herbert. 'Whom none should advise, thou hast persuaded.' Was that true of everyone who died? Of Erridge, eminently true: true too, in its way, of Stringham and Templer: to some extent of Barnby: not at all true of George Tolland: yet, after all, was it true of him too? I thought of the portraits of Ralegh, stylized in ruff, short cloak, pointed beard, fierce look. 'All the pride, cruelty and ambition of men.' Ralegh knew the form. Still, Herbert was good too. I wondered what Herbert had looked like. In the end one got back to Burton's 'vile rock of melancholy, a disease so frequent, as few there are that feel not the smart of it'. Melancholy was so often the explanation, anyway melancholy in Burton's terms. The bearers took up the coffin once more. The recession was slow, though this time uninterrupted.

'I hope old Skerrett will be all right,' whispered Isobel. 'He looked white as a sheet when he passed.'

'Whiter than Mrs Widmerpool?'

'Much whiter.'

Outside, the haze had thickened. The air struck almost warm after the church. Rain still fell in small penetrating drops. The far corner of the churchyard was occupied with an area of Tolland graves: simple headstones: solid oblong blocks of stone with iron railings: crosses, two unaccountably Celtic in design: one obelisk. Norah, who had never got on at all well with her eldest brother, was in convulsions of tears, the other sisters dabbing with their handkerchiefs. There was no sign of Pamela in the porch. The mourners processed to the newly dug grave. The old parson, his damp surplice clinging like a shroud, refused to be hurried by the elements. He took what he was doing at a thoroughly leisurely pace. There seemed no reason why the funeral should ever end. Then, all at once, everything was over. The mourners began to move slowly, rather uncomfortably away.

'I'll just have a word with Skerrett,' said Isobel. 'He's looking better now. Meet you at the gate.'

Before I reached the lychgate, a tall, rather distinguished-looking woman separated herself from other shapes lurking among the tombstones, and came towards me. She must have sat at the back of the church, because I had not seen her until that moment. She was fortyish, a formal magazine-cover prettiness organized to make her seem not only younger than that, but at the same time a girl not exactly of the present, rather of some years back. Her voice too struck a note at that moment equally out of fashion.

'I thought I *must* say hullo, Nick, though it's *years* since we met—you remember me, Mona, I used to be married to Peter Templer—what ages. Yes, poor Peter, wasn't it sad? So brave of him at his age too. Jeff says you're *never* the same in war after you're thirty. We're weaving about fairly close here, and I've got to *scamper* home this minute, because Jeff's quite *insane* about punctuality. We're living in a *horrible* house over by Gibbet Down, so I thought I *ought* to make a pilgrimage for Alf. It's poor Alf now too, as well as poor Peter, isn't it? Alf didn't have much of a time, did he, though he *was* kindhearted in his way, even if he *abominated* spending a farthing on drink—one's throat got absolutely *arid* travelling with him. I shall never forget Hong Kong. JG used to get so *angry* in the old days if I complained about the *drought* when we dined at Thrubworth with Alf, which wasn't all that often. Lack of drink was even worse when I was alone with him, I can assure you. Fancy JG turning up today too. *So* unexpected when he does the right thing for once. I hear he lived for a time with someone called *Lady Anne Stepney*, and then she went off with one of the Free French. That did make me laugh—and Gypsy here too. Do you think she *did* have a walk out with Alf? He used to talk about seeing her at those *awful* political conferences he loved going to. I sometimes wondered. Well, we'll never know now. I just *waved* to JG and Gypsy. I thought that would be *quite enough*.'

Isobel reappeared.

'Your *wife*? How sad it must be to lose a brother, I never had one, but I'm sure it is. And not at all old either, except we're all *centuries* old now, I feel a *million*, but, of course—well, I don't know—anyway, I just thought it was my *duty* to come, even in *daunting* weather. I'll have to proceed back now with all possible speed, or Jeff will be having *kittens*. Jeff's an Air Vice-Marshal now. Isn't that grand? *Burdened* with gongs. He was rather worried about my using the car for a funeral, but I said I was going to a POW camp, and if an Air Vice-Marshal's lady can't inspect a POW camp, what in hell can she do? Well, it's been nice seeing you, Nick, *and* your wife, not to mention having a word about those poor dears who are no more. That erk will have to drive like *stink* if I'm not to be late. We've got some personnel coming to *tea* of all things—drink quite impossible to get for love or money these days, anyway to dish out to all and sundry, as well you must know, so I'll just say bye-bye for now . . .'

While talking, she had fallen more than once into what Mr Deacon used to call a 'vigorous pose'. Now, as she walked away, the controlled movement of her long swift strides recalled the artists' model she once had been. In the road stood a large car, a uniformed aircraftman at the wheel. She turned and waved, then disappeared within.

'Who on earth?'

'That's Mona.'

'Not the girl Erry took to China?'

'Of course.'

'Why didn't you indicate that? I could have had a closer look. What a pity the poor old boy didn't hang on. She might have kept him going.'

As the RAF car drove away, the outlines of Alfred Tolland, picking his way between the graves, came into view. He had been waiting for Mona to move on before he approached. It now struck me that he must have met Widmerpool at the Old Boy dinners of Le Bas's house, because Alfred Tolland retained sentiments about his schooldays that age had in no way diminished. Except for Le Bas himself, he had always—in the days long past when I myself attended them—been the eldest present by at least twenty years.

'Uncle Alfred's a sad case in that respect,' Hugo had remarked. 'Personally I applaud that great enemy of the Old School Tie, the Emperor Septimius Severus, who had a man scourged merely for drawing attention to the fact that they had been at school together.'

Le Bas dinners could explain why Widmerpool and Alfred Tolland had travelled down together after seeing each other at the station. Widmerpool was, in fact, now revealed as standing close behind, as if he expected Alfred Tolland to make some statement that concerned himself or his party, the rest of whom were no longer to be seen. They could be concealed by mist, or have left in a body after the committal. To make sure his own presence as a mourner was not overlooked by Erridge's family would be characteristic of Widmerpool, even though the reason for his attendance remained at present unproclaimed. He was looking even more worried than in the church. If he had merely desired to register attendance and go away, he would certainly have pushed in front of Alfred Tolland, whose hesitant, deferential comportment always caused delays, particularly at a time like this. Neat, sad, geared perfectly in outward appearance to the sombre nature of the occasion, Tolland stood, head slightly bent, gazing at the damp grass beneath his feet. He had once admitted to having travelled as far as Singapore. One wondered how he had ever managed to get there and back again. Unlikely he had taken with him a girl like Mona, though one could never tell. Barnby always used to insist it was misplaced to speak categorically about other people's sexual experiences, whoever they were.

'Uncle Alfred?'

'My dear Isobel, this is very . . .'

He was all but incapable of finishing a sentence, a form of diffidence implying unworthiness to force a personal opinion on others. Even when Alfred Tolland spoke his own views, they were hedged round with every sort of qualification. Erridge's passing, the company in which he found himself on the way down, stirred within him concepts far too unmanageable to be accommodated in a single phrase. Isobel helped him out.

'A very sad occasion, Uncle Alfred. Poor Erry. It was so unexpected.'

'Yes—quite unexpected. These things are unexpected sometimes. Absolutely unexpected, in fact. Of course Erridge always did . . .'

What did Erridge always do? The question was capable of many answers. The wrong thing? Know he was a sick man? Fear the winter? Hope the end would be sudden? Want Alfred Tolland to reveal some special secret after his own demise? Perhaps just 'do the unexpected'. On the whole that termination was the most probable. Alfred Tolland, this time unassisted by Isobel, may have feared that any too direct statement about what Erridge 'did' might sound callous, if spoken straight out. Instead of completing, he altogether abandoned the comment, this time bringing out in its entirety another concept, quite different in range.

'I'm feeling rather ashamed.'

'Ashamed, Uncle Alfred?'

'Never got down here for George's . . . In bed, as a matter of fact.'

'Nothing bad, I hope, Uncle Alfred.'

'Had a bit of—chest. Felt ashamed, all the same. Not absolutely right now, but can get about. Can't be helped. Didn't want to stay away when it came to the head of the family.'

He spoke as if he would have risen from the dead to reach the funeral of the head of the family. Perhaps he had. The idea was not to be too lightly dismissed. There was something not wholly of this world about him. Time, for example, seemed to mean nothing. One hoped he would come soon to the point of what he had to say. Although the worst of the rain had stopped, a pervasive damp struck up from the ground and into the bones. Obviously something was on his mind. In the background Widmerpool shifted about, stamping his feet and kicking them together.

'We'll give you a lift back to the house, Uncle Alfred, if you want one. That's if any of the cars will start. Some of them are rather ancient. It may be rather a squeeze.'

'Quite forgot, quite forgot . . . These good people I travelled down with . . . shared a taxi from the station . . . Mr—met him at those dinners Nicholas and I . . . and his wife . . . very good looking . . . another couple too, Sir Somebody and Lady Something . . . also another old friend of Erridge's . . . nice people . . . something they wanted to ask . . .'

Alfred Tolland turned towards Widmerpool, in search of help, to give words to a matter not at all easy to summarize in a few broken phrases. At least he found that hard, which was usual enough, even if the situation were not as ticklish as this one appeared. Widmerpool, not happy himself, was prepared at the same time to accept his cue. He began to speak in his least aggressive manner.

'Two things, Nicholas—though I don't expect you're really the person to ask, sure as I am, as an old friend, you'll be prepared to act for us as—well, as what?—intermediary, shall we say? You know already, I think, the other members of the party I came down with. J. G. Quiggin, of course—must know him as a literary bloke like yourself—and as for Sir Howard and Lady Craggs, of course you remember them.'

One had to admit that 'Sir Howard and Lady Craggs' conjured up a rather different picture from Mr Deacon's birthday party, Gypsy lolling on Craggs's knee, struggling to divert a too exploratory hand back to a wide area of pink thigh. If it came to that, one had one's own reminiscences of Lady Craggs in an easy-going mood.

'We all wanted, of course, to pay last respects to your late brother-in-law, Lord Warminster—much to my regret I never managed to meet him—but there was also something else. This seemed a golden opportunity to have a preliminary word, if possible, with the appropriate member, or members, of the family, now collected together, as to the best means of approaching certain matters arisen in consequence of Lord Warminster's death.'

Widmerpool paused. He was relieved to have made a start on whatever he wanted to say, for clearly this was by no means the end.

'The late Lord Warminster left certain instructions in connexion with the publishing house Sir Howard Craggs—well, we can talk about all that later. As I say, this seemed a good moment to have a tentative word with the—in short with the executors, as I understand, Mr Hugo Tolland and Lady Frederica Umfraville.'

Whatever complications now threatened were beyond conjecture. Within the family it had been generally agreed that for Erridge to leave the world without arranging some testing problem to be settled by his heirs and successors, was altogether unthinkable. The form such a problem, or problems, might take was naturally not to be anticipated. That Widmerpool should be involved in any such matters was unlooked for. His relief at having made the statement about Erridge's dispositions, whatever they were, turned out to be due to anxiety to proceed to a far more troublesome enquiry from his own point of view.

'Another matter, Nicholas. My wife—you know her, of course, I'd forgotten—Pamela, as I say, was overcome with faintness during the service. In fact had to leave the church. I hope no one noticed. She did so as quietly as possible. These attacks come on her at times. Largely nerves, in my opinion. It was arranged between us she should await me in the porch. She no doubt found the stone seat there too cold in her distressed state. I thought she might have taken refuge in our taxi, but the driver said, on the contrary, he saw her walking up the drive in the direction of the house.'

Widmerpool stopped speaking. His efforts to present in terms satisfactory to himself two quite separate problems, so that they merged into coherent shape, seemed to have broken down. The first question was what Craggs and Quiggin wanted from the executors, no doubt something to do with the matters of which Bagshaw had spoken; the second, which Widmerpool, judging by past experience, regarded as more important, the disappearance of his wife.

Frederica and Blanche, saying goodbye to the Alford relations to whom they had been talking, came over to have a word with their uncle. Alfred Tolland, still considerably discomposed by all that was happening round him, managed to effect a mumbled introduction of Widmerpool, who seized his opportunity, settling on Frederica. He began at once to put forward the advantages of having a preliminary talk, 'quite informal', about straightening out Erridge's affairs. Frederica had hardly time to agree this would be a good idea, before he returned to the question of Pamela, certainly worrying him a lot. Frederica, a very competent person when it came to making arrangements, took these problems in her stride. Like Erridge, she was not greatly interested in individuals as such, so that Widmerpool's desire to talk business, coupled with anxiety about his wife, were elements to be accepted at their face value. Neither aroused Frederica's curiosity.

'Where are these friends of yours now, Mr Widmerpool?'

'In the church porch. They wanted to get out of the rain. They're waiting—in fact waiting for me to obtain your permission, Lady Frederica, to come up to the house as I suggest. I really think the house is probably where my wife is too.'

This then was the crux of the matter. They all wanted to come up to the house. While that was arranged, Widmerpool had judged it best to confine them to the porch. Possibly there had been signs of mutiny. Judged as a group, they must have been just what Frederica would expect as representative friends of her brother, even though she could not guess, had no wish to examine, subtleties of their party's composition. In her eyes Widmerpool's conventional clothes, authoritative manner, made him a natural enough delegate of an otherwise fairly unpresentable cluster of Erridge hangers-on, a perfectly acceptable representative. Frederica and Erridge had been next to each other in age. Although living their lives in such different spheres, they were by no means without mutual understanding. The whim to leave complicated instructions after death was one with which Frederica could sympathize. Sorting out her brother's benefactions gratified her taste for tidying up.

An uncertain quantity was whether or not she remembered anything of Widmerpool's wife. There could be little doubt that at one time or another Dicky Umfraville had made some reference to Pamela's gladiatorial sex life during the war. It would have been very unlike him to have let that pass without comment. On the other hand, Frederica not only disapproved of such goings-on, she took little or no interest in them, was capable of shutting her eyes to misbehaviour altogether. Unaccompanied by Umfraville, whose banter kept her always on guard against being ragged about what Molly Jeavons used to call her own 'correctness', Frederica, on such an exceptional family occasion, may have reverted to type; closing her eyes by an act of will to the fact, even if she knew that, for example, her sister Norah had been one of Pamela's victims. In short, for one reason or another, she did not in the least at that moment concern herself with the identity of Widmerpool's wife. While she was talking to him, Blanche and Isobel made arrangements about getting old Skerrett home. Alfred Tolland drew me aside.

'Thought it would be all right—best—not to wear a silk hat. See you haven't either, nor the rest of the men. Quite right. Not in keeping with the way we live nowadays. What Erridge would have preferred too, I expect. I always like to do that. Behave as—well—the deceased would have done himself. Doubt if Erridge owned a silk hat latterly. Anthony Eden hats they call this sort I'm wearing now, don't quite know why. Mustn't lose count of time and miss my train, because when I get back I've got to . . .'

Again one wondered what on earth he had 'got to' do when he returned to London. It was not the season for reunion dinners. Molly Jeavons no longer alive, he could not drop in there to be teased about family matters. To picture him at any other sort of engagement than these was difficult. It was doubtful whether amicable relations with Jeavons included visits to the house now Molly was gone. One returned to the earlier surmise that he had risen from the dead, had to report back to another graveyard by a stated time.

'I haven't seen Frederica's husband.'

He spoke tentatively, like many of his own age-group, prepared always for the worst when it came to news about the marriages of the next generation.

'Dicky couldn't come. He's with the Control Commission.'

There was no point in emphasizing Umfraville's flat refusal to turn up. The fact of his absence seemed to bring relief to Alfred Tolland.

'Remember I once told you Umfraville was my fag at school? Not a word of truth in it. My fag was an older man. Not older than Umfraville is now, of course, he was younger than me, and naturally still is, if he's alive, but older than Frederica's husband would have been at that age. Made a mistake. Found there were two Umfravilles. Been on my conscience ever since telling you that. Hope it never got passed on. Didn't want to meet him, and seem to be claiming acquaintance . . .'

'Probably a relation. It's an uncommon name.'

'Never safe to assume people are relations. That's what I've found.'

'Isobel's beckoning us to a car.'

The dilapidated Morris Eight to which we steered him was driven by Blanche and already contained Norah. Accommodation was cramped. As we drove away, Widmerpool was to be seen marshalling his own party outside the porch. They were lost to sight moving in Indian file between the tombstones, making for a large black car, the taxi in which they had all arrived, far more antiquated than our own vehicle.

'Of course, I knew—Mr—Mr Whatever-his-name-is, knew his face when I saw him at the train,' said Alfred Tolland. 'As soon as he spoke I remembered the excellent speech he made that night—what's the man's name?—took over the house from Cordery—your man—Le Bas—that's the one. The night Le Bas had a stroke or something. Always remember that speech. Full of excellent stuff. Good idea to get away from all that—what is it, *Eheu fugaces*, something of the sort, never any good at Latin. All that sentimental stuff, I mean, and talk about business affairs for a change. Sound man. Great admirer of Erridge, he told me—takes rather a different view of him to most—I don't say *most*—anyway some of the family, who were always a bit what you might call lacking in understanding of Erridge—not exactly disapproving but . . . Widmerpool, that's the fellow's name. He's an MP now. Labour, of course. Thinks very highly of Mr Attlee. Sure he's right . . . I was a bit worried about Mrs Widmerpool. So quiet. Very shy, I expect. Rare these days for a young woman to be as quiet as that. Thought she might be upset about something. Daresay funerals upset her. They do some people. Beautiful young woman too. I couldn't help looking at her. She must have thought me quite rude. Hope somebody's seeing to her properly after she had to leave the service . . .'

This was the longest dissertation I had ever heard Alfred Tolland attempt. That he should allow himself such conversational licence showed how much the day had agitated him. He might also be trying to keep his mind from the discomfort suffered where we sat at the back of the small car. A long silence followed, as if he regretted having given voice to so many private opinions.

'True Thrubworth weather,' said Norah.

She had recovered from her tears. Rain was pouring down again. Mist hid the woods on the high ground behind the house, the timber preserved from felling by St John Clarke's fortuitous legacy to Erridge. The camp was visible enough. On either side of the drive Nissen huts were enclosed by barbed wire. The dismal climate kept the POWs indoors. A few drenched guards were the only form of life to be seen. Blanche made a circuit round the back of the house, the car passed under an arch, into the cobbled yard through which Erridge's wing was approached. She stopped in front of a low door studded with large brass nails.

'I'll put the car away. Go on up to the flat.'

The door turned out to be firmly shut.

'Probably no one at home,' said Norah. 'They've all been to the funeral. I hope Blanchie's got the key. It would be just like her to leave the house without bringing the key with her.'

She knocked loudly. We waited in the rain. After a minute the door was opened. I expected an elderly retainer of some sort, if the knocking were answered at all. Instead of that, a squat, broad-shouldered young man, with fair curly hair and a ruddy face, stood on the threshold. He wore a grey woollen sweater and chocolate-coloured trousers patched in many places. I thought he must be some new protégé of Erridge's about whom one had not been warned. He seemed wholly prepared for us.

'Come in, please, come in.'

Blanche appeared at that moment.

'They'll all be along soon, Siegfried. Will you put the kettle on? I'll come and help in a second. I thought we left the door on the latch.'

'Miss must have closed it.'

'Mrs Skerrett did? Well, leave it unlatched now, so the others can get in without bringing you down to open it.'

'Make her tea.'

'You've made tea already, Siegfried?'

'Of course.'

Grinning delightedly about something, apparently his own ingenuity, he bustled off.

'Who the hell?' asked Norah.

'Siegfried? He's one of the German prisoners working on the land. He loves doing jobs about the house so much, there seemed no point in trying to prevent him. It's a great help, as there's too much for Mrs Skerrett singlehanded, especially on a day like this.'

We passed along the passages leading to Erridge's flat, the several rooms of which were situated up a flight of stairs some little way from the door opening on the courtyard. In the dozen years or so since I had last been at Thrubworth more lumber than ever had collected in these back parts of the house, much of it no doubt brought there after requisitioning. There was an overwhelming accumulation: furniture: pictures: rolled-up carpets: packing cases. Erridge's father, an indefatigable wanderer over the face of the earth, had been responsible for much of this hoard, buying everything that took his fancy. There were 'heads' of big game: a suit of Japanese armour: two huge vases standing on plinths: an idol that looked Mexican or South American. Alfred Tolland identified some of these odds and ends as we made our way through them.

'That oil painting on its side's the First Jubilee. Very old-fashioned in style. Nobody paints like that now. Those big pots are supposed to be eighteenth-century Chinese. Walter Huntercombe came to shoot here once, and insisted they were nothing of the sort. Nineteenth-century copies, he said, and my brother had been swindled. Of course Warminster didn't like that at all. Told Walter Huntercombe he was a conceited young ass. Goodness knows where the tricycle came from.'

Erridge's flat, at the top of a flight of narrow stairs at the end of the corridor, in most respects a severely unadorned apartment, with the air of a temple consecrated to the beliefs of a fanatically austere sect, included a few pieces of furniture that suggested quite another sort of life. His disregard for luxury, anything like fastidious selection of objects, allowed shabby chairs and tables that had seen better days in other parts of the house. In the sitting-room someone—probably Frederica—had removed from the wall the pedigree-like chart, on which what appeared to be descending branches of an ancient lineage, had turned out an illustration of the principles of world economic distribution; now, in any case, hopelessly outdated in consequence of the war.

The books on the shelves, most of them published twelve or fifteen years before, gave the impression of having been bought during the same period of eighteen months or two years: *Russia's Productive System* . . . *The Indian Crisis* . . .

Anthology of Soviet Literature . . . Towards the Understanding of Karl Marx . . . From Peasant to Collective Farmer. There was also a complete set of Dickens in calf, a few standard poets, and—Erridge's vice, furtive, if not absolutely secret—the bound volumes of *Chums* and the *Boy's Own Paper*, the pages of which he would turn unsmiling for hours at times of worry or irritation. Erridge's Russian enthusiasms had died down by the late thirties, but he always retained a muted affection for the Soviet system, even when disapproving. This fascination for an old love was quite different from Bagshaw's. Bagshaw delighted in examining every inconsistency in the Party Line: who was liquidated: who in the ascendant: which heresies persecuted: which new orthodoxies imposed. Such mutations were painful to Erridge. He preferred not to be brought face to face with them. He was like a man who hoped to avoid the distress of hearing of the depravities into which an adored mistress has fallen.

In this room Erridge had written his letters, eaten his meals, transacted political business with Craggs and Quiggin, read, lounged, moped, probably seduced Mona, or *vice versa*; the same, or alternate, process possibly applying also to Gypsy Jones—or rather Lady Craggs. He used rarely to digress into other parts of the house. The 'state apartments' were kept covered in dust sheets. Once in a way he might have need to consult a book in the library, to which few volumes had been added since the days of the Chemist-Earl, who had brought together what was then regarded as an unexampled collection of works on his own subject. Once in a way a guest—latterly these had become increasingly rare—likely to be a new political contact of one kind or another, for example, an unusually persistent refugee, might be shown round. Erridge had never entirely conquered a taste for exhibiting his own belongings, even though rather ashamed of the practice, and of the belongings themselves.

The once wide assortment of journals on a large table set aside for this purpose had been severely reduced—probably by Frederica again—to a couple of daily newspapers, neither of a flavour her brother would have approved. Beyond this table stood a smaller one at which Erridge and his guests, if any, used to eat. The most comfortable piece of furniture in the room was a big sofa facing the fireplace, its back to the door. The room appeared to be empty when entered, the position of this sofa concealing at first the fact that someone was reclining at full length upon it. Walking across the room to gain a view of the park from the window, I saw the recumbent figure was Pamela's. Propped against cushions, a cup of tea beside her on the floor, by the teacup an open book, its pages downward on the carpet, she was looking straight ahead of her, apparently once more lost in thought. I asked if she were feeling better. She turned her large pale eyes on me.

'Why should I be feeling better?'

'I don't know. I just enquired as a formality. Don't feel bound to answer.'

For once she laughed.

'I mean obviously you weren't well in church.'

'Worse than the bloody corpse.'

'Flu?'

'God knows.'

'A virus?'

'It doesn't much matter does it?'

'Diagnosis might suggest a cure.'

'Are Kenneth and those other sods on their way here?'

'So I understand.'

'The kraut got me some tea.'

'That showed enterprise.'

'He's got enterprise all right. Why's he at large?'

'He's working on the land apparently.'

'His activities don't seem particularly agricultural.'

'He winkled himself into the house somehow.'

'He knows his way about all right. He was bloody fresh. Who's that awful woman we travelled down with called Lady Craggs?'

The sudden appearance beside us of Alfred Tolland spared complicated exposition of Gypsy's origins. In any case the question had expressed an opinion rather than request for information. Alfred Tolland gazed down at Pamela. He seemed to be absolutely fascinated by her beauty.

'Do hope you're . . .'

'I'm what?'

'Better.'

He brought the word out sharply. Probably he ought always to be treated in an equally brusque manner, told to get on with it, make a move, show a leg, instead of being allowed to maunder on indefinitely trying to formulate in words his own obscurities of thought; licence that his relations had fallen too long into the habit of granting without check. Siegfried appeared again, this time carrying a tray loaded with cups and saucers. His personality lay somewhere between that of Odo Stevens and Mrs Andriadis's one-time boy-friend, Guggenbühl, now Gainsborough. He made firmly towards Alfred Tolland, who stood between him and the table where he planned to lay the tea things.

'Sir, excuse, you are in the way, please.'

Called to order only a second before by Pamela Alfred Tolland again reacted more quickly than usual. He almost jumped aside. Siegfried pushed adroitly past him, set the tray on a table, then returned to retrieve Pamela's cup from the floor.

'More of tea, Miss, please?'

'No.'

'Not good?'

'Not particularly.'

'Why not so?'

'God knows.'

'Another cup then, please. There is enough. China tea for the ration more easy.'

'I said I don't want any more.'

'No?'

She did not answer this time, merely closed her eyes. Siegfried, not in the least put out, showed no sign of going away. He and Alfred Tolland stood side by side staring at Pamela, expressing in their individual and contrasted ways boundless silent admiration. Her contempt for both of them was absolute. It seemed only to stimulate more fervent worship. After remaining thus entranced for some little time, Siegfried must have decided that after all work came first, because he suddenly hurried away, no less complacent and apparently finding the situation irresistibly funny. He had certainly conceived a more down-to-earth estimate of Pamela's character and possibilities than Alfred Tolland, who was in any case taken over at that moment by Blanche. He allowed himself to be led away, showing signs of being even a little relieved at salvage in this manner. Pamela opened her eyes again, though only to look straight in front of her. When I spoke of a meeting with Ada Leintwardine, she showed a little interest.

'I warned her that old fool Craggs, whose firm she's joining, is as randy as a stoat. I threw a glass of Algerian wine over him once when he was trying to rape me. Christ, his wife's a bore. I thought I'd strangle her on the way here. Look at her now.'

Gypsy, followed by Craggs, Quiggin and Widmerpool, had just arrived, ushered in by Siegfried, to whom Widmerpool was talking loudly in German. Whatever he had been saying must have impressed Siegfried, who stuck out his elbows and clicked his heels before once more leaving the room. Widmerpool missed this mark of respect, because he had already begun to look anxiously round for his wife. Frederica went forward to receive him, and the others, but Widmerpool scarcely took any notice of her, almost at once marking down Pamela's location and hurrying towards her. To run her to earth was obviously an enormous relief. He was quite breathless when he spoke.

'Are you all right?'

'Why should I be all right?'

'I meant no longer feeling faint. How did you find your way here? It was sensible to come and lie down.'

'I didn't fancy dying of exposure, which was the alternative.'

'Is it one of your nervous attacks?'

'I told you I'd feel like bloody hell if I came on this ghastly party—you insisted.'

'I know I did, dear, I didn't want to leave you alone. We'll be back soon.'

'Back where?'

'Home.'

'After another lovely journey with your friends.'

Widmerpool was not at all dismayed by this discouraging reception. What he wanted to know was Pamela's whereabouts. Having settled that, all was well. The physical state she might or might not be in was in his eyes a secondary matter. In any case he was probably pretty used to rough treatment by now, would not otherwise have been able to survive as a husband. Barnby used to describe the similar recurrent anxieties of the husband of some woman with whom he had been once involved, the man's disregard for everything except ignorance on his own part of his wife's localization. Having her under his eye, no matter how ill-humoured or badly-behaved, was all that mattered. Widmerpool seemed to have reached much the same stage in married life. Anything was preferable to lack of information as to what Pamela might be doing. His tone now altered to one of great relief.

'You'd better lie still. Rest while you can. I must go and talk business.'

'Do you ever talk anything else?'

Disregarding the question, he turned to me.

'Why is that Tory MP Cutts here?'

'He's another brother-in-law.'

'Of course, I'd forgotten. Retained his seat very marginally. I must have a word with him. That's Hugo Tolland he's talking to, I believe?'

'I haven't had an opportunity yet to congratulate you on winning your own seat.'

Widmerpool grasped my arm in the chumminess appropriate to a public man to whom all other men are blood brothers.

'Thanks, thanks. It showed the way things are going. A colleague in the House rather amusingly phrased it to me. We are the masters now, he said. The fight itself was a heartening experience. I used to meet Cutts when I was younger, but we have not yet made contact at Westminster. He had a sister called Mercy, I remember from the old days. Rather a plain girl. There are some things I'd like to discuss with him.'

He left the area of the sofa. Now the war was over one constantly found oneself congratulating people. In a mysterious manner almost everyone who had survived seemed also to have had a leg up. For example, books written by myself, long out of print, appeared better known after nearly seven years of literary silence. This was a more acceptable side of growing older. Even Quiggin, Craggs and Bagshaw had the air of added stature. Craggs was talking to Norah. Either to get away from him, or because she had decided that contact with Pamela was unavoidable, better to be faced coolly, she made some excuse, and came towards us. She may also have felt the need to restore her own reputation for disregarding commonplaces of sentiment in relation to such things as love and death. A brisk talk to Pamela offered opportunity to cover both elements with lightness of touch.

'Hullo, Pam.'

Norah's manner was jaunty.

'Hullo.'

'I never expected to see you here today.'

'You wouldn't have done, if I'd had my way.'

'Unlike you not to have your way, Pam.'

'That's good from you. You were always wanting me to do things I hated.'

'But didn't succeed.'

'It didn't look like that to me.'

'How have you been, Pam?'

'Like hell.'

After saying that Pamela picked up the book from the floor—revealed as Hugo's copy of *Camel Ride to the Tomb*, which he had brought down with him—smoothed out the crumpled pages, and began to turn them absently. Conceiving Norah well qualified by past experience to contend with manoeuvring of this particular kind, in which emotional undercurrents were veiled by unpromising mannerisms, I moved away. Their current relationship would be better hammered out unimpeded by male surveillance. Craggs, left on his own by Norah, had joined Quiggin and Frederica, who were talking together. In his elaborately refined vocables, reminiscent of a stage clergyman in spite of his anti-clericalism, he began to speak of Erridge.

'Such satisfying recollections of your brother were brought home to us—JG and myself, I mean—by the letter you are discussing. It revealed the man, the humanity under a perplexed, one might almost say headstrong exterior.'

Quiggin nodded judiciously. He may have felt a follow-up by Craggs would be helpful after whatever he had himself been saying, because he led me away from the other two. He had been looking rather fiercely round the room while engaged with Frederica. Now his manner became jocular.

'Only through me you infiltrated this house.'

Notwithstanding fairly powerful efforts on his own part to prevent any such ingress, that was broadly speaking true. Obstructive tactics at such a distant date could be overlooked in the light of subsequent events. In any case Quiggin seemed to have forgotten this obverse side of his own benevolence. I supposed he was going to explain whatever dispositions Erridge had left which affected the new publishing firm, but something else was on his mind.

'You saw Mona?' he asked.

'I had quite a talk with her.'

'She was looking very prosperous.'

'She's married to an Air Vice-Marshal.'

'Good God.'

'She appears to like it.'

'Rather an intellectual comedown.'

'You never can tell.'

'Did she ask about me?'

'Said she'd sighted you outside the church and waved.'

'Not particularly good taste her coming, I thought. But listen—I understand you met Bagshaw, and he talked about *Fission*?'

'Not in detail. He said Erry had an interest—that to some extent the magazine would propagate his ideas.'

'Unfortunately that will be possible only in retrospect, but the fact Alf is no longer with us does not mean the paper will not be launched. In fact it will be carried forward much as he would have wished, subject to certain modifications. Kenneth Widmerpool is interested in it now. He wants an organ for his own views. There is another potential backer keen on the more literary, less political side. We have no objection to that. We think the magazine should be open to all opinion to be looked upon as progressive, a rather broader basis than Alf envisaged might be advantageous.'

'Why not?'

'Bagshaw was in Alf's eyes editor-designate. He has had a good deal of experience, even if not of actually running a magazine. I think he should make a tolerable job of it. Howard does not altogether approve of his attitude in certain political directions, but then Howard and Alf did not always see eye to eye.'

I could not quite understand why I was being told all this. Quiggin's tone suggested he was leading up to some overture.

'There will be too much for Bagshaw to spare time for books coming in for review. We'd have liked Bernard Shernmaker to do that, but everyone's after him. Then we tried L. O. Salvidge. He'd been snapped up too. Bagshaw suggested you might like to take the job on.'

The current financial situation was not such as to justify turning down out of hand an offer of this sort. Researches at the University would be at an end in a week or two. I made enquiries about hours of work and emoluments. Quiggin mentioned a sum not startling in its generosity, none the less acceptable, bearing in mind that one might ask for a rise later. The duties he outlined could be fitted into existing routines.

'It would be an advantage having you about the place as a means of keeping in touch with Alf's family. Also you've known Kenneth Widmerpool a long time, he tells me. He's going to advise the firm on the business side. The magazine and the publishing house are to be kept quite separate. He will contribute to *Fission* on political and economic subjects.'

'Do Widmerpool's political views resemble Erry's?'

'They have a certain amount in common. What's more important is that Widmerpool is not only an MP, therefore a man who can to some extent convert ideas into action—but also an MP untarnished by years of back-benching, with all the intellectual weariness that is apt to bring—I say, look what that girl's doing now.'

On the other side of the room Widmerpool had been talking for some little time to Roddy Cutts. The two had gravitated together in response to that law of nature which rules that the whole confraternity of politicians prefers to operate within the closed circle of its own initiates, rather than waste time with outsiders; differences of party or opinion having little or no bearing on this preference. Paired off from the rest of the mourners, speaking rather louder than the hushed tones to some extent renewed in the house after seeming befitted to the neighbourhood of the church, they were animatedly arguing the question of interest rates in relation to hire-purchase; a subject, if only in a roundabout way, certainly reconcilable to Erridge's memory. Widmerpool was apparently giving some sort of an outline of the Government's policy. In this he was interrupted by Pamela. For reasons of her own she must have decided to break up this tête-à-tête. Throwing down her book, which, having freed herself from Norah, she had been latterly reading undisturbed, she advanced from behind towards her husband and Roddy Cutts.

'People refer to the suppressed inflationary potential of our present economic situation,' Widmerpool was saying. 'I have, as it happens, my own private panacea for—'

He did not finish the sentence because Pamela, placing herself between them, slipped an arm round the waists of the two men. She did this without at all modifying the fairly unamiable expression on her face. This was the action to which Quiggin now drew attention. Its effect was electric; electric, that is, in the sense of switching on currents of considerable emotional force all round the room. Widmerpool's face turned almost brick red, presumably in unexpected satisfaction that his wife's earlier ill-humour had changed to manifested affection, even if affection shared with Roddy Cutts. Roddy Cutts himself—who, so far as I know, had never set eyes on Pamela before that afternoon—showed, reasonably enough, every sign of being flattered by this unselfconscious demonstration of attention. Almost at once he slyly twisted his own left arm behind him, no doubt the better to secure Pamela's hold.

This was the first time I had seen her, so to speak, in attack. Hitherto she had always exhibited herself, resisting, at best tolerating, sorties of greater or lesser violence against her own disdain. Now she was to be observed in assault, making the going, preparing the ground for further devastations. The sudden coming into being of this baroque sculptural group, which was what the trio resembled, caused a second's pause in conversation, in any case rather halting and forced in measure, the reverential atmosphere that to some extent had prevailed now utterly subverted. Susan, glancing across at her husband clasped lightly round the middle by Pamela, turned a little pink. Quiggin may have noticed that and judged it a good moment for reintroduction—when they first met he had shown signs of fancying Susan—because he brought our conversation to a close before moving over to speak to her.

'I'll have a further word with Bagshaw,' he said. 'Then he or I will get in touch with you.'

Siegfried entered with a large teapot. He set it on one of the tables, made a sign to Frederica, and, without waiting for further instructions, began to organize those present into some sort of a queue. Frederica, now given opportunity to form a more coherent impression of Widmerpool's wife and her temperament, addressed herself with cold firmness to the three of them.

'Won't you have some tea?'

That broke it up. Siegfried remarshalled the party. Hugo took on Pamela. Widmerpool and Roddy Cutts, left once more together, returned to the principles of hire-purchase. Alfred Tolland, wandering about in the background, seemed unhappy again. I handed him a cup of tea. He embarked once more on one of his new unwonted bursts of talkativeness.

'I'm glad about Mrs Widmerpool . . . glad she found her way . . . the foreign manservant here . . . whoever he is, I mean to say . . . they're lucky to have a . . . footman . . . these days . . . hall-boy, perhaps . . . anyhow he looked after Mrs Widmerpool properly, I was relieved to find . . . Confess I like that quiet sort of girl. Do hope she's better. I'm a bit worried about the train though. We'll have to be pushing off soon.'

'You'll have time for a cup of tea.'

'Please, this way,' said Siegfried.' Please, this way now.'

He managed to break up most of the existing conversations.

'Just like Erry to find that goon,' said Hugo. 'He's worse than Smith, the butler who drank so much, and raised such hell at Aunt Molly's.'

In Siegfried's reorganization of the company, Gypsy was placed next to me, the first opportunity to speak with her. All things considered, she might have been more friendly in manner, though her old directness remained.

'Is this the first time you've been here?'

'No.'

That was at any rate evidence of a sort that she had visited Erridge on his home ground at least once; whether with or without Craggs, or similar escort, was not revealed.

'Who's that Mrs Widmerpool?'

To describe Pamela to Gypsy was no lesser problem than the definition of Gypsy to Pamela. Again no answer was required, Gypsy supplying that herself.

'A first-class little bitch,' she said.

Craggs joined his wife.

'JG and I have completed what arrangements can be made at present. We may as well be going, unless you want another cup of tea, Gypsy?'

The way he spoke was respectful, almost timorous.

'The sooner I get out, the better I'll be pleased.'

'Ought to thank for the cupper, I suppose.'

Craggs looked round the room. Frederica, as it turned out, had gone to fetch some testamentary document for Widmerpool's inspection. While they had been speaking Roddy Cutts took the opportunity of slipping away and standing by Pamela, who was listening to a story Hugo was telling about his antique shop. She ignored Roddy, who, seeing his wife's eye on him, drifted away again. Widmerpool drummed his fingers against the window frame while he waited. Until Roddy's arrival in her neighbourhood, Pamela had given the appearance of being fairly amenable to Hugo's line of talk. Now she put her hand to her forehead and turned away from him. She went quickly over to Widmerpool and spoke. The words, like his answer, were not audible, but she raised her voice angrily at whatever he had said.

'I tell you I'm feeling faint again.'

'All right. We'll go the minute I get this paper—what is that, my dear Tolland?—yes, of course we're taking you in the taxi. I was just saying to my wife that we're leaving the moment I've taken charge of a document Lady Frederica's finding for me.'

He spoke absently, his mind evidently on business matters. Pamela made further protests. Widmerpool turned to Siegfried, who was arranging the cups, most of them odd ones, in order of size at the back of the table.

'Fritz, mein Mann, sagen Sie bitte der Frau Gräfin, dass Wir jetzt abfahren.'

'Sofort, Herr Oberst.'

Pamela was prepared to submit to no such delays. 'I'm going at once—I must. I'm feeling ghastly again.'

'All right, dearest. You go on. I'll follow—the rest of us will. I can't leave without obtaining that paper.'

Widmerpool looked about him desperately. Marriage had greatly reduced his self-assurance. Then a plan suggested itself.

'Nick, do very kindly escort Pam to the door. She's not feeling quite herself, a slight recurrence of what she went through earlier. Those passages are rather complicated, as I remember from arriving. Your sister-in-law's looking for a document I need. I must stay for that, and to thank her for her hospitality.'

Pamela had certainly gone very white again. She looked as if she might be going to faint. Her withdrawal from church, in the light of previous behaviour likely to be prompted by sheer perversity, now took on a more excusable aspect. That she was genuinely feeling ill was confirmed by the way she agreed without argument to the suggested compromise. We at once set off down the stairs together, Pamela bidding no one goodbye.

'Is the taxi outside?'

'Parked in the yard.'

'Your coat?'

'Lying on some of that junk by the door.'

We hurried along. About halfway to the goal of the outside door, amongst the thickest of the bric-à-brac that littered the passage, she stopped.

'I'm feeling sick.'

This was a crisis indeed. If we returned to Erridge's quarters, again negotiating the stairs and passing through the sitting-room, resources existed—in the Erridge manner, unelaborate enough—for accommodating sudden indisposition of this sort, but the sanctuary, such as it was, could not be called near. I lightly sketched in the facilities available, their means of approach. She looked at me without answering. She was a greenish colour by now.

'Shall we go back?'

'Back where?'

'To the bathroom—'

Pamela seemed to consider the suggestion for a second. She glanced round about, her eyes coming to rest on the two tall oriental vessels, which Lord Huntercombe had disparaged as nineteenth-century copies. Standing about five foot high, patterned in blue, boats sailed across their surface on calm sheets of water out of which rose houses on stilts, in the distance a range of jagged mountain peaks. It was a peaceful scene, very different from the emergency in the passage. Pamela came to a decision. Moving rapidly forward, she stepped lightly on one of the plinths where a huge jar rested, in doing so showing a grace I could not help admiring in spite of the circumstances. She turned away and leant forward. All was over in a matter of seconds. On such occasions there is no way in which an onlooker can help. Inasmuch as it were possible to do what Pamela had done with a minimum of fuss or disagreeable concomitant, she achieved that difficult feat. The way she brought it off was remarkable, almost sublime. She stepped down from the plinth with an air of utter unconcern. Colour never high in her cheeks, slightly returned. I made some altogether inadequate gestures of assistance, which she unsmilingly brushed aside. Now she was totally herself again.

'Give me your handkerchief.'

She put it in her bag, and shook her hair.

'Come on.'

'You wouldn't like to go back just for a moment?'

'Of course not.'

Her firmness was granite. Just as we were proceeding on towards the outside door, the rest of the party, Widmerpool, Alfred Tolland, Quiggin, Craggs, Gypsy, appeared at the far end of the corridor. Hugo was seeing them out. Widmerpool was at the head, explaining some apparently complicated matter to Hugo, so that he did not notice Pamela and myself until a yard or two away.

'Ah, there you are, dear. I thought you'd have reached the car by now. I expect you are better, and Nicholas has been pointing out the *objets d'art* to you. It's the kind of thing he knows about. Rather fine some of the pieces look to me.'

He paused and pointed.

'What are those great vases, for example? Chinese? Japanese? I am woefully ignorant of such matters. I intend to visit Japan when opportunity occurs, see what sort of a job the Americans are doing there. I doubted the wisdom of retaining the Emperor. Feudalism must go whenever and wherever it survives. We must also keep an eye on Uncle Sam's mailed fist—but I am running away with myself. Pam, you must go carefully on the journey home. Rest is what you need.'

She did not utter a word but, turning from them, walked quickly towards the door. Morally speaking, some sort of warning seemed required that all had not been well, yet any such announcement was hard to phrase. Before anything could be said—if, indeed, there were anything apposite to say—Hugo had gently encouraged the group to move on.

'I think a revised seating arrangement might be advisable on the way back to the station,' said Widmerpool.

'I'm going in front,' said Pamela.

The rest were contained somehow at the back. Alfred Tolland looked like a man being put to the torture for conscience sake, but determined to bear the torment with fortitude. Pamela lay back beside the driver with closed eyes. The taxi moved away slowly towards the arch, hooted, disappeared from sight. No one waved or looked back. Hugo and I re-entered the house. I told him what had happened in the passage.

'In one of the big Chinese pots?'

'Yes.'

'You don't mean literally?'

'Quite literally.'

'Couldn't you stop her?'

'Where was there better?'

'You mean otherwise it would have been the floor?'

'I suppose so.'

'Does that mean she's going to have a baby?'

'I hadn't thought of that.'

'It's the only excuse.'

'I think it was just rage.'

'Nothing whatever was said?'

'Not a word.'

'You just looked on?'

'What was there to say? It wasn't my business, if she didn't want the others to sympathize with her.'

Hugo laughed. He thought for a moment.

'I believe if I were given to falling for women, I'd fall for her.'

'Meanwhile, how is the immediate problem to be dealt with?'

'We'll consult Blanche.'

The news of Pamela's conduct was received at the beginning with incredulity, the first reaction, that Hugo and I were projecting a bad-taste joke. When the crude truth was grasped, Roddy Cutts was shocked, Frederica furious, Norah sent into fits of hysterical laughter. Jeavons only shook his head.

'Knew she was a wrong 'un from the start,' he said. 'Look at the way she behaved to that poor devil Templer. You know I often think of that chap. I liked having him in the house, and listening to all those stories about girls. Kept your mind off the blitz. Turned out we'd met before in that night-club of Umfraville's, though I couldn't remember a word about it.'

Complications worse than at first envisaged were contingent on what had happened. The Chinese vase had to be sluiced out. Blanche, although totally accepting responsibility for putting right this misadventure, like the burden of every other disagreeable responsibility where keeping house was concerned, voiced these problems first.

'I don't think we can very well ask Mrs Skerrett to clean things up.'

'Quite out of the question,' said Frederica.

There was unanimous agreement that it was no job for Mrs Skerrett in the circumstances.

'Why not tell that Jerry to empty it,' said Roddy Cutts. 'He's doubtless done worse things in his time. His whole demeanour suggests the Extermination Squad.'

'Oh, God, no,' said Hugo. 'Can you imagine explaining to Siegfried what has happened? He would either think it funny in that awful gross German way, or priggishly disapprove in an equally German manner. I don't know which would be worse. One would die of embarrassment.'

'No, you couldn't possibly ask a German to do the cleaning up,' said Norah. 'That would be going a bit far—and a POW at that.'

'I can't see why not,' said Roddy Cutts. 'Rather good for him, to my way of thinking. Besides, the Germans are always desperately keen on vomiting. In their cafés or restaurants they have special places in the Gents for doing so after drinking a lot of beer.'

'It's not him,' said Norah. 'It's us.'

'Norah's quite right,' said Frederica.

For Frederica to support a proposition of Norah's was sufficiently rare to tip the scale.

'Well, who's going to do it?' asked Blanche. 'The jar's too big for me to manage alone.'

In the end, Jeavons, Hugo and I, with shrewd advice from Roddy Cutts, bore the enormous vessel up the stairs to Erridge's bathroom. It passed through the door with comparative ease, but, once inside, every kind of difficulty was encountered. Apart from size and weight, the opening at the top of the pot was not designed for the use to which it had been put; not, in short, adapted for cleansing processes. The job took quite a long time. More than once the vase was nearly broken. We returned to the sitting-room with a good deal of relief that the business was at an end.

'It's Erry's shade haunting the place,' said Norah. 'His obsession with ill-health. All the same, we all supposed him a *malade imaginaire*. Now the joke's with him.'

'I was thinking the other day that hypochondria's a step-brother to masochism,' said Hugo.

This sort of conversation grated on Frederica.

'Do you know how Erry occupied his last week?' she asked. 'Writing letters about the memorial window.'

'The old original memorial window?'

'Yes.'

'But Erry was always utterly against it,' said Norah. 'At least refused ever to make a move. It was George who used to say the window had been planned at the time and ought to be put up, no matter what.'

'Erry appears to have started corresponding about stained-glass windows almost immediately after George's funeral. Blanche found the letters, didn't you?'

Blanche smiled vaguely. Norah threw her cigarette into the fireplace in a manner to express despair at all human behaviour, her own family's in particular.

'Apart from going into complete reverse as to his own values, fancy imagining you could get a stained-glass window put up to your grandfather when you can't find a bloody builder to repair the roof of your bloody bombed-out flat. That was Erry all over.'

'Perhaps he meant it as a kind of tribute to George.'

'I don't object to George wanting to stick the window up. That was George's line. It's Erry. It was just like darling George to be nice about that sort of thing—just as he went when he did, and didn't hang about a few months after Erry to make double death duties. George was always the best behaved of the family.'

Frederica did not comment on that opinion. It looked as if a row, no uncommon occurrence when Frederica and Norah were under the same roof, might be about to break out. Hugo, familiar with his sisters' wars and alliances, changed the subject.

'There's always something rather consoling about death,' he said. 'I don't mean Erry, because of course one's very sorry about the old boy and all that. What you must admit is there's a curious pleasure in hearing about someone's death as a rule, even if you've quite liked them.'

'Not George's,' said Susan. 'I cried for days.'

'So did I,' said Norah. 'Weeks.'

She was never to be outdone by Susan.

'That's quite different again,' said Hugo. 'I quite agree I was cut up by George too. Felt awful about him in an odd way—I mean not the obvious way, but treating it objectively. It seemed such bloody bad luck What I'm talking about is that sense of relief about hearing a given death has taken place. One can't explain it to oneself.'

'I think you're all absolutely awful,' said Roddy Cutts.

'I don't like hearing about death or people dying in the least. It upsets me even if I don't know them—some film star you've hardly seen or foreign statesman or scientist you've only read about in the paper. It thoroughly depresses me. I agree with Dicky about that. Let's change the subject.'

I asked whether he had settled with Widmerpool the rights and wrongs of hire-purchase.

'I don't much care for the man. In the margins where we might be reasonably in agreement, he always takes what strikes me as an unnecessarily aggressive line.'

'What's Cheap Money?'

'The idea is to avoid a superfluity of the circulating medium concentrated on an insufficiency of what you swop it for. When Widmerpool and his like have put the poor old *rentier* on the spot they may find he wasn't performing too useless a rôle.'

'But Widmerpool's surely a *rentier* himself?'

'He's a bill-broker, and the bill-brokers are the only companies getting any sympathy from the Government these days. He's in the happy position of being wooed by both sides, the Labour Party—that is to say his own party—and the City, who hope to get concessions.'

'I find politics far more lowering a subject than death,' said Norah. 'Especially if they have to include discussing that man. I can't think how Pam can stand him for five minutes. I'm not surprised she's ill all the time.'

'I was told that one moment she was going to marry John Mountfichet,' said Susan. 'He was prepared to leave his wife for her. Then he was killed. She made this marriage on the rebound. Decided to marry the first man who asked her.'

'Don't you believe it,' said Jeavons. 'That sort of story always gets put round. Who was Mountfichet's wife—the Huntercombes' girl Venetia, wasn't she? I bet they suited each other a treat in their own way. Married couples usually do.'

'What's that got to do with whether he was going off with Pamela Flitton?' asked Norah. 'Or whether she married Widmerpool on the rebound?'

'People get divorced just because they don't know they suit each other,' said Jeavons.

He did not enlarge further on this rebuttal of the theory that people married 'on the rebound', or that the first choice was founded on an instinctive rightness of judgment. Instead, he turned to the question of how he himself was to get back to London. Wandering about the room chain-smoking, he looked more than ever like a plain-clothes man.

'Wish the train didn't arrive back so late. They must be getting familiar with my face on that line. Probably think I'm working the three-card trick. Anything I can do to help sort things out while I'm here? Cleaning up that mess in the jar's whetted my appetite for work. I'd have offered to be a bearer, if I'd thought I could hold up the coffin for more than a minute and a half, but that lump of gunmetal in my guts has been giving trouble again. Never seems to settle down. Sure the army vets left a fuse there, probably a whole shellcap. Can't digest a thing. Becomes a bore after a time. Never know what you may do when you're in that state. Didn't want to be halfway up the aisle, and drop my end of the coffin. Still, that couldn't have disrupted things, or made more row, than that girl did going out. Wish Molly was alive. Nothing Molly didn't know about funerals.'

Frederica, who had just come in, looked not altogether approving of all this. She was never in any case really sure that she liked Jeavons, certainly not when in moods like his present one. That had been Jeavons's standing with her even before she married Umfraville, for whom Jeavons himself had no great affection. Umfraville, on the other hand, liked Jeavons. He used to give rather subtle imitations of him.

'What you could do, Uncle Ted, is to make a list of the wreaths,' said Frederica. 'Would you really do that? It would be a great help.'

'Keep me quiet, I suppose,' said Jeavons.

He often showed an unexpected awareness that he was gettting on the nerves of people round him.

'I'll duly render a return of wreaths,' he said. 'Show the state (a) as to people who ought to have sent them and haven't, (b) those who've properly observed regulations as to the drill on such occasions.'

Never finding it easy to set his mind to things, the process, if Jeavons decided to do so, was immensely thorough. When he married, he had, for example, taken upon himself to memorize the names of all his wife's relations, an enormous horde of persons. Jeavons familiarized himself with these ramifications of kindred as he would have studied the component parts of a piece of machinery or mechanical weapon. He 'made a drill of it', as he himself expressed his method, in the army sense of the phrase, inventing a routine of some sort that enabled him to retain the name of each individual in his mind, together with one small fact, probably quite immaterial, about each one of them. As a consequence, his knowledge in that field was encyclopaedic. No one was better placed to list the wreaths. Hugo stretched himself out on the sofa.

'Mortality breeds odd jobs,' he said.

'And the men to do them,' said Jeavons.

Later, as he worked away, he could be heard singing in his mellow, unexpectedly attractive voice, some music-hall refrain from his younger days:

'When Father went down to Southend,
To spend a happy day,

He didn't see much of the water,
But he put some beer away.
When he landed home,
Mother went out of her mind,
When he told her he'd lost the seaweed,
And left the cockles behind.'

A footnote to the events of Erridge's funeral was supplied by Dicky Umfraville after our return to London. It was to be believed or not, according to taste. Umfraville produced the imputation, if that were what it was to be called, when we were alone together. Pamela Widmerpool's name had cropped up again. Umfraville, assuming the manner he employed when about to give an imitation, moved closer. Latterly, Umfraville's character-acting had become largely an impersonation of himself, Dr Jekyll, even without the use of the transforming drug, slipping into the skin of the larger-than-life burlesque figure of Mr Hyde. In these metamorphoses, Umfraville's normal conversation would suddenly take grotesque shape, the bright bloodshot eyes, neat moustache, perfectly brushed hair—the formalized army officer of caricature—suddenly twisted into some alarming or grotesque shape as vehicle for improvisation.

'Remember my confessing in my outspoken way I'd been pretty close to Flavia Stringham in the old days of the Happy Valley?'

'You put it more bluntly than that, Dicky—you said you'd taken her virginity.'

'What a cad I am—well, one sometimes wonders.'

'Whether you're a cad, Dicky, or whether you were the first?'

'Our little romance was scarcely over before she married Cosmo Flitton. Now the only reason a woman like Flavia could want to marry Cosmo was because she needed a husband in a hurry, and at any price. Unfortunately my own circumstances forbade me aspiring to her hand.'

'Dicky, this is pure fantasy.'

Umfraville looked sad. Even at his most boisterous, there was a touch of melancholy about him. He was a pure Burton type, when one came to think of it. Melancholy as expressed by giving imitations would have made another interesting sub-section in the *Anatomy*.

'All right, old boy, all right. Keep your whip up. Cosmo dropped a hint once in his cups.'

'Not a positive one?'

'There was nothing positive about Cosmo Flitton—barring, of course, his Wassermann Test. Mind you, it could be argued Flavia found an equally God-awful heel in Harrison F. Wisebite, but Harrison came on to the scene too late to have fathered the beautiful Pamela.'

'I'm not prepared to accept this, Dicky. You've just thought it up.'

Umfraville's habit of taking liberties with dates, if a story could thereby be improved, was notorious.

'You can never tell,' he repeated. 'My God, Cosmo was a swine. A real swine. Harrison I liked in his way. He mixed a refreshing cocktail of his own invention called Death Comes for the Archbishop.'

3

In the course of preliminary conclaves with Bagshaw on the subject of *Fission*'s first number, mention was again made of an additional personage, a woman, who was backing the magazine. Bagshaw, adept at setting forth the niceties of political views, if these happened to attach to the doctrinaire Left, was less good at delineating individuals, putting over no more than that she was a widow who had always wanted some hand in running a paper. As it turned out, excuse existed for this lack of precision in grasping her name, in due course revealed in quite unforeseen circumstances. Bagshaw thought she would cause little or no trouble editorially. That was less true of Widmerpool, who certainly harboured doubts as to Bagshaw's competence as editor. Quiggin and Craggs were another matter. They were old acquaintances who differed on all sorts of points, but they were familiar with Bagshaw's habits. Widmerpool had no experience of these. He might take exception to some of them. Bagshaw himself was much too devious to express all this in plain terms, nor would it have been discreet to do so openly. His disquiet showed itself in repeated attempts to pinpoint Widmerpool himself politically.

'From time to time I detect signs of fellow-travelling. Then I think I'm on the wrong tack entirely, he's positively Right Wing Labour. Again, you find him stringing along with the far, but anti-Communist, Left. You can't help admiring the way he conceals his hand. My guess is he's playing ball with the Comrades on the quiet for whatever he can get out of it, but trying to avoid the appearance of doing so. He doesn't want to prejudice his chances of a good job in the Government when the moment comes.'

'Was that the game Hamlet was playing when he said:

> The undiscovered country from whose bourn
> No fellow-traveller returns, puzzles the will?'

'There was something fishy about Hamlet's politics, I agree,' said Bagshaw. 'But the only fellow-travellers we can be certain about were Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.'

Meanwhile I worked away at Burton, and various other jobs. The three months spent in the country after demobilization had endorsed the severance with old army associates, the foreign military attachés with whom I had been employed 'in liaison'. One returned to a different world. Once in a way the commemorative gesture might be made by one or other of them of inviting a former colleague, now relegated to civilian life; once in a way an unrevised list of names might bring one incongruously to the surface again. On the whole, attendance at such gatherings became very infrequent.

When we were asked to drinks by Colonel and Madame Flores, the invitation derived from neither of these two sources. It was sent simply because the hostess wanted to take another look at a former lover who dated back to days long before she had become the wife of a Latin American army officer; or—the latter far more probable, when one came to think of it—was curious, as ladies who have had an inclination for a man so often are, regarding the appearance and demeanour of his wife; with whom, as it happened, the necessity had never arisen to emphasize that particular conjunction of the past.

The Flores's drawing-room presented a contrast with the generally austere appearance almost prescriptive to apartments given over to official entertaining; not least on account of the profusion of flowers set about, appropriate to the host's surname, but at that period formidably expensive. This rare display, together with the abundance and variety of drink on offer—as Mona had remarked, still hard to obtain—suggested that Colonel Flores was fairly rich himself, or his Government determined to make a splash. It struck me all at once, confronted with this luxuriance, that, although never behaving as if that were so, money was after all what Jean really liked. In fact Duport, even apart from his other failings, had not really been rich enough. It looked as if that problem were now resolved, Jean married to a rich man.

Almost every country which had not been at war with us was represented among the guests round about, 'Allies' and 'Neutrals' alike. The 'Iron Curtain' states (a new phrase), from time to time irascible about hospitality offered or accepted, had on this occasion turned up in force. Looking round the room, one noted an increase in darker skins. Aiguillettes were more abundant, their gold lace thicker. Here was gathered together again an order of men with whom I should always feel an odd sense of fellowship, though now, among this crowd of uniformed figures, chattering, laughing, downing their drinks, not one of their forerunners remained with whom I had formerly transacted military business. Only two or three of those present were even familiar by sight.

Jean, rather superb in what was called 'The New Look' (another recent phrase), was dressed in a manner to which hardly any woman in this country, unless she possessed unusually powerful tentacles, could at that time aspire. She greeted us at the door. That she had become so fashionable had to be attributed, one supposed, to her husband. In the old days much of her charm—so it had seemed—had been to look like a well-turned-out schoolgirl, rather than an enchantress on the cover of a fashion magazine. The slight, inexpressibly slight, foreign intonation she had now acquired, or affected, went well with the splendours of *haute couture*.

'How *very* kind of you both to come.'

Colonel Flores had his CBE ribbon up, a decoration complimenting his country rather than rewarding any very tangible achievement of his own since taking up his appointment in London; indeed presented to him on arrival like a gift at a children's party to animate a cosy atmosphere. There was no doubt—as his predecessor and less triumphant husband, Bob Duport, had remarked—Flores did possess a distinct look of Rudolph Valentino. I thought how that comparison dated Duport and myself. Handsome, spruce, genial, the Colonel's English was almost more fluent than his wife's, at least in the sense that his language had that faintly old-world tinge that one associated with someone like Alfred Tolland—though naturally far more coherent in delivery—or multilingual royalties of Prince Theodoric's stamp.

'My dear fellow—don't mind if I call you Nick, just as Jean does when she speaks of you—how marvellous it must be to have left the army behind. I am always meaning to send in my papers, as you call it, get to hell out of it. Then I give the old show another chance—but you must have a drink. Pink gin? My tipple too. Contigo me entierren. But the army? How should I occupy myself if there was no one to order me about? That's what I ask. Jean always tells me also that I should be getting into trouble if I had too little to do. Our wives, our wives, what slaves they make of us. She thinks I should turn to politics. Well, I might one day, but how much I envy you to be free. My time will come at last. I shall then at least be able to look after my horses properly

. . . Ah, my dear General . . . but of course . . . pernod, bourbon—I must tell you I have even got a bottle of tequila hidden away . . . Hasta mañana, su Excelencia . . . à bientôt, cher Colonel . . .'

I wondered whether Jean trompé'd him with the gauchos, or whatever was of the most tempting to ladies in that country. Probably she did; her husband, having plenty of interests of his own, quite indifferent. The fact was Flores showed signs of being a great man. That had to be admitted. They were quite right to give him a CBE as soon as he arrived. His manner of handling his party suggested he well deserved it.

I circulated among the 'Allies', polite majors, affable colonels, the occasional urbane general, all the people who had once made up so much of daily life. Now, for some reason, there seemed little or nothing to talk about. It was no use broaching to these officers the subject of the newly founded publishing house of Quiggin & Craggs, the magazine *Fission* that was to embody the latest literary approach. At the same time the most superficial military topics once mutually exchanged seemed to have altered utterly overnight, everything revised, reorganized, reassembled; while —an awkward point—to approach, as a civilian, even the exterior trimmings of the military machine, when making conversation with the professional who controlled some part of it, was to risk, if not a snub, conveying an impression of curiosity either impertinent, or stemming from personal connexion with the Secret Service. While I wrestled with this problem, Jean reappeared.

'Your wife has so kindly asked us to dine with you. It's very hospitable, because I know how absolutely impossible it is to give dinner parties these days, not only rationing, but all sorts of other things. They are difficult enough even if you have official supplies and staff to draw on like ourselves. Carlos and I would so much have loved to come, but there has been a surprise. We have just received news from our Defence Ministry that we must go home.'

'Already?'

'We have to leave London almost at once. There has been a change of Government and a big reorganization.'

'Promotion, I hope?'

'Carlos has been given a military area in the Northern Province. It is quite unexpected and might lead to big things. There are, well, political implications. It is not just the same as being in the army here. So we have to make immediate arrangements to pack up, you see.'

She smiled.

'I should offer congratulations as well as regrets?'

'Of course Carlos is delighted, though he pretends not to be. He is quite ambitious. He makes very good speeches. We are both pleased really. It shows the new Government is being sensible. To tell the truth we were sent here partly to get Carlos out of the country. Now all that is changed—but the move must be done in such a hurry.'

'How foolish of them not to have wanted such a nice man about the place.'

She laughed at that.

'I was hoping to take Polly round a little in London. However, she is going to stay in England for a time in any case. She has ambitions to go on the stage.'

'I haven't seen her at your party?'

'She's with her father at the moment—I think you've met my first husband, Bob Duport?'

'Several times—during the war among others. He'd been ill in the Middle East, and we ran across each other in Brussels.'

'Gyppy tummy and other things left poor Bob rather a wreck. He ought to marry somebody who'd look after him properly, keep him in order too, which I never managed to do. He's rather a weak man in some ways.'

'Yes, poor Bob. No good being weak.'

She laughed again at this endorsement of her own estimate of Duport's character, but at the same time without giving anything away, or to the smallest degree abandoning the determined formality of her manner. That particular laugh, the way she had of showing she entirely grasped the point of what one had said, once carried with it powerful intoxications; now—a relief to ascertain even after so long—not a split second of emotional tremor.

'What's he doing now?'

'Bob? Oil. Something new for him—produced by an old friend of his called Jimmy Brent. You may have met him with my brother Peter. How I miss Peter, although we never saw much of each other.'

'I came across Jimmy Brent in the war too.'

'Jimmy's a little bit awful really. He's got very fat, and is to marry a widow with two grown-up sons. Still, he's fixed up Bob, which is the great thing.'

To make some comment that showed I knew she had slept with Brent—by his own account, been in love with him—was tempting, but restraint prevailed. Nevertheless, recollecting that sudden hug watching a film, her whisper, 'You make me feel so randy,' I saw no reason why she should go scot free, escape entirely unteased.

'How well you speak English, Madame Flores.'

'People are always asking if I was brought up in this country.'

She laughed again in that formerly intoxicating manner. A small dark woman, wearing an enormous spray of diamonds set in the shape of rose petals trembling on a stalk, came through the crowd.

'Rosie, how lovely to see you again. Do you know each other? Of course you do. I see Carlos is making signs that I must attend to the Moroccan colonel.'

Jean left us together. Rosie Manasch took a handful of stuffed olives from a plate, and offered one.

'I saw you once at a meeting about Polish military hospitals. You were much occupied at the other end of the room, and I had to move on to the Titian halfway through. Besides, I didn't know whether you'd remember me.'

The Red Cross, Allied charities, wartime activities of that sort, explained why she was at this party. It was unlikely that she had known Jean before the war, when Rosie had been married to her first husband, Jock Udall, heir apparent to the newspaper proprietor of that name, arch-enemy of Sir Magnus Donners. Rosie Manasch's parents, inveterate givers of musical parties and buyers of modern pictures, had been patrons of both Moreland and Barnby in the past. Mark Members had made a bid to involve them in literature too, but without much success, enjoying a certain amount of their hospitality, but never bringing off anything spectacular in the way of plunder. It had been rumoured in those days that Barnby had attempted to start up some sort of a love affair with Rosie. If so, the chances were that nothing came of it. Possessing that agreeable gift of making men feel pleased with themselves by the way she talked, she was in general held to own a less sensual temperament than her appearance suggested. Quite how she accomplished this investiture of male self-satisfaction was hard to analyse, perhaps simply because, unlike some women, she preferred men that way.

Udall was shot by the SS, on recapture, after a mass escape from a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany. The marriage—in the estimation of those always prepared to appraise explicitly other people's intimate relationships—was judged to have been only moderately happy. There were no children. There was also, even the most inquisitorial conceded, no gossip about infidelities on either side, although Udall was always reported to be 'difficult'. Quite soon after her husband's death, Rosie married a Pole called Andrzejewski, a second-lieutenant, though not at all young. I never came across him at the Titian during my period of liaison duty, but his appointment there, Polish GHQ in London, sounded fairly inconsiderable even within terms of the rank. Andrzejewski, as it turned out, was suffering from an incurable disease. He died only a few months after the wedding. Rosie resumed her maiden name.

'I've just been talking to your wife. We'd never met before, though I knew her sister Susan Tolland before she married. I hear you didn't guess that I was the mysterious lady in the background of *Fission*.'

'Was this arranged by Widmerpool?'

'The Frog Footman? Yes, indirectly. He used to do business when he was at Donners-Brebner with my cousin James Klein. Talking of Donners-Brebner, did you go to the Donners picture sale? I can't think why Lady Donners did not keep more of them herself. There must be quite a lot of money left in spite of death duties—though one never knows how a man like Sir Magnus Donners may have left everything.'

'If I'd been Matilda, I'd have kept the Toulouse-Lautrec.'

'Of course you must have known Matilda Donners when she was married to Hugh Moreland. Matilda and I don't much like each other, though we pretend to. Do you realize that a relation of mine—Isadore Manasch—was painted by Lautrec? Isn't that smart? A café scene, in the gallery at Albi. Isadore's slumped on a chair in the background. The Lautrec picture's the only thing that keeps his slim volume of Symbolist verse from complete oblivion. Isadore's branch of the family are still embarrassed if you talk about him. He was very disreputable.'

To emphasize the awful depths of Isadore's habits, Rosie stood on tiptoe, clasping together plump little hands that seemed subtly moulded out of pink icing sugar, then tightly caught in by invisible bands at the wrist. At forty or so, she herself was not unthinkable in terms of Lautrec's brush, more alluring certainly than the ladies awaiting custom on the banquettes of the Rue de Moulins, though with something of their resignation A hint of the seraglio, and its secrets, that attached to her suggested oriental costume in one of the masked ball scenes.

'Do you ever see Hugh Moreland now? Matilda told me he's still living with that strange woman called Maclintick. They've never married. Matilda says Mrs Maclintick makes him work hard.'

'I don't even know his address.'

That was one of the many disruptions caused by the war. Rosie returned to *Fission*.

'What do you think of the Frog Footman's beautiful wife? Did you hear what she said to that horrid girl Peggy Klein—who's a sort of connexion, as she was once married to Charles Stringham? James had adored Peggy for years when he married her—I'll tell you some other time. There's the Frog Footman himself making towards us.'

Widmerpool gave Rosie a slight bow, his manner suggesting the connexion with *Fission* put her in a category of business colleagues to be treated circumspectly.

'I've been having an interesting talk with the military attaché of one of the new Governments in Eastern Europe,' he said. 'He's just arrived in London. As a matter of fact I myself have rather a special relationship with his country, as a member—indeed a founder member—of no less than two societies to cement British relations with the new régime. You remember that ineffective princeling Theodoric, I daresay.'

'I thought him rather attractive years ago,' said Rosie. 'It was at Sir Magnus Donners' castle of all places. Was the military attaché equally nice?'

'A sturdy little fellow. Not much to say for himself, but made a good impression. I told him of my close connexions with his country. These representatives of single-party government are inclined to form a very natural distrust for the West. I flatter myself I got through to him successfully. I expect you've been talking about *Fission*. I hear you have been having sessions with our editor Bagshaw, Nicholas?'

'He's going to produce for me a writer called X. Trapnel, of whom he has great hopes.'

'*Camel Ride to the Tomb?*' said Rosie. 'I thought it so good.'

'I shall have to read it,' said Widmerpool. 'I shall indeed. I must be leaving now to attend to the affairs of the nation.'

Somebody came up at that moment to claim Rosie's attention, so I never heard the story of what Pamela had said to Peggy Klein.

The promised meeting with X. Trapnel came about the following week. Like almost all persons whose life is largely spun out in saloon bars, Bagshaw acknowledged strong ritualistic responses to given pubs. Each drinking house possessed its special, almost magical endowment to give meaning to whatever was said or done within its individual premises. Indeed Bagshaw himself was so wholeheartedly committed to the mystique of The Pub that no night of his life was complete without a final pint of beer in one of them. Accordingly, withdrawal of Bagshaw's company—whether or not that were to be regarded as auspicious—could always be relied upon, wherever he might be, however convivial the gathering, ten minutes before closing time. If—an unlikely contingency—the 'local' were not already known to him, Bagshaw, when invited to dinner, always took the trouble to ascertain its exact situation for the enaction of this last rite. He must have carried in his head the names and addresses of at least two hundred London pubs—heaven knows how many provincial ones—each measured off in delicate gradations in relation to the others, strictly assessed for every movement in Bagshaw's tactical game. The licensed premises he chose for the production of Trapnel were in Great Portland Street, dingy, obscure, altogether lacking in outer 'character', possibly a haunt familiar for years for stealthy BBC negotiations, after Bagshaw himself had, in principle, abandoned the broadcasting world.

'I'm sure you'll like Trapnel,' he said. 'I feel none of the reservations about presenting him sometimes experienced during the war. I don't mean brother officers in the RAF—who could be extraordinarily obtuse in recognizing the good points of a man who happens to be a bit out of the general run—but Trapnel managed to get on the wrong side of several supposedly intelligent people.'

'Where does he fit into your political panorama?'

Bagshaw laughed.

'That's a good question. He has no place there. Doesn't know what politics are about. I'd define him as a Leftish Social-Democrat, if I had to. Born a Roman Catholic, but doesn't practise—a lapsed Catholic, rather as I'm a lapsed Marxist. As a matter of fact I came across him in the first instance through a small ILP group in India, but Trapnel didn't know whether it was arse-holes or Tuesday, so far as all that was concerned. As I say, he's rather odd-man-out.'

Even without Bagshaw's note of caution, I had come prepared for Trapnel to turn out a bore. Pleasure in a book carries little or no guarantee where the author is concerned, and *Camel Ride to the Tom*b, whatever its qualities as a novel, had all the marks of having been written by a man who found difficulty in getting on with the rest of the world. That might well be in his favour; on the other hand, it might equally be a source of anyway local and temporary discomfort, even while one hoped for the best.

'Trapnel's incredibly keen to write well,' said Bagshaw. 'In fact determined. Won't compromise an inch. I admire that, so far as it goes, but writers of that sort can add to an editor's work. Our public may have to be educated up to some of the stuff we're going to offer—I'm thinking of the political articles Kenneth Widmerpool is planning—so Trapnel's good, light, lively pieces, if we can get them out of him, are likely to assist the other end of the mag.'

Trapnel's arrival at that point did not immediately set at rest Bagshaw's rather ominous typification of him. Indeed, Bagshaw himself seemed to lose his nerve slightly when Trapnel entered the bar, though only for a second, and quickly recovered.

'Ah, Trappy, here you are. Take a seat. What's it to be? How are things?'

He introduced us. Trapnel, in a voice both deep and harsh, requested half a pint of bitter, somehow an unexpectedly temperate choice in the light of his appearance and gruffness of manner. He looked about thirty, tall, dark, with a beard. Beards, rarer in those days than they became later, at that period hinted of submarine duty, rather than the arts, social protest or a subsequent fashion simply for much more hair. At the same time, even if the beard, assessed with the clothes and stick he carried, marked him out as an exhibitionist in a reasonably high category, the singularity was more on account of elements within himself than from outward appearance.

Although the spring weather was still decidedly chilly, he was dressed in a pale ochre-coloured tropical suit, almost transparent in texture, on top of which he wore an overcoat, black and belted like Quiggin's Partisan number, but of cloth, for some reason familiarly official in cut. This heavy garment, rather too short for Trapnel's height of well over six feet, was at the same time too full, in view of his spare, almost emaciated body. Its weight emphasized the flimsiness of the tussore trousers below. The greatcoat turned out, much later, to have belonged to Bagshaw during his RAF service, disposed of on terms unspecified, possibly donated, to Trapnel, who had caused it to be dyed black. The pride Trapnel obviously took in the coat was certainly not untainted by an implied, though unjustified, aspiration to ex-officer status.

The walking stick struck a completely different note. Its wood unremarkable, but the knob, ivory, more likely bone, crudely carved in the shape of a skull, was rather like old Skerrett's head at Erridge's funeral. This stick clearly bulked large in Trapnel equipment. It set the tone far more than the RAF greatcoat or tropical suit. For the rest, he was hatless, wore a dark blue sports shirt frayed at the collar, an emerald green tie patterned with naked women, was shod in grey suede brothel-creepers. These last, then relatively new, were destined to survive a long time, indeed until their rubber soles, worn to the thinness of paper, had become all but detached from fibreless uppers, sounding a kind of dismal applause as they flapped rhythmically against the weary pavement trodden beneath.

The general effect, chiefly caused by the stick, was of the Eighteen-Nineties, the *décadence*; putting things at their least eclectic, a contemptuous rejection of currently popular male modes in grey flannel demob suits with pork-pie hats, bowler-crowned British Warms, hooded duffels, or even those varied outfits like Quiggin's, to be seen here and there, that suggested recent service in the *maquis*. All such were rejected. One could not help speculating whether an eyeglass would not be produced—Trapnel was reported to have sported one for a brief period, until broken in a pub brawl—insomuch that the figure he recalled, familiar from some advertisement advocating a brand of chocolates or cigarettes, similarly equipped with beard and cane, wore an eye-glass on a broad ribbon, though additionally rigged out in full evening dress, an order round his neck, opera cloak over his shoulder. In Trapnel's case, the final effect had that touch of surrealism which redeems from complete absurdity, though such redemption was a near thing, only narrowly achieved.

Perhaps this description, factually accurate—as so often when facts are accurately reported—is at the same time morally unfair. 'Facts'—as Trapnel himself, talking about writing, was later to point out—are after all only on the surface, inevitably selective, prejudiced by subjective presentation. What is below, hidden, much more likely to be important, is easily omitted. The effect Trapnel made might indeed be a little absurd; it was not for that reason unimpressive. In spite of much that was all but ludicrous, a kind of inner dignity still somehow clung to him.

Nevertheless, the impression made on myself was in principle an unfavourable one when he first entered the pub. A personal superstructure on human beings that seems exaggerated and disorganized threatens behaviour to match. That was the immediate response. Almost at once this turned out an incorrect as well as priggish judgment. There were no frills about Trapnel's conversation. When he began to talk, beard, clothes, stick, all took shape as necessary parts of him, barely esoteric, as soon as you were brought into relatively close touch with the personality. That personality, it was at once to be grasped, was quite tough. The fact that his demeanour stopped just short of being aggressive was no doubt in the main a form of self-protection, because a look of uncertainty, almost of fear, intermittently showed in his eyes, which were dark brown to black. They gave the clue to Trapnel having been through a hard time at some stage of his life, even when one was still unaware how dangerously—anyway how uncomfortably—he was inclined to live. His way of talking, not at all affected or artificial, had a deliberate roughness, its rasp no doubt regulated for pub interchanges at all levels, to avoid any suggestion of intellectual or social pretension.

'Smart cane, Trappy,' said Bagshaw. 'Who's the type on the knob? Dr Goebbels? Yagoda? There's a look of both of them.'

'I'd like to think it's Boris Karloff in a horror rôle,' said Trapnel. 'As you know, I'm a great Karloff fan. I found it yesterday in a shop off the Portobello Road, and took charge on the strength of the Quiggin & Craggs advance on the short stories. Not exactly cheap, but I had to possess it. My last stick, Shakespeare's head, was pinched. It wasn't in any case as good as this one—look.'

He twisted the knob, which turned out to be the pommel of a sword-stick, the blade released by a spring at the back of the skull. Bagshaw restrained him from drawing it further, seizing Trapnel's arm in feigned terror.

'Don't fix bayonets, I beseech you, Trappy, or we'll be asked to leave this joint. Keep your steel bright for the Social Revolution.'

Trapnel laughed. He clicked the sword back into the shaft of the stick.

'You never know when you may have trouble,' he said. 'I wouldn't have minded using it on my last publisher. Quiggin & Craggs are going to take over his stock of the *Camel*. They'll do a reprint, if they can get the paper.'

I told him I had enjoyed the book. That was well received. The novel's title referred to an incident in Trapnel's childhood there described; one, so he insisted, that had prefigured to him what life—anyway his own life—was to be. In the narrative this episode had taken place in some warm foreign land, the name forgotten, but a good deal of sand, the faint impression of a pyramid, offering a strong presumption that the locale was Egyptian. The words that made such an impression on the young Trapnel—in many subsequent reminiscences always disposed to represent himself as an impressionable little boy—were intoned by an old man whose beard, turban, nightshirt, all the same shade of off-white, manifested the outer habiliments of a prophet; just as the stony ground from which he delivered his tidings to the Trapnel family party seemed the right sort of platform from which to prophesy.

'Camel ride to the Tomb . . . Camel ride to the Tomb . . . Camel ride to the Tomb . . . Camel ride to the Tomb . . .'

Trapnel, according to himself, immediately recognized these words, monotonously repeated over and over again, as a revelation.

'I grasped at once that's what life was. How could the description be bettered? Juddering through the wilderness, on an uncomfortable conveyance you can't properly control, along a rocky, unpremeditated, but indefeasible track, towards the destination crudely, yet truly, stated.'

If Trapnel were really so young as represented by himself at the time of the incident, the story was not entirely credible, though none the worse for that. None the worse, I mean, insomuch as the words had undoubtedly haunted his mind at some stage, even if a later one. The greybeard's unremitting recommendation of his beast as means of local archaeological transport had probably become embedded in the memory as such phrases will, only later earmarked for advantageous literary use: *post hoc*, *propter hoc*, to invoke a tag hard worked by Sir Gavin Walpole-Wilson in post-retirement letters to *The Times*.

The earlier Trapnel myth, as propagated in the *Camel*, was located in an area roughly speaking between Beirut and Port Said, with occasional forays further afield from that axis. His family, for some professional reason, seemed to have roamed that part of the world nomadically. This fact—if it were a fact—to some extent attested the compatibility of a pleasure trip taken in Egypt, a holiday resort, in the light of other details given in the book, otherwise implying an unwarrantably prosperous interlude in a background of many apparent ups and downs, not to say disasters. Egypt cropped up more than once, perhaps—like the RAF officer's greatcoat—adding a potentially restorative tone. The occupation of Trapnel's father was never precisely defined; obscure, even faintly shady, commercial undertakings hinted. His social life appeared marginally official in style, if not of a very exalted order; possibly tenuous connexions with consular duties, not necessarily our own. One speculated about the Secret Service. Once—much later than this first meeting—a reference slipped out to relations in Smyrna. Trapnel's physical appearance did not exclude the possibility of a grandmother, even a mother, indigenous to Asia Minor. He was, it appeared, an only child.

'I always wondered what your initial stood for?'

Trapnel was pleased by the question.

'I was christened Francis Xavier. Watching an old western starring Francis X. Bushman in a cowboy part, it struck me we'd both been called after the same saint, and, if he could suppress the second name, I could the first.'

'You might do a novel about being a lapsed Catholic,' said Bagshaw. 'It's worth considering. I know JG would like you to tackle something more *engagé* next time. When I think of the things I'd write about if I had your talent. I did write a novel once. Nobody would publish it. They said it was libellous.'

'People like JG are always giving good advice about one's books,' said Trapnel. 'In fact I hardly know anyone who doesn't. "If only I could write like you, etc. etc." They usually outline some utterly banal human situation, or moral issue, ventilated every other day on the Woman's Page.'

'Don't breathe a word against the Woman's Page, Trappy. Many a time I've proffered advice on it myself under a female pseudonym.'

'Still, there's a difference between a novel and a newspaper article. At least there ought to be. A novelist writes what he is. That's equally true of mediaeval romances or journeys to the moon. If he put down on paper the considerations usually suggested, he wouldn't be a novelist—or rather he'd be one of the fifty-thousand tenth-rate ones who crawl the literary scene.'

Trapnel had suddenly become quite excited. This business of being a 'writer'—that is, the status, moral and actual, of a writer—was a matter on which he was inordinately keen. This was one of the facets of Trapnel to emerge later. His outburst gave an early premonition.

'Reviewers like political or moral problems,' said Bagshaw. 'Something they can get their teeth into. You can't blame them. Being committed's all the go now. I was myself until a few years ago, and still enjoy reading about it.'

Trapnel was not at all appeased. In fact he became more heated than ever, striking his stick on the floor.

'How one envies the rich quality of a reviewer's life. All the things to which those Fleet Street Jesuses feel superior. Their universal knowledge, exquisite taste, idyllic loves, happy married life, optimism, scholarship, knowledge of the true meaning of life, freedom from sexual temptation, simplicity of heart, sympathy with the masses, compassion for the unfortunate, generosity—particularly the last, in welcoming with open arms every phoney who appears on the horizon. It's not surprising that in the eyes of most reviewers a mere writer's experiences seem so often trivial, sordid, lacking in meaning.'

Trapnel was thoroughly worked up. It was an odd spectacle. Bagshaw spoke soothingly.

'I know some of the critics are pretty awful, Trappy, but Nicholas wanted to talk to you about reviewing an occasional book yourself for *Fission*. If you agree to do so, you'll at least have the opportunity of showing how it ought to be done.'

Trapnel saw that he had been caught on the wrong foot, and took this very well, laughing loudly. He may in any case have decided some apology was required for all this vehemence. All the earlier tension disappeared at once.

'For Christ's sake don't let's discuss reviews and reviewers. They're the most boring subject on earth. I expect I'll be writing just the same sort of crap myself after a week or two. It's only they get me down sometimes. Look, I brought a short story with me. Could you let me know about it tomorrow, if I call you up, or send somebody along?'

Trapnel's personality began to take clearer shape after another round of drinks. He was a talker of quite unusual persistence. Bagshaw, notoriously able to hold his own in that field, failed miserably when once or twice he attempted to shout Trapnel down. Even so, the absolutely unstemmable quality of the Trapnel monologue, the impossibility of persuading him, as night wore on, to stop talking and go home, was a menace still to be learnt. He gave a few rather cursory imitations of his favourite film stars, was delighted to hear I had only a few days before met a man who resembled Valentino. Trapnel's mimicry was quite different from Dicky Umfraville's—he belonged, of course, to a younger generation—but showed the same tendency towards stylization of delivery. It turned out in due course that Trapnel impersonations of Boris Karloff were to be taken as a signal that a late evening must be brought remorselessly to a close.

A favourite myth of Trapnel's, worth recording at this early stage because it illustrated his basic view of himself, was how a down-at-heel appearance had at one time or another excited disdain in an outer office, restaurant or bar, this attitude changing to respect when he turned out to be a 'writer'. It might well be thought that most people, if they considered a man unreasonably dirty or otherwise objectionable, would regard the culpability aggravated rather than absolved by the fact that he had published a book, but possibly some such incident had really taken place in Trapnel's experience, simply because private fantasies so often seem to come into being at their owner's behest. This particular notion—that respect should be accorded to a man of letters—again suggested foreign rather than home affiliations.

When I left the pub, where it looked as if Bagshaw contemplated spending the evening, Trapnel stood up rather formally and extended his hand. I asked if he had a telephone number. He at once brushed aside any question of the onus of getting in touch again being allowed to rest with myself, explaining why that should be so.

'People can't very well reach me. I'm always moving about. I hate staying in the same place for long. It has a damaging effect on work. I'll ring you up or send a note. I rather enjoy the old-fashioned method of missive by hand of bearer.'

That sounded another piece of pure fantasy, but increased familiarity with Trapnel, and the way he conducted his life, modified this view. He really did send notes; the habit by no means one of his oddest. That became clear during the next few months, when we met quite often, while preparations went forward for the publication of the first number of *Fission*, which was due at the end of the summer or beginning of autumn. Usually we had a drink together in one of his favourite pubs—as with Bagshaw, these were elaborately graded—and once he dined with us at home, staying till three in the morning, talking about himself, his girls and his writing. That was the first occasion when the Boris Karloff imitation went on record as indication that the best of the evening was over, the curtain should fall.

A passionate interest in writing, or merely his taste for discussing it, set Trapnel aside from many if not most authors, on the whole unwilling to risk disclosure of trade secrets, or regarding such talk as desecration of sacred mysteries. Trapnel's attitude was nearer that of a businessman or scientist, never tired of discussing his job from a professional angle. That inevitably included difficulties with editors and publishers. Many writers find such relationships delicate, even aggravating. Trapnel was particularly prone to discord in that field. He had, for example, managed to get himself caught up in a legal tangle with the publication of a *conte*, before the appearance of the *Camel*. This long short story, to be published on its own by some small press, had not yet seen light owing to a contractual row. The story was left, as it were, in baulk; unproductive, unproduced, unread. There had apparently been trouble enough for Quiggin & Craggs to take over the rights of the *Camel*.

'The next thing's the volume of short stories,' said Trapnel. 'Then the novel I'm already working on. That's really where my hopes are based. It's going to be bigger stuff than the *Camel*. The question is whether Quiggin & Craggs have the sales organization to handle it properly.'

The question was more substantially how well Quiggin & Craggs would handle Trapnel himself. That looked like a tricky problem. Their premises were in Bloomsbury, according to Bagshaw reduced in price on account of bomb damage. An architecturally undistinguished exterior bore out that possibility. The building, reconditioned sufficiently for business to be carried on there, though not on a lavish scale, had housed small publishers for years, changing hands as successive firms went bankrupt or were absorbed by larger ones. There was no waiting room. Once through the door, you were confronted with the bare statement of the sales counter; beyond it the packing department, a grim den looking out on to a narrow yard. On the far side of this yard a kind of outhouse enclosed *Fission*'s editorial staff, that is to say Bagshaw and his secretary. Ada Leintwardine would sometimes cross the yard to lend a hand when the secretary, constantly replaced in the course of time, became too harassed by Bagshaw's frequent absences from the office to carry on unaided. Apart from that, an effort was made to keep the affairs of *Fission* separate so far as possible from the publishing side, although Craggs and Quiggin sat on both boards.

'Ada's the king-pin of the whole organization,' said Bagshaw. 'Maybe I should say queen bee. She provides an oasis of much needed good looks in the office, and a few contacts with writers not sunk in middle age.'

Ada had made herself at home in London. In fact she was soon on the way to becoming an established figure in the 'literary world', such as it was, battered and reduced, but taking some shape again, over and above the heterogeneous elements that had kept a few embers smouldering throughout the war. London suited Ada. She dealt with her directors, especially Quiggin, with all the skill formerly shown in managing Sillery. She had begun to refer to 'Poor old Sillers.' I had not seen Sillery himself again, as it happened, before the period of research at the University came to an end, calling once at his college, but being told he had gone to London for several days to attend the House of Lords.

When he was not present, Bagshaw was also designated by Ada 'Poor old Books'. That did not prevent them from getting on pretty well with each other. Her emotional life had become a subject people argued about. Malcolm Crowding, the poet, not much older than herself, alleged that the novelist Evadne Clapham (niece of the publisher of that name, and by no means bigoted in a taste for her own sex) had boasted of a 'success' with Ada. On the other hand, Nathaniel Sheldon, always on the look out, though advancing in years, spoke of encouragement offered him by Ada, when he was waiting to see Craggs. No doubt she made herself reasonably agreeable to anyone—even Nathaniel Sheldon, as a reviewer—likely to be useful to the firm. The fact that no one could speak definitely of lovers demonstrated an ability to be discreet. Ada herself was reported to be writing a novel, as Sillery had alleged.

In the humdrum surroundings of everyday business life, when, for example, one met them on the doorstep of the office, both Quiggin and Craggs showed themselves more changed than in the hurried, unaccustomed circumstances of Erridge's funeral. For instance, it was now clear Quiggin had settled down to be a publisher, intended to be a successful one, make money. He no longer spoke of himself producing a masterpiece. *Unburnt Boats*, his 'documentary', had been well received, whatever Sillery might say, when the book appeared not long before the war, but there Quiggin's literary career was allowed to rest. He had lost interest in 'writing'. Instead, he now identified himself, body and soul, with his own firm's publications, increasingly convinced—like not a few publishers—that he had written them all himself.

Quiggin also considered that he had a right, even duty, to make such alterations in the books published by the firm as he saw fit; anyway in the case of authors prepared to be so oppressed. Certainly Trapnel would never have allowed anything of the sort. There were others who rebelled. These differences of opinion might have played a part in causing Quiggin—again like many publishers—to develop a detestation of authors as a tribe. On the contrary, nothing of the sort took place. As long as they were his own firm's authors, Quiggin would allow no breath of criticism, either of themselves or their books, to be uttered in his presence, collectively or individually. His old rebellious irritability, which used formerly to break out so violently in literary or political argument, now took the form of rage—at best, extreme sourness—directed against anyone, professional critic or too blunt layman, who wrote an unfavourable notice, dropped an unfriendly remark, calculated to discourage Quiggin & Craggs sales.

Craggs's attitude towards publishing was altogether different. Craggs had been practising the art in one form or another for a long time. That made a difference. He did not care in the smallest degree about rude remarks made on the subject of 'his' authors, or 'his' books. In some respects, so far as the former were concerned, the more people abused them, the better Craggs was pleased. Certainly he had no great affection for authors as men—for that matter, unless easily seducible, as women—but, unlike Quiggin, his policy in this respect was not subjective; at least not entirely so. It cloaked a certain commercial shrewdness. Craggs, off his guard one day with Bagshaw, expressed the view that there were more ways of advertising a book than dwelling on the intellectual and moral qualifications of its author.

'What matters is getting authors talked about,' Craggs said. 'Let people know what they're really like. It whets the appetite. Look at Alaric Kydd's odd tastes, for instance. I drop an occasional hint.'

Craggs was being unusually communicative when he let that out, because in general nowadays he affected the manner of a man distinguished in his own sphere, but vague almost to the point of senility. Such had been his conversation at Thrubworth, though more defensive than real, to be dropped immediately if swift action were required. There was evidence that he was making good use of his wartime contacts in the civil service. Widmerpool, for his part, seemed to be pulling his weight too in a trade that was new to him.

'He's laid hands on some extra paper,' said Bagshaw. 'Found it hidden away and forgotten in some warehouse in his constituency.'

Walking through Bloomsbury one day on the way to the *Fission* office, I ran into Moreland. When I first caught sight of him coming towards me, he was laughing to himself. A shade more purple in the face than formerly, he looked otherwise much the same. We talked about what we had both been doing since that grim night the Café de Madrid was bombed. Moreland had always been fond of *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. I told him how I was now occupied with its author.

'Gone for a Burton, in fact?'

'Books-do-furnish-a-room Bagshaw's already made that joke.'

'How extraordinary you should mention Bagshaw. He got in touch with me recently about a magazine he's editing.'

'I'm on my way there now to sort out the review copies.'

'He wanted an article on Existential Music. The last time I saw Bagshaw was coming home from a party soon after he returned from Spain. He was crawling very slowly on his hands and knees up the emergency exit stairs of a tube station—Russell Square, could it have been?'

'He must have reached the top just in time for the war, because he was in the RAF, and now has a moustache.'

'A fighter-pilot?'

'PR in India.'

'Jane Harrigan's an' Number Nine, The Reddick an' Grant Road? I should think there was a good deal of that. I refused to contribute, although I suspect I've been an existentialist for years without knowing it. Like suffering from an undiagnosed disease. The fact is I now go my own way. I've turned my back on contemporary life—but what brings you to this forsaken garden? You can't know anybody who lives in Bloomsbury these days. Personally, I've been getting a picture framed, and am now trying to outstrip the ghosts that haunt the place and tried to commune with me. Comme le souvenir est voisin du remords.'

'Burton thought that too.'

'I've been reading Ben Jonson lately. He's a sympathetic writer, who reminds one that human life always remains the same. I remember Maclintick being very strong on that when mugging up Renaissance composers. Allowing for murder being then slightly easier, Maclintick believed a musician's life remains all but unchanged. How bored one gets with the assumption that people now are organically different from people in the past—the Lost Generation, the New Poets, the Atomic Age, the last reflected in the name of your new magazine

Fart upon Euclid, he is stale and antick.
Gi'e me the moderns.

It's the Moderns on whom I'm much more inclined to break wind.'

'If not too late, restrain yourself. As you've just pointed out, the Moderns no longer live round here.'

'Forgive my sneering at Youth, but what a lost opportunity within living memory. Every house stuffed with Moderns from cellar to garret. High-pitched voices adumbrating absolute values, rational states of mind, intellectual integrity, civilized personal relationships, significant form . . . the Fitzroy Street Barbera is uncorked. *Le Sacre du Printemps* turned on, a hand slides up a leg . . . All are at one now, values and lovers. Talking of that sort of thing, you never see Lady Donners these days, I suppose?'

'I read about her doings in the paper sometimes.'

'Like myself. Ah, well. Bagshaw's request made me wonder whether I would not give up music, and take to the pen as a profession. What about *The Popular Song from Lilliburllero to Lili Marlene?* Of course one might extricate oneself from the whole musical turmoil, cut free of it altogether. Turn to autobiography. *A Hundred Disagreeable Sexual Experiences* by the author of *Seated One Day at an Organ*—but I must be moving on. I'm keeping you from earning a living.'

I suggested another meeting, but he made excuses, murmuring something about a series of tiresome sessions with his doctor. Seen closer, he looked in less good health than suggested by the first impression.

'I've sacked Brandreth. My latest physician takes not the slightest interest in music, thank God, nor for that matter in any of the arts. He also has quite different ideas from Brandreth when it comes to assessing what's wrong with me. Life becomes more and more like an examination where you have to guess the questions as well as the answers. I'd long decided there were no answers. I'm beginning to suspect there aren't really any questions either, none at least of any consequence, even the old perennial, whether or not to stay alive.'

'Beyond Good and Evil, in fact?'

'Exactly—one touch of Nietzsche makes the whole world kin.'

On that note (recalling Pennistone) we parted. Moreland went on his way. I continued towards Quiggin & Craggs, through sad streets and squares, classical façades of grimy brick, faded stucco mansions long since converted to flats. Bagshaw had a piece of news that pleased him.

'Rosie Manasch is going to pay for a party to celebrate the First Number. That's scheduled for the last week in September. None of us have had a party for a long time.'

In the end, owing to the usual impediments, *Fission* did not come to birth before the second week in October. The comparative headway made by then in establishment of the firm's position was reflected in the fact that, when I arrived at the Quiggin & Craggs office, where the party mentioned by Bagshaw was taking place, a member of the Cabinet was making his way up the steps. As he disappeared through the door, a taxi drove up, and someone called my name. Trapnel got out. The fare must have been already in his hand, because he passed the money to the driver with a flourish, turned immediately, and waved his stick in greeting. He was wearing sun spectacles—in which for everyday life he was something of an optical pioneer—and looked rather flustered.

'I thought I'd never get here. I'm temporarily living rather far out. Taxis are hard to find round there. I was lucky to pick up this one.'

The fact of his arriving by taxi at all did not at the time strike me as either remarkable or inevitable. I was still learning only slowly how near the knuckle Trapnel lived. The first few months of his acquaintance had been a period of comparative prosperity. They were not altogether representative. That did not prevent taxis playing a major rôle in his life. Trapnel used them when to the smallest degree in funds, always prepared to spend his last few shillings on this mode of transport, rather than descend to bus or tube. Later, when we were on sufficiently familiar terms to touch on so delicate a subject, he admitted that taxis also provided a security, denied to the man on foot, against bailiffs serving writs for debt. At the same time this undoubtedly represented as well an important factor in the practical expression of the doctrine of 'panache', which played a major part in Trapnel's method of facing the world. I did not yet fully appreciate that. We mounted the steps together.

'I don't think I'll risk leaving my stick down here,' he said. 'It might be pinched by some detective-story writer hoping to experiment with the perfect crime.'

No one was about by the trade counter. Guests already arrived had left coats and other belongings at the back, among the stacks of cardboard boxes and brown-paper parcels of the equally deserted packing department. A narrow staircase led to the floor above, where several small rooms communicated with each other. The doors were now all open, furniture pushed back against the wall, typewriters in rubber covers standing on steel cabinets, a table covered with stacks of the first number of *Fission*. Apart from these, and a bookcase containing 'file' copies of a few books already published by the firm, other evidences of the publishing trade had been hidden away.

In the furthest room stood another table on which glasses, but no bottles, were to be seen. Ada Leintwardine was pouring drink from a jug. She had just filled a glass for the member of the Government who preceded us up the stairs. This personage, probably unused to parties given by small publishers, tasted what he had been given and smiled grimly. Craggs and Quiggin, one on either side, simultaneously engaged him in conversation. Bagshaw, not absolutely sober, waved. His editorial, perfectly competent, had spoken of the post-war world and its anomalies, making at least one tolerable joke. Trapnel's short story had the place of honour next to the editorial. We moved towards the drinks.

Bagshaw, like the Cabinet Minister, was taking on two at a time, in Bagshaw's case Bernard Shernmaker and Nathaniel Sheldon. This immediately suggested an uncomfortable situation, as these two critics had played on different sides in a recent crop of letters about homosexuality in one of the weeklies. In any case they were likely to be antipathetic to each other as representing opposite ends of their calling. Sheldon, an all-purposes journalist with a professional background comparable with Bagshaw's (Sheldon older and more successful) had probably never read a book for pleasure in his life. This did not at all handicap his laying down the law in a reasonably lively manner, and with brutal topicality, in the literary column of a daily paper. He would have been equally happy—possibly happier, if the epithet could be used of him at all—in almost any other journalistic activity. Chips Lovell, to whom Sheldon had promised a job before the war, then owing to some move in his own game withdrawn support, used often to talk about him.

Shernmaker represented literary criticism in a more eminent form. Indeed one of his goals was to establish finally that the Critic, not the Author, was paramount. He tended to offer guarded encouragement, tempered with veiled threats, to young writers; Trapnel, for example, when the *Camel* had first appeared. There was a piece by him in *Fission* contrasting Rilke with Mayakovsky, two long reviews dovetailed together into a fresh article. Shernmaker's reviews, unlike Sheldon's, would one day be collected together and published in a volume itself to be reviewed—though not by Sheldon. That was quite certain. Yet was it certain? Their present differences could become so polemical that Sheldon might think it worth while lampooning Shernmaker in his column. If Sheldon did decide to attack him, Shernmaker would have no way of getting his own back, however rude Sheldon might be. However, even offensive admission into Sheldon's column was recognition that Shernmaker was worth abusing in the presence of a mass audience. That would to some extent spoil the pleasure for Sheldon, for Shernmaker allay the pain.

Publishers, especially Quiggin, endlessly argued the question whether Sheldon or Shernmaker 'sold' any of the books they discussed. The majority view was that no sales could take place in consequence of Sheldon's notices, because none of his readers read books. Shernmaker's readers, on the other hand, read books, but his scraps of praise were so niggardly to the writers he scrutinized that he was held by some to be an equally ineffective medium. It was almost inconceivable for a writer to bring off the double-event of being mentioned, far less praised, by both of them.

The dangerous juxtaposition of Sheldon and Shernmaker was worrying Quiggin. He continually glanced in their direction, and, when Gypsy joined his group with Craggs and the Cabinet Minister, he allowed husband and wife to guide the statesman to a corner for a more private conversation, while he himself moved across the room. He paused briefly with Trapnel and myself.

'Where's your wife?'

He spoke accusingly, as if he considered a covert effort had been made to undermine the importance of the *Fission* first number, also his own prestige as a director of the magazine.

'Our child's in bed with a cold. She sent many regrets at missing the party.'

Quiggin looked suspicious, but pursued the matter no further, as the Sheldon and Shernmaker situation had become more ominous. Bagshaw was reasonably well equipped to hold the balance between a couple like this, operating expertly on two fronts, provided the other parties did not too far overstep the bounds each felt the other allowed by convention, given the fact they were on bad terms. This rule appeared to have been observed so far, but Sheldon now began to embark on a detailed account of a recent visit to the Nuremberg trials, his report on which had already appeared in print. At this new development Shernmaker's features had taken on the agonized, fractious contours of a baby about to let out a piercing cry. Quiggin stepped quickly forward.

'Bernard, I'm going to take the liberty of sending you a proof copy of Alaric Kydd's new novel *Sweetskin*. It will interest you.'

Shernmaker showed he had heard this statement by swivelling his head almost imperceptibly in Quiggin's direction, at the same time signifying by an unaltered expression that nothing was less likely than that a work of Kydd's would hold his attention for a second. However, he took the opportunity of moving out of the immediate range of Sheldon's trumpeting narrative, giving Quiggin a look to denote rebuke for ever having allowed such an infliction to be visited on a sensitive critic's nerves. Quiggin seemed to expect nothing more welcoming than this reception.

'There may be trouble about certain passages in Kydd's book—two especially. If it has to be toned down through fear of prosecution, I'd like you to have read what the author originally wrote.'

Shernmaker continued his stern silence. If he allowed his face to relax at all, it was only to register deeper suspicion of publishers and all their works. Quiggin was by no means to be put off by such severity. He smiled encouragingly. Although not by nature ingratiating, he could be industrious at the process if worth while.

'Don't tell me you've washed your hands of Kydd's work, Bernard—like Pilate?'

Shernmaker did not return the smile. He thought for a time. Quiggin, unlike Pilate for his part, awaited an answer. Shernmaker brought his own out at last.

'Pilate washed his hands—did he wash his feet?'

It was now Quiggin's turn to withhold a smile. He was as practised a punch-line killer and saboteur of other people's witticisms as Shernmaker himself. This disrespect for one of the firm's new authors must also have annoyed him. A lot was expected from Kydd. Before further exchanges could take place, Quiggin's old friend Mark Members arrived. With him was a young man whose khaki shirt, corduroy trousers, generally buccaneering aspect, suggested guerrilla warfare in the Quiggin manner, though far more effectively. This was appropriate enough in Odo Stevens, an unlikely figure to turn up at a publisher's party, though apparently an already accepted acquaintance of Members. As Sillery had remarked, white locks suited Members. He allowed them to grow fairly long, which gave him the rather dramatic air of a nineteenth-century literary man who had loved and suffered, the mane of hair weighing down his slight, spare body. Stevens made a face expressing recognition, but, before we could speak, was at once buttonholed by Quiggin, with whom he also appeared on the best of terms. Members now introduced Stevens to Shernmaker.

'I don't know whether you've met Odo Stevens, Bernard? You probably read his piece the other day about life with the Army of Occupation. Odo and I have just been discussing the most suitable European centre for cultural congress—you know my organization is trying to get one on foot. Do you hold any views? Your own co-operation would, of course, be valuable.'

Shernmaker was still giving nothing away. Frowning, moving a little closer, he watched Members's face as if trying to detect potential insincerities; allowing at the same time a rapid glance at the door to make sure no one of importance was arriving while his attention was thus occupied. Shernmaker's party personality varied a good deal according to circumstance; this evening a man of iron, on guard against attempts to disturb his own profundities of thought by petty everyday concerns. His duty, this manner implied, was with a wider world than any offered by Quiggin & Craggs and their like; if a trifle sullen, he must be forgiven. He had already shown that, once committed to such inanities, the best defence was epigram. Members, who had known Shernmaker for years—almost as long as he had known Quiggin—evidently wanted to get something out of him, because he showed himself quite prepared to put up, anyway within reason, with the Shernmaker personality as then exercised.

'You'll agree, Bernard, that effective discussion of the Writer's Position in Society is impractical in unsympathetic surroundings. Artists are vulnerable to circumstance, never more so than when compulsorily confined to their native shores.'

Still Shernmaker did not answer. Members became more blunt in exposition.

'We're none of us ever going to get out of England again, except as emissaries of culture. That's painfully clear. We're caught in a trap. Unless something is done, we'll none of us ever see the Mediterranean again.'

Evadne Clapham, L. O. Salvidge and Malcolm Crowding, the last of whom had a poem in *Fission*, had joined the group. All agreed with this deduction. Evadne Clapham went further. She clasped her hands together, and quoted:

'A Robin Redbreast in a Cage
Puts all Heaven in a Rage.'

The lines suddenly brought Shernmaker to life. He stared at Evadne Clapham as if outraged. She smiled invitingly back at him.

'Rubbish.'

'You think Blake rubbish, Mr Shernmaker?'

'I disagree with him in this particular case.'

'How so?'

'A robin redbreast in a rage
Puts all heaven in a cage.'

Evadne Clapham now unclasped her hands, and brought them together several times in silent applause.

'Very good, very good. You are quite right, Mr Shernmaker. I often notice what aggressive birds they are when I'm gardening. Your conclusion is, of course, that writers must not be held in check. Don't you agree, Mark? We must make ourselves heard. Do tell me about the young man you came in with. Isn't it true he's had a very glamorous war career, and is terribly naughty?'

This question was answered by Quiggin introducing Odo Stevens all round as the man who was writing a war book to make all other war books seem thin stuff. It was to be about Partisans in the Balkans. Quiggin was a little put out to find that Stevens and I had already met, but we were again prevented from talking by an incident taking place that was in a small way dramatic. Pamela Widmerpool, followed by her husband, had come into the room. Quiggin turned to greet them. Stevens was obviously as surprised to see Pamela at this party as I had been myself to find him there. As they came past he spoke to her.

'Why, hullo, Pam.'

She looked straight at, and through, him. It was not so much that she ignored what Stevens had said, as that she behaved as if he had never spoken, was not even there. She seemed to be looking at someone or something beyond him, unable to see Stevens himself at all. Stevens, by nature as sure of himself as a man could well be, was not in the least embarrassed, but certainly taken aback. When he grasped what had happened, he turned towards me and grinned. We were not near enough for comment.

'There's someone I'd like you to meet, dear heart,' said Widmerpool. 'We'll talk business later, JG. There are two misprints in my own article, but on the whole Bagshaw must be agreed to have made a creditable job of the first number.'

Apart from her treatment of Stevens—or signalizing it by that—Pamela gave the impression of being on her best behaviour. She allowed herself to be piloted across to the Cabinet Minister. Cutting Stevens might be explained by the fact that, when last seen with him, she had slapped his face. It was quite possible that night, the first of the flying-bombs, had been also the last she had seen of him. To start again as total strangers was one way of handling such matters. The most recent news of her had been from Hugo Tolland. Pamela had appeared at his antique shop in the company of an unidentified man, who had paid cash for an Empire *bidet*, later delivered to the Widmerpool flat in Victoria Street; a highly decorative piece of furniture, according to Hugo. Inevitably her sickness at Thrubworth had developed into a legend of pregnancy, cut short artificially and not occasioned by her husband, but that was probably myth.

Widmerpool's demeanour gave no impression of having emerged from a trying domestic experience, though it could be argued the truth had been kept from him. Not long before, a speech of his in a parliamentary debate on the reduction of interest rates had been the subject of satirical comment in a *Daily Telegraph* leader, but, at the stage of public life he had reached, no doubt any mention in print was better than none. Certainly he appeared well satisfied with himself, clapping Craggs on the back, and giving an amicable greeting to Gypsy, with whom he must have established some sort of satisfactory adjustment. The article he had written for *Fission* had been called *Affirmative Action and Negative Values*. Stevens came over to talk.

'Did you notice Pam's lack of recognition? Her all over. What the hell's she doing here?'

He laughed heartily.

'Her husband's part of the Quiggin & Craggs set-up. Why did you hit on them for your book?'

'My agent thought they'd be the right sort of firm, as I was operating with the Commies most of the time I was in the Balkans. The publishers have only seen a bit of it. It's not finished yet. Will be soon. I'm spreading culture with Mark Members at the moment, but I hope to get out of an office—if the book sells, and it will.'

'All about being "dropped"?'

'A murder or two. Some rather spicy political revelations. One of the former incidents mucked up my affairs rather—lost me a DSO.'

'What did you haul in finally?'

'MC and bar, also one of the local gongs from the new régime. Don't know yet whether I'll be permitted to put it up. I shall anyway.'

'When did you get out of the army?'

'It was rather premature. I was never much of a hand at regimental life, even though I wasn't sure at one moment I wouldn't take up soldiering as a trade. So many temptations in Germany. The Colonel didn't behave too badly, but in the end he said I'd have to go. I agreed, so far as it went. I scrounged round for a bit selling space and little articles, then got myself fixed up in this culture-toting outfit. At the moment I'm in liaison with Mark Members and his conference project. I hear you're doing the books on this mag. What about some reviewing for Odo?'

'Why not, Odo? Why should you be the only man in England who's not going to review for *Fission*?'

'Who's the small dark lady talking to Sir Howard Craggs?'

'Rosie Manasch. She too has an interest in the mag.'

'Rather attractive. I think I'll meet her.'

The war had washed ashore all sorts of wrack of sea, on all sorts of coasts. In due course, as the waves receded, much of this flotsam was to be refloated, a process to continue for several years, while the winds abated. Among the many individual bodies sprawled at intervals on the shingle, quite a lot resisted the receding tide. Some just carried on life where they were on the shore; others—the more determined—crawled inland. Stevens belonged to the latter category. He knew where his future lay.

'Any books you can spare. Army matters, travel, jewellery—as you know, I'm interested in verse too. HQ, my cultural boys, always finds me.'

He strolled away. Widmerpool appeared.

'I've been having a lot to do with your relations lately. It turned out your late brother-in-law was on bad terms with the family solicitor. I've managed to arrange that some of the work should be transferred to Turnbull, Welford & Puckering—my old firm, you remember I started the struggle for existence in Lincoln's Inn—has the advantage of my being able to keep a weather eye on things from time to time. The Quiggin & Craggs interests will need a certain amount of attention. Hugo Tolland tells me he did not at all mind Mrs George Tolland giving birth to a son—one Jeremy, I understand—told me he was far from anxious to inherit responsibilities, myriad these days, of becoming head of the family. Titles are a survival one must deplore, but they can be a worry, as Howard Craggs was remarking last week. I see Hugo Tolland's point. He is a sensible young man, in spite of what at first appears a foolish manner. I understand that, as mother of the little earl, Mrs George Tolland—who has two children of her own by an earlier marriage—is going to live in the wing of Thrubworth Park formerly occupied by the late Lord Warminster. Modest premises in themselves, and a good idea. Lady Blanche Tolland is to remain there as before. An excellent arrangement for one of her retiring nature. I talked to her, and greatly approved what she had to say for herself.'

Abandoning for a moment the intense pleasure people find in explaining in detail to someone the characteristics and doings of their own relations, he paused and glanced round the room. This could have been a routine survey to be taken wisely at regular intervals with the object of keeping check on his wife's doings. She was at that particular moment revealed as listening to some sort of a harangue given by a dark bespectacled personage in his thirties, whom I recognized as Werner Guggenbühl, now Vernon Gainsborough. There could be no doubt there was a look of Siegfried. Widmerpool marked them down.

'I see Pam's got caught up with Gainsborough. I don't know whether you've come across him? He's a German—a "good" German—a close friend of Lady Craggs, as a matter of fact. They go about a lot together. I'm giving away no secret. Craggs, very sensibly, takes an understanding view. He is a man of the world, though you might never guess that to look at him. Gainsborough is not a bad fellow. A little pedantic.'

'He used to be a Trotskyist.'

'No longer, I think. In any case I disapprove of witch-hunting. He stands, of course, considerably to the left of centre. I am not sure he is quite the sort of person Pam likes—she is easily bored—so perhaps it would be wise to come to her rescue.'

He gave the impression that Gainsborough's relationship with Gypsy, however little Craggs might resent it, and however 'good' a German he might be, was not one to recommend sustained conversation with a wife like his own. Widmerpool was about to move off and break up the tête-à-tête. However, Trapnel came up at that moment. Rather to my surprise, he addressed himself to Widmerpool with a formal cordiality not at all like his usual manner. It looked as if he were playing one of his rôles, a habit now becoming familiar.

'It's Mr Widmerpool, isn't it? Do forgive my introducing myself. My name's X. Trapnel. I'm a writer. JG was talking about you the other day. He said you were one of the few MPs who are trying to make the Government get a move on. I do hope you'll do something about the laws defining certain kinds of writing as obscene, when it's nothing of the sort. They really ought to be looked into. As a writer I can speak. You won't have heard of me, but I'm published by Quiggin & Craggs. I've a short story in this opening number of *Fission*.'

'Of course, of course.'

It was not possible to judge how far Widmerpool had taken in Trapnel's identity. I was at a loss to understand the meaning of this move. Trapnel continued to speak his piece.

'I don't want to bother you, just to say this. It looks as if there might be a danger of their bringing a case against Alaric Kydd's *Sweetskin*. I haven't read it, of course, because it isn't out yet—but we don't want JG put inside just because some liverish judge happens to take a dislike to Kydd's work.'

Widmerpool, if rather taken aback at being appealed to in this manner, was at the same time not unflattered to be regarded as the natural protector of publishers, now that he was in a sense a publisher himself. The manoeuvre was quite uncharacteristic of Trapnel. Like most writers in favour of abolishing current restrictions, such as they were, he was not so far as I knew specially interested in the question of 'censorship'. Trapnel's writing was not of the sort to be greatly affected by prohibitions of language or subject matter. He was competent to express whatever he wanted in an oblique manner. At the same time, he might well feel that, if obliquity in the context were less concordant than bluntness, it was absurd for bluntness to be forbidden by law. Language was a matter of taste. It looked as if the theme of censorship had been evoked on the spur of the moment as a medium convenient for making himself known to Widmerpool. Although Trapnel's appearance was of a kind to which he was unused, Widmerpool showed himself equal to the challenge.

'I'm happy you mention the matter. It is one that has always been at the back of my mind as of prime importance. As with so many questions of a similar sort, there are two sides. We must consider all the evidence carefully, especially that of those best fitted to judge in such matters. Amongst them I don't doubt you are one, Mr Trapnel, an author yourself and man of experience, well versed in the subject. My own feeling is that we want to do away with the interference of old-fashioned busybodies to the furthest possible extent, while at the same time taking care not to offend the susceptibilities of simple people with a simple point of view, and their livings to earn, people who haven't time to concern themselves too closely with what may easily have the appearance of contradictory arguments put forward by the pundits of the so-called intellectual world, men whom you and I perhaps respect less than they respect themselves. The prejudices of such people may seem unnecessarily complicated to the man in the street, who has been brought up with what could sometimes be justly regarded as a lot of out-of-date notions, but notions that are nevertheless dear to him, if only because they have been dear in the past to someone whose opinion he knew and revered—I mean of course to his mother.'

Widmerpool, who had dropped his voice at the last sentence, paused and smiled. The reply was one with which no politician could have found fault. Surprisingly enough, it seemed equally satisfactory to Trapnel. His acceptance of such an answer was as inexplicable as his reason for asking the question.

'Admirably expressed, Mr Widmerpool. What I envy about an MP like yourself is not the power he wields, it's his constituency. Going round and seeing how all sorts of different people live, what their homes are like, some friendly, some hostile. It must be a fascinating experience—what background stuff for a novelist.'

This was getting so near utter nonsense that I wondered whether Trapnel had managed to get drunk in a comparatively short time on the watery cocktail available, and, for reasons still obscure, wanted to pick a quarrel with Widmerpool; was, in fact, building up to deliver some public insult. Widmerpool himself totally accepted Trapnel's words at their face value.

'It is indeed a privilege to see ordinary folk in their own homes, though I never thought of the professional advantage you put forward. Well, housing conditions need a lot of attention, and I can tell you I am giving them of my best.'

'You should come and try to pull the plug where I am living myself,' said Trapnel. 'I won't enlarge.'

Widmerpool looked rather uneasy at that. Trapnel, seeing he risked prejudicing the good impression he intended to convey, laughed and shook his head, dismissing the matter of plumbing.

'I just wanted to mention the matter. Nice of you to have listened to it—nice also to have met.'

'Just let me make a note of your bad housing, my friend,' said Widmerpool. 'Exact information is always useful.'

Trapnel had spoken his last words in farewell, but Widmerpool led him aside and took out a notebook. At the same moment Pamela abandoned Gainsborough, whose attractions her husband must have overrated. She came towards us. Widmerpool turned to her. She disregarded him, and addressed herself to me in her slow, hypnotic voice.

'Have you been attending any more funerals?'

'No—have you?'

'Just awaiting my own.'

'Not imminent, I hope?'

'I rather hope it is.'

'How are you enjoying political life?'

'Like any other form of life—sheer hell.'

She said that in a relatively friendlv tone. Craggs intervened and led Widmerpool away. Trapnel returned. I introduced him to Pamela. It was not a success. In fact it was a disaster. From being in quite a good humour, she switched immediately to an exceedingly bad one. As he came up, her face at once assumed an expression of instant dislike. Trapnel himself could not fail to notice this change in her features. He winced slightly, but did not allow himself to be discouraged sufficiently to abandon all hope of making headway. Obviously he was struck by Pamela's appearance. For a moment I wondered whether that had been the real reason for making such a point of introducing himself to Widmerpool. Any such guess turned out wide of the mark. On the contrary, he had not seen them come into the room together, nor taken in who she was. His head appeared still full of whatever he had been talking about to Widmerpool, because he did not listen when I told him her name. It turned out later that he was determined in his own mind that Pamela was a writer of some sort. Having decided that point, he wanted to find out what sort of a writer she might be. This was on general grounds of her looks, rather than any very special attraction he himself found for them.

'Are you doing something for *Fission*?'

Pamela stared at him as if he had gone off his head.

'Me?'

'Yes.'

'Why should I?'

'I just thought you might.'

'Do I look the sort of person who'd write for *Fission*?'

'It struck me you did rather.'

She gave him a stare of contempt, but did not answer. Trapnel, seeing he was to be treated with deliberate offensiveness, made no further effort in Pamela's direction. Instead, he began talking of the set-to on the subject of modern poetry that had just taken place between Shernmaker and Malcolm Crowding. Pamela walked away in the direction of Ada Leintwardine. Trapnel looked after her and laughed.

'Who is she?'

'I told you—Mrs Widmerpool.'

'Wife of the MP I was chatting with?'

'She's rather famous.'

'I didn't get the name. I thought you were saying something about Widmerpool. So that's who she is? I'd never have thought he'd have a wife like that. Bagshaw was talking about him, so I thought I'd like to make contact. I can't say I was much taken with Mrs Widmerpool. Is that how she always behaves?'

'Quite often.'

'Girls like that are not in my line. I don't care how smashing they look. I need a decent standard of manners.'

At this stage of our acquaintance I did not know much about Trapnel's girls, beyond his own talk about them, which indicated a fair amount of experience. Some 'big' love affair of his had gone wrong not long before our first meeting. Ada came round with the drink jug. Trapnel filled up and moved away.

'Not much danger of intoxication from this brew,' she said.

'The Editor doesn't seem to have done too badly.'

'Books had an early go at the actual bottle—before this potion was mixed.'

Bagshaw, rather red in the face, was in fact little if at all drunker than he had been at the beginning of the party, reaching a saturation point beyond which he never overflowed. He was clutching Evadne Clapham affectionately round the waist, while he explained to her—with some supposed reference to her short story in *Fission*—where Marx differed from Feuerbach in aiming not to interpret the world but to change it; and what was the real significance of Lenin's April Theses.

'Evadne Clapham's coiffure always reminds me of that line of Arthur Symons, "And is it seaweed in your hair?"' said Ada. 'There's been some hot negotiation with poor old Sillers, but we've come across with quite a big advance in the end. I hope the book will justify that when it appears.'

'What's Odo Stevens's work to be called?'

'*Sad Majors*, an adaption of—

> Let's have one other gaudy night: call to me
> All my sad captains . . .

JG doesn't care for the title. We're trying to get Stevens to change it.'

'Why? We all agree it's a gloomy rank.'

'God—Nathaniel Sheldon's helping himself. He must think he's not being appreciated.'

It was true. Sheldon was routing about under the drink table. Ada hurried off. It was time to go home. I sought out Quiggin to say goodbye. He was talking with Shernmaker, whose temper seemed to have improved, because he was teasing Quiggin.

'Gauguin abandoned business for art, JG—you're like Rimbaud, who abandoned art for business.'

'Resemblances undoubtedly exist between publishing and the slave trade,' said Quiggin. 'But it's not only authors who get sold, Bernard.'

Downstairs in the packing department Widmerpool was wandering about looking for something. He no longer retained his earlier geniality, was now despondent.

'I've lost my briefcase. Hid it away somewhere down here. I say, that friend of yours, Trapnel, is an odd fellow, isn't he?'

'In appearance?'

'Among other things.'

'He's a good writer.'

'So I'm told.'

'I mean should be useful on *Fission*.'

'Ah, there's the briefcase—no, I've just been talking to Trapnel, and his behaviour rather surprised me. As a matter of fact he asked me to lend him some money.'

'Following, no doubt, on your recommendations in the House that interest rates should be reduced.'

'Your joke is no doubt very amusing. At the same time you will agree Trapnel's request was unusual on the part of a man whom I had never set eyes on before tonight, when he introduced himself to me?'

'You know what literary life is like.'

'I'm beginning to learn.'

'Did you come across?'

'I handed over a pound. The man assured me he was completely penniless. However, let us speak no more of that. I merely put it on record. I consider the party for *Fission* was a success. It will get off to a good start, even though I do not feel so much confidence in Bagshaw as I could wish.'

'He knows his stuff.'

'So everyone says. He appeared to me rather drunk by the end of the evening, but I must not stay gossiping. I have to get back to Westminster. Pam had to leave early. She had a dinner engagement.'

We went outside. Trapnel was standing on the pavement. He had just hailed a cab. He must have been waiting there for one to pass for some minutes; in fact since he had taken the pound off Widmerpool.

'Dearth of taxis round this neighbourhood's almost as bad as where I'm living. Can I give anyone a lift? I'm heading north.'

We both declined the offer.

4

In the new year, without further compromise, Dickensian winter set in. Snow fell, east winds blew, pipes froze, the water main (located next door in a house bombed out and long deserted) passed beyond insulation or control. The public supply of electricity broke down. Baths became a fabled luxury of the past. Humps and cavities of frozen snow, superimposed on the pavement, formed an almost impassable barrier of sooty heaps at the gutters of every crossing, in the network of arctic trails. Bagshaw sat in his overcoat, the collar turned up round a woollen muffler, from which a small red nose appeared above a gelid moustache. Ada's protuberant layers of clothing travestied pregnancy. Only Trapnel, in his tropical suit and dyed greatcoat, seemed unaware of the cold. He complained about other things: lack of ideas: emotional setbacks: financial worries. Climate did not affect him. The weather showed no sign of changing. It encouraged staying indoors. I worked away at Burton.

On the whole Bagshaw's tortuous, bantering strategy, which had seen him through so many tussles with employers and wives (the latest one kept rigorously in the background), was designed to conceal hard-and-fast lines of opinion—assuming Bagshaw still held anything of the sort—so that, in case of sudden showdown, he could without prejudice give support wherever most convenient to himself. Even so, he allowed certain assessments to let fall touching on the fierce internal polemics that raged under the surface at Quiggin & Craggs; by association, at *Fission* too. Such domestic conflict, common enough in all businesses, took a peculiarly virulent form in this orbit, according to Bagshaw, on account of political undercurrents concerned.

'There are daily rows about what books are taken on. JG's not keen on frank propaganda, especially in translation. The current trouble's about a novel called *The Pistons of Our Locomotives Sing the Songs of Our Workers.* JG thinks the title too long, and that it won't sell anyway. No doubt the Party will see there's no serious deficit, but JG fears that sort of book clogs the wheels—the pistons in this case—of the non-political side of the list. He's nervous in certain other respects too. He doesn't mind inconspicuous fraternal writings inculcating the message in quiet ways. He rather likes that. What he doesn't want is for the firm to get a name for peddling the Party Line.'

'Craggs takes another view?'

'Howard's an old fellow-traveller of long standing. He hardly notices the books are propaganda. It all gives him a nostalgic feeling that he's young again, running the Vox Populi Press, having the girls from the 1917 Club. All the same, he probably wouldn't argue with JG so much if he wasn't being prodded all the time by Gypsy.'

'And Widmerpool?'

'All I'm certain about is he wants to winkle me out of the editorship. As I've said, he behaves at times like a crypto, but I suspect he's still waiting to see which way the cat will jump—and of course he doesn't want to get too far the wrong side of his Labour bosses in the House.'

'You were uncertain at first.'

'He's been repeating pure Communist arguments about the Civil War in Greece. He may simply believe them. I'm never quite sure Gypsy hasn't a hold on him of some sort. There was a story about them in the old days. That was long before I came on the scene so far as Gypsy was concerned.'

'How does Rosie Manasch take all this?'

'She's only interested in writers and art, all that sort of thing. She doesn't cause any trouble. She holds those mildly progressive views of the sort that are not at all bothered by the Party Line. Incidentally, she seems to have taken rather a fancy to young Odo Stevens. Trappy's becoming rather a worry. We're always shelling out to him. He writes an article or a short story, gets paid on the nail, is back on the doorstep the next afternoon, or one of his stooges is, and he wants some more. I can handle him all right, but I'm not sure they're doing so well on the other side of the yard.'

Trapnel's financial embarrassments had become unambiguous enough during the months that transformed him from a mere acquaintance of Bagshaw's, and professional adjunct of *Fission*, into a recognized figure in one's own life. His personality, built up with thought, deserves a word or two on account of certain elements not restricted to himself. He was a fine specimen of a general type, to which he had added flourishes of his own, making him—it was hardly going too far to say—unique in the field. The essential point was that Trapnel always acted a part; not necessarily the same part, but a part of some kind. Insomuch as most people cling to a rôle in which they particularly fancy themselves, he was no great exception so far as that went. Where he differed from the crowd was in so doggedly sticking to the rôle—or rôles—he had chosen to assume.

Habitual rôle-sustainers fall, on the whole, into two main groups: those who have gauged to a nicety what shows them off to best advantage: others, more romantic if less fortunate in their fate, who hope to reproduce in themselves arbitrary personalities that have won their respect, met in life, read about in papers and books, or seen in films. These self-appointed players of a part often have little or no aptitude, are even notably ill equipped by appearance or demeanour, to wear the costume or speak the lines of the prototype. Indeed, the very unsuitability of the rôle is what fascinates. Even in the cases of individuals showing off a genuine pre-eminence—statesmen, millionaires, poets, to name a few types—the artificial personality can become confused with the passage of time, life itself being a confused and confusing process, but, when the choice of part has been extravagantly incongruous, there are no limits to the craziness of the performance staged. Adopted almost certainly for romantic reasons, the rôle, once put into practice, is subject to all sorts of unavoidable and unforeseen restraints and distortions; not least, in the first place, on account of the essentially rough-and-ready nature of all romantic concepts. Even assuming relative clarity at the outset, the initial principles of the rôle-sustainer can finally reach a climax in which it is all but impossible to guess what on earth the rôle itself was originally intended to denote.

So it was with Trapnel. Aiming at many rôles, he was always playing one or other of them for all he was worth. To do justice to their number requires—in the manner of Burton—an interminable catalogue of types. No brief definition is adequate. Trapnel wanted, among other things, to be a writer, a dandy, a lover, a comrade, an eccentric, a sage, a virtuoso, a good chap, a man of honour, a hard case, a spendthrift, an opportunist, a *raisonneur*; to be very rich, to be very poor, to possess a thousand mistresses, to win the heart of one love to whom he was ever faithful, to be on the best of terms with all men, to avenge savagely the lightest affront, to live to a hundred full of years and honour, to die young and unknown but recognized the following day as the most neglected genius of the age. Each of these ambitions had something to recommend it from one angle or another, with the possible exception of being poor—the only aim Trapnel achieved with unqualified mastery—and even being poor, as Trapnel himself asserted, gave the right to speak categorically when poverty was discussed by people like Evadne Clapham.

'I do so agree with Gissing,' she said. 'When he used to ask of a writer—has he starved?'

The tribute was disinterested, as Evadne Clapham did not in the least look as if she had ever starved herself. The remark ruffled Trapnel.

'Gissing was more of an authority on starvation than on writing.'

'You don't think hunger teaches things?'

'I know as much about starvation as Gissing, probably more.'

'Then you prove his point—though after all it's dedication that counts in the end.'

'Dedication's often the hallmark of inferior performance.'

Trapnel was in a severe mood on that occasion. He was annoyed at Evadne Clapham being brought to his favourite pub The Hero of Acre. The conversation was reproduced in due course, somewhat more elaborately phrased, with the heroine getting the whip-hand, when Evadne Clapham's next novel appeared. However, that is by the way. To return to Trapnel's ambitions, they were—poverty apart—not only hard to achieve individually, but, even in rotation, impossible to combine. That was over and above Trapnel's particular temperament, no great help. Infeasibility did not prevent him from behaving, where ambitions were concerned, like an alpinist who tackles the sheerest, least accessible rock face of the peak he has sworn to ascend.

The rôle of 'writer' was on the whole the one least damaged when the strain became too severe, a heavy weight of mortal cargo jettisoned. There were times when even that rôle suffered violent stress. All writing demands a fair amount of self-organization, some of the 'worst' writers being among the most highly organized. To be a 'good' writer needs organization too, even if those most capable of organizing their books may be among the least competent at projecting the same skill into their lives. These commonplaces, trite enough in themselves, are restated only because they have bearing on the complexity of Trapnel's existence. There was a growing body of opinion, including, as time went on, Craggs, Quiggin, even Bagshaw himself—though unwillingly—which took the view that Trapnel's shiftlessness was in danger of threatening his status as a 'serious' writer. His books might be what the critics called 'well put together'—Trapnel was rather a master of technical problems—his life most certainly was the reverse. Nevertheless, people have to do things their own way, and the troubles that beset Trapnel were for the most part in what Pennistone used to call 'a higher unity'. So far as coping with down-to-earth emergencies, often seemingly unanswerable ones, Trapnel could show surprising agility.

One point should be cleared up right away. If comparison of his own life with a camel ride to the tomb makes Trapnel sound addicted to self-pity, a wrong impression has been created. Self-pity was a trait from which, for a writer—let alone a novelist—he was unusually free. On the other hand, it would be mistaken to conclude from that fact that he had a keen grasp of objectivity where his own goings-on were concerned. That judgment would be equally wide of the mark. This lack of objectivity made him enemies; that of self-pity limited sales. Whatever Trapnel's essence, the fire that generated him had to see him through difficult days. At the same time he managed to retain in a reasonably flourishing state—flourishing, that is, in his own eyes—what General Conyers would have called his 'personal myth', that imaginary state of being already touched on in Trapnel's case. The General, speaking one felt with authority, always insisted that, if you bring off adequate preservation of your personal myth, nothing much else in life matters. It is not what happens to people that is significant, but what they think happens to them.

Although ultimate anti-climaxes, anyway in their most disastrous form, were still kept at bay at this period, portents were already threatening in the eyes of those—L. O. Salvidge, for example, one of the first to praise the *Camel*—who took a gloomy view. Others—Evadne Clapham led this school of thought—dismissed such brooding with execrations against priggishness, assurances that Trapnel would 'grow up'. When Evadne Clapham expressed the latter presumption, Mark Members observed that he could think of no instance of an individual who, having missed that desirable attainment at the normal stage of human development, successfully achieved it in later life. It was hard to disagree. The fact is that a certain kind of gifted irresponsibility, combined with physical stamina and a fair degree of luck—in some respects Trapnel was incredibly lucky—always holds out an attractive hope that its possessor will prove immune to the ordinary vengeances of life; that at least one human being, in this case X. Trapnel, will beat the book, romp home a winner at a million to one.

Trapnel said he preferred women to have tolerable manners. The taste was borne out by the behaviour of such girls as he produced in public. When things were going reasonably well, he would be living with a rather unusually pretty one, who was also to all appearances bright, good tempered and unambitious. At least that was the impression they gave when on view at The Hero of Acre, or another of Trapnel's chosen haunts. The fairly rapid turnover suggested they might be less amenable when alone with Trapnel, not on their best behaviour; but that, after all, was just as much potential criticism of Trapnel as of the girl. She usually kept herself by typing or secretarial work (employed in concerns other than those coming under the heading of publishing and journalism), her financial contribution tiding over the ménage more or less—on the whole less rather than more—during lean stretches of their life together.

The pair of them, when Trapnel allowed his whereabouts to be known, were likely to be camped out in a bleak hotel in Bloomsbury or Paddington, enduring intermittent persecution from the management for delayed action in payment of the bill. The Ufford, as it used to be in Uncle Giles's day, would have struck too luxurious, too bourgeois a note, but, after wartime accommodation of a semi-secret branch of the Polish army in exile, the Ufford, come down in the world like many such Bayswater or Notting Hill establishments, might well have housed Trapnel and his mistress of the moment; their laundry impounded from time to time, until satisfactory settlement of the weekly account.

Alternatively, during brief periods of relative affluence, Trapnel and his girl might shelter for a few weeks in a 'furnished flat'. This was likely to be a stark unswept apartment in the back streets of Holland Park or Camden Town. The flat might belong to an acquaintance from The Hero of Acre, for example, possibly borrowed, while a holiday was taken, custodians needed to look after the place; if Trapnel and his girl could be so regarded.

When, on the other hand, things were going badly, the girl would have walked out—this happened sooner or later with fair regularity—and, if the season were summer, the situation might not exclude a night or two spent on the Embankment. The Embankment would, of course, represent a very low ebb indeed, though certainly experienced during an unprosperous interlude immediately preceding the outbreak of war. After such disasters Trapnel always somehow righted himself, in a sense seeming to justify the optimism of Evadne Clapham and those of her opinion. Work would once more be established on a passable footing, a new short story produced, contacts revived. The eventual replacement of the previous girl invariably kept up the traditionally high standard of looks.

Like many men rather 'successful' with women, Trapnel always gave the impression of being glad to get away from them from time to time. Not at all a Don Juan—using the label in a technical sense—he was quite happy to remain with a given mistress, once established, until the next upheaval. The question of pursuing every woman he met did not arise. Unlike, say, Odo Stevens, Trapnel was content to be in a room with three or four women without necessarily suffering the obligation to impose his personality on each one of them in turn.

All the same, if they could feel safe with him in that sphere, Trapnel's girls, even apart from shortage of money, had to put up with what was in many respects a hard life, one regulated by social routines often untempting to feminine taste. A gruelling example was duty at The Hero of Acre. They would be expected to sit there for hours while Trapnel held forth on *Portrait of the Artist*, or *The Birth of a Nation*. Incidentally, The Hero of Acre was to be avoided if absolute freedom from parasites was to be assured, even though Trapnel could drastically rebuff them, if they intervened when a more important assignation was in progress. Dismissal might take a minute or two, should they be drunk, and in any case their mere presence in the saloon bar could be inhibiting.

However, this body of auxiliaries was a vital aspect of the Trapnel way of life. When things were bad, they would come into play, collect books for review, deliver 'copy'—Trapnel in any case distrusted the post—telephone in his name about arrangements or disputes, tactfully propound his case if required, detail his future plans if known, try—when such action was feasible, sometimes when not—to raise the bid in his favour. They were to be seen lingering patiently in waiting rooms or halls of the journal concerned—at Quiggin & Craggs in the packing room, if cold and wet, the yard, if sunny and dry—usually the end in view to acquire ready cash for the Trapnel piece they had handed to the editor a short time before. Where Trapnel recruited these auxiliaries, how he disciplined them, was always a mystery.

This need to receive payment on the nail was never popular with the publishers and editors. Even Bagshaw used to grouse about it. The money in his hand, Trapnel could rarely hang on to it. He was always in debt, liked standing drinks. He could not understand the difficulties publishers and editors, especially the latter, made about advancing further sums.

'After all, it's not their own money. It's little or no trouble to them. As a matter of fact the accountants, the boys who are put to the ultimate bother, such as it is, of unlocking the safe and producing the dough, are far easier to deal with than the editor himself.'

Accountants, as described by Trapnel, would often leave their offices after the money had been paid out, and join him in a drink. Perhaps they thought they were living dangerously. It might be argued they were. Trapnel had made a study of them.

'People who spend their time absorbed with money always have a bright apologetic look about the eyes. They crave sympathy. Particularly accountants. I always offer a drink when specie changes hands. It's rarely refused.'

Bagshaw was unusually skilful in controlling this aspect of Trapnel as a *Fission* contributor. Not at all inexperienced himself in the exertions of extracting money, he knew all the arguments why Trapnel should not be given any more until he produced the goods. Bagshaw would put on an immensely good-natured act that represented him as a man no less necessitous than Trapnel himself, if not more so. Trapnel did not have to believe that, but it created some sort of protection for Bagshaw. That was when Trapnel appeared in person. As time went on, these personal visits decreased in frequency.

Living as he did, there were naturally times when Trapnel was forced to apply for a loan. Widmerpool was a case in point. One of the principles dearest to Trapnel was that, as a writer himself, he did not care to borrow from another writer; anyway not more than once. At a party consisting predominantly of writers and publishers—publishers naturally unsuitable for rather different reasons—Widmerpool was a tempting expedient. A man of strong principle in his own particular genre, Trapnel appears to have observed this self-imposed limitation to the best of his ability, circumstances from time to time perforce intervening. The fulfilment of this creed must have been strengthened by practical experience of the literary profession's collective deficiencies as medium for floating loans.

However, almost everyone had their story of being approached by Trapnel at one time or another: Mark Members: Alaric Kydd: L. O. Salvidge: Evadne Clapham: Bernard Shernmaker: Nathaniel Sheldon: Malcolm Crowding: even Len Pugsley. All had paid up. Among these Alaric Kydd took it the hardest. The 'touch' had been one afternoon, when Kydd and Trapnel had met at the Quiggin & Craggs office. They were moving northwards together in the direction of Tavistock Square, according to Kydd, who was very bitter about it afterwards. He had been particularly outraged by Trapnel's immediate offer of a drink, a piece of good-fellowship received not at all in the spirit proffered. Quiggin, whose relations with Kydd were not entirely friendly, although proud of him as a capture, told the story after.

'Alaric had my sympathy. The money was at one moment resting frugally and safely in his pocket—the next, scattered broadcast by Trapnel. Alaric wasn't going to stand Trapnel a drink with it, it's therefore logical he should object to Trapnel wasting it on a drink for him.'

Kydd's never wholly appeased rancour implied abstraction of a somewhat larger sum than customary. A tenner was normal. Quiggin, whose judgment on such matters was to be respected, put it as high as twelve or fifteen—possibly even twenty. He may have been right. He had just signed a cheque for Kydd. There must have been a battle of wills. Trapnel did not on the whole prejudice his own market by gleaning the odd five bob or half-a-crown, though there may have been fallings by the wayside in this respect when things were bad; even descent to sixpences and pennies, if it came to that, for his unceasing and interminable telephone calls from the afternoon drinking clubs he liked to frequent. Such dives appealed to him chiefly as social centres, when The Hero and other pubs were closed, because Trapnel, as drinking goes, was not a great consumer, though he chose to speak of himself as if he were. An exceptionally excited or demoralized mood was likely to be the consequence of his 'pills', also apparently taken in moderation, rather than alcohol.

'The habit of words bestows adroitness on men of letters in devising formulae of excuse in evading onerous obligations. More especially when it comes to parting with hard cash.'

St John Clarke had voiced that reflection—chronologically speaking, before the beginning of years—when Mark Members had not yet been ousted by Quiggin as the well-known novelist's secretary; himself to be replaced in turn by Guggenbühl. Members had goodish stories about his former master, particularly on the theme of handling needy acquaintances from the past, who called in search of financial aid. Members insisted that the sheer artistry of St John Clarke's pretexts claiming exemption from lending were so ornate in expression that they sometimes opened fresh avenues of attack for the quicker-witted of his persecutors.

'Many a literary parasite met his Waterloo in that sitting-room,' said Members. 'There were crises when shelling out seemed unavoidable. St J. always held out right up to the time he was himself remaindered by the Great Publisher. I wonder what luck X. Trapnel would have had on that stricken field of borrowers.'

It was an interesting question. Trapnel was just about old enough to have applied for aid before St John Clarke's passing. His panoramic memory for the plots of twentieth-century novels certainly retained all the better known of St John Clarke's works; as of almost every other novelist, good, bad or indifferent, published in Great Britain since the beginning of the century. As to the United States, Trapnel was less reliable, though he could put up a respectable display of familiarity with American novelists too; anyway since the end of the first war. An apt quotation from *Dust Thou Art* (in the College rooms), *Match Me Such Marvel* (Bithel's favourite) or the much more elusive *Mimosa* (brought to my notice by Trapnel himself), might well have done the trick, produced at the right moment by a young, articulate, undeniably handsome fan; the intoxicating sound to St John Clarke of his own prose repeated aloud bringing off the miracle of success, where so many tired old leathery hands at the game had failed. In the face of what might sound damaging, even contradictory evidence, Trapnel was no professional sponge in the manner of characters often depicted in nineteenth-century novels, borrowing compulsively and indiscriminately, while at the same time managing to live in comparative comfort. That was the picture Members painted of the St John Clarke petitioners, spectres from the novelist's younger, more haphazard days, who felt an old acquaintance had been allowed too long to exist in undisturbed affluence. Members had paused for a phrase. 'Somewhere between men of letters and blackmailers, a largely forgotten type.'

No one could say Trapnel resembled these. He neither lived comfortably, nor, once the need to take taxis were recognized, borrowed frivolously. Indeed, when things were going badly, there was nothing frivolous about Trapnel's condition except the manner in which he faced it. He borrowed literally to keep alive, a good example of something often unrecognized outside the world of books, that a writer can have his name spread all over the papers, at the same time net perhaps only a hundred pounds to keep him going until he next writes a book. Finally, the battle against all but overwhelming economic pressures might have been lost without the support of Trapnel's chief weapon—to use the contemporary euphemism 'moral deterrent'—the swordstick. The death's head, the concealed blade, in the last resort gained the day.

I have given a long account of Trapnel and his ways in order to set in perspective what happened later. Not all this description is derived from first-hand knowledge. Part is Trapnel legend, of which there was a good deal. He reviewed fairly regularly for *Fission*, wrote an occasional short story, article or parody—he was an accomplished parodist of his contemporaries—and on the whole, in spite of friction now and then, when he lost his temper with a book or one of his pieces was too long or too short, the magazine suited him, he the magazine. His own volume of collected short stories, *Bin Ends*, was published. Trapnel's reputation increased. At the same time he was clearly no stranger to what Burton called 'those excrementitious humours of the third concoction, blood and tears'.

One day the blow fell. Alaric Kydd's *Sweetskin* appeared on the shelf for review. Even Quiggin was known to have reservations about the novel's merits. Several supposedly outspoken passages made him unwilling to identify himself with the author in his accustomed manner, in case there was a prosecution. In addition to that, a lack of humdrum qualities likely to appeal to critics caused him worry about its reception. These anxieties Quiggin had already transmitted to Bagshaw. *Sweetskin* was a disappointing book. Kydd had been coaxed away from Clapham's firm. Now he seemed to be only a liability. On the one hand, the novel might be suppressed, the firm fined, a director possibly sent to gaol; on the other, the alleged lubricities being in themselves not sufficient to guarantee by any means a large sale, *Sweetskin* might easily not even pay off its considerable advance of royalties. How was the book to be treated in *Fission*? Kydd was too well known to be ignored completely. That would be worse than an offensive review. Who could be found, without too hopelessly letting down the critical reputation of *Fission* itself, to hold some balance between feelings on either side of the backyard at the Quiggin & Craggs office?

Then an opportune thing happened. Trapnel rang up Bagshaw, and asked if he could deal with Kydd, in whose early work he was interested, even though he thought the standard had not been maintained. If he could see *Sweetskin*, he might want to write a longer piece, saying something about Kydd's origins and development, in which the new book would naturally be mentioned. Bagshaw got in touch with me about this. It seemed the answer. Trapnel's representative came round the same afternoon to collect the review copy.

The following week, when I was at *Fission* 'doing' the books, Trapnel rang up. He said he was bringing the *Sweetskin* review along himself late that afternoon, and suggested we should have a drink together. There was something he particularly wanted to talk about. This was a fairly normal thing to happen, though the weather was not the sort to encourage hanging about in pubs. I also wanted to get back to Burton. However, Trapnel was unusually pressing. When he arrived he was in a jumpy state, hard to say whether pleased or exasperated. Like most great egoists, a bad arriver, he lacked ease until settled down into whatever rôle he was going to play. Something was evidently on his mind.

'Would you object to The Hero? That's the place I'd feel it easiest to tell you about this.'

If the object of the meeting was to disclose some intimate matter that required dissection, even allowing for Trapnel's reasonably competent control of his creatures, few worse places could be thought of, but the venue was clearly demanded by some quirk of pub mystique. These fears were unjustified. The immoderate cold had kept most of the usual customers away. The place was almost empty. We sat down. Trapnel looked round the saloon bar rather wildly. His dark-lensed spectacles brought to The Hero's draught-swept enclaves a hint of warmer shores, bluer skies, olives, vines, in spite of the fact that the turn-ups of the tussore trousers were soaked from contact with the snow. He at once began a diatribe against *Sweetskin*, his notice of which had been left unread at the office.

'I warned you it wasn't much good.'

This would mean embarrassment for Quiggin, if Trapnel had been unremittingly scathing. Coming on top of the 'touch', unfavourable comment from such a source would make Kydd more resentful than ever. However, that was primarily Quiggin's worry. So far as I was concerned the juggernaut of critical opinion must be allowed to take its irrefragable course. If too fervent worshippers, like Kydd, were crushed to powder beneath the pitiless wheels of its car, nothing could be done. Only their own adoration of the idol made them so vulnerable. Trapnel was specially contemptuous of Kydd's attempts at eroticism. To be fair, *Sweetskin* was in due course the object of prosecution, so presumably someone found the book erotic, but Trapnel became almost frenzied in his expostulations to the contrary. It was then suddenly revealed that Trapnel was in the middle of a row with Quiggin & Craggs.

'I thought you got on so well with Ada?'

Ada Leintwardine dealt with Trapnel in ordinary contacts with the firm. She did not control disposal of money —there Quiggin was called in—but questions of production, publicity, all such matters passed through her hands. Book production, as it happened, owing to shortage of paper and governmental restrictions of one kind or another, was at the lowest ebb in its history at this period. A subject upon which Trapnel held strong views, this potential area of difference might have led to trouble. Ada always smoothed things over. After the honeymoon following the transfer of *Camel Ride to the Tomb*, Trapnel and Craggs scarcely bothered to conceal the lack of sympathy they felt for one another. It looked as if Quiggin had now been swept into embroilment by Trapnel's tendency to get on bad terms with all publishers and editors.

In this connexion, Ada was an example of Trapnel's exemption from the need to captivate every woman with whom he came in contact. He would not necessarily have captivated Ada had he tried. Nothing was less likely. The point was that he did not try. He always emphasized his amicable relations with her, how much he preferred these to be on a purely business basis. This proved no more than that Ada was not Trapnel's sort of woman, Trapnel not Ada's sort of man, but, for someone who liked running other people's lives so much as Ada, to get on with Trapnel, who liked running his own, was certainly a recommendation for her tact in doing business.

'Ada's all right. She's a grand girl. It isn't Ada who gets me down. She's always on my side. It's Craggs who's impossible. I feel pretty sure of that. He makes trouble in the background.'

'What sort of trouble?'

'Influencing JG.'

'*Bin Ends* went quite well?'

'All right. They've been looking at the first few chapters of *Profiles in String*—provisional title. I want some money while I'm writing it. I can't live on air.'

'Surely they'll advance something on what you've shown them?'

'They've given me a bit already, but I've got to exist while I write the bloody book.'

'You mean they won't unbelt any more?'

'I may have to approach another publisher.'

'You're under contract?'

'They like the new book all right, what there is. Like it very much. If they won't see reason, I may have to put the matter in the hands of my solicitors.'

Trapnel tapped the skull against the table. Talk about his solicitors always meant a highly nervous state. Even at the time of the monumental entanglement of the *conte*, it was doubtful whether legal processes had ever been carried further than consultation with old Tim Clipthorpe, one of the seasoned habitués of The Hero, his face covered with crimson blotches, who had been struck off the roll in the year the *Titanic* went down, as he was always telling any adjacent toper who would listen. In any case, Trapnel gave the impression that, as publishing rows go, this was not a specially serious one. Even if it were, he could hardly have brought a fellow-writer, not a particularly close friend, to shiver in the boreal chills of The Hero's saloon bar merely to confirm the parsimony of publishers; still less to listen to a critical onslaught against the amateurish pornography and slipshod prose of Alaric Kydd. Even Trapnel's egotism was hardly capable of that. He was, in fact, obviously playing for time, talking at random while he tried to screw himself up to making some more or less startling confession. Again he tapped the swordstick against the table.

'Don't let's talk about all this rot anyway. One of the things I wanted to tell you was that Tessa's walked out on me.'

That was much more the sort of thing to be expected. Even so, Tessa seemed a rather slender pretext for bringing about a portentous meeting such as this one. An attractive girl, she had shown early signs of finding the Trapnel way of life too much for her. Her departure was not a staggering surprise. Sympathy seemed best expressed by enquiry, though the answer was not in much doubt.

'How did it happen?'

'Yesterday—just left a note saying she was through.'

'Things had been getting difficult?'

'There was rather a scene last week. I thought it had all blown over. Apparently not. As a matter of fact I'm not sorry. I was fond of Tessa, but things have to have an end—at least most do.'

'Dowson said something of the sort in verse.'

Trapnel brushed aside further condolences, admittedly rather feeble ones, on the subject of the vicissitudes of love. He was, to say the least, bearing Tessa's abdication with fortitude. I was surprised at quite such a show of indifference, thinking some of it perhaps assumed. Trapnel, although resilient, was not at all heartless in such matters.

'Now Tessa's gone I'm faced with a decision.'

'Giving up women altogether?'

Trapnel laughed with rather conscious bitterness.

'I mean Tessa kept me from making an absolute fool of myself. Now I'm left without that support.'

He did not have the appearance of having indulged in a recent drinking bout, nor too many pep-pills, but was in such an unusual state that I began to wonder whether, after all, Ada was at the bottom of all this; that I had been summoned to give advice on the uncommon situation of an author falling in love with his publisher. The suspicion became almost a certainty when Trapnel leant forward and spoke dramatically, almost in a whisper.

'Nick, I'm absolutely mad about somebody.'

'A replacement for Tessa?'

'No—nothing like that. Nothing like Tessa at all. This is love. The genuine thing. I've never known what it was before. Not really. Now I do.'

This was going a little far. He spoke with complete gravity, though he and I were not at all on the terms when revelations of that kind are volunteered. Trapnel's emotional life, if proffered at all, was as a rule dished up with a light dressing of irony or melancholy. He was never brutal; on the other hand, he was never severely stricken. From the outside he appeared a reasonably adoring lover, if not an unduly serious one. The attitude maintained that night in The Hero was different from anything previously handed out. I had made up my mind to leave very soon now, almost at once. If Trapnel wanted to make a statement, he must get on with the job, do it expeditiously. The night was too cold to hang about any longer, while he braced himself to set forth in detail this amatory crisis, whatever it might be.

'Why isn't this one like Tessa?'

Instead of answering the question, Trapnel opened *Sweetskin* again. He removed from its pages the review slip, which notes date of publication, together with the request (never in the history of criticism vouchsafed) that the publisher should be sent a copy of the notice when it appeared in print. This small square of paper had been inserted earlier by Trapnel to mark a passage of notable ineptitude to be read aloud as illustration of Kydd's inability to write with grace, distinction or knowledge of the ways of women. He had recited the paragraph a few minutes before. Now he took one of several pens from the outside breast pocket of the tropical jacket, quickly wrote something on the back of the slip of paper, and passed it across to me. On examination, this enigmatic missive disclosed two words inscribed in Trapnel's small decorative script, of which he was rather proud. I read them without at first understanding why my attention should be drawn to this name.

Pamela Widmerpool

The whole procedure had been so odd, I was so cold and bored, the final flourish so unexpected—although in one sense Trapnel at his most Trapnelesque—that I did not immediately grasp the meaning of this revealment, if revealment it were.

'What about her?'

Trapnel did not speak at once. He looked as if he could not believe he had heard the words correctly. I asked again. He smiled and shook his head.

'That's whom I'm in love with.'

No comment seemed anywhere near adequate. This was beyond all limits. Burton well expressed man's subjection to passion. To recall his words gave some support now. 'The scorching beams under the *Æquinoctial*, or extremity of cold within the circle of the *Arctick*, where the very Seas are frozen, cold or torrid zone cannot avoid, or expel this heat, fury and rage of mortal men.' No doubt that was just how Trapnel felt. His face showed that he saw this climax as the moment of truth, one of those high-spots in the old silent films that he liked to recall, some terrific consummation emphasized by several seconds of monotonous music rising louder and louder, until, almost deafening, the notes suddenly jar out of tune in a frightful discord: the train is derailed: the canoe swept over the rapids: the knife plunged into the naked flesh. All is over. The action is cut: calm music again, perhaps no music at all.

'Of course I know I'm mad. I don't stand a chance. That's one of the reasons why the situation's nothing like Tessa—or any other girl I've ever been mixed up with. I admit it's not sane. I admit that from the start.'

If things had gone so far that Trapnel could not even pronounce the name of the woman he loved, had to write it down on a review slip, the situation must indeed be acute. I laughed. There seemed nothing else to do. That reaction was taken badly by Trapnel. He had some right to be offended after putting on such an act. That could not be helped. He looked half-furious, half-upset. As he was inclined to talk about his girls only after they had left, there was no measure for judging the norm of his feelings when they were first sighted. Possibly he was always as worked up as at that moment, merely that I had never been the confidant. That seemed unlikely. Even if he showed the same initial excitement, the incongruity of making Pamela his aim was something apart.

'You didn't much take to her at the *Fission* party.'

'Of course I didn't. I thought her the most awful girl I'd ever met.'

'What brought about the change?'

'I was in Ada's room looking through my press-cuttings. Mrs Widmerpool suddenly came in. She's an old friend of Ada's. I hadn't known that. She didn't bother to be announced from the downstairs office, just came straight up to Ada's room. She wanted to telephone right away. I was standing there talking to Ada about the cuttings. Mrs Widmerpool didn't take any notice of me. I might just as well not have been there, far less chatted with her at a party. Ada told her my name again, but she absolutely cut me. She went to the telephone, at once began cursing the girl at the switchboard for her slowness. When she got the number, it was to bawl out some man who'd sent her a jar of pickled peaches as a present. She said they were absolutely foul. She'd thrown them down the lavatory. She fairly gave him hell.'

'That stole your heart away?'

'Something did. Nick, I'm not joking. I'm mad about her. I'd do anything to see her again.'

'Did you converse after the telephoning?'

'That's what I'm coming to. We did talk. Ada asked her if she'd read the *Camel*. My God, she had—and liked it. She was—I don't know—almost as if she were shy all at once. Utterly different from what she'd been at the party, or even a moment before in the room. She behaved as if she quite liked me, but felt it would be wrong to show it. That was the moment when the thing hit me. I didn't know what to do. I felt quite ill with excitement. I mean both randy, and sentimentally in love with her too. I was wondering whether I'd ask both her and Ada to have a drink with me before lunch—perhaps borrow ten bob from Ada and pay her back later in the afternoon, because I was absolutely cleaned out at the moment of speaking—then Mrs Widmerpool suddenly remembered she was lunching with some lucky devil, and had told him to be at the restaurant at twelve-thirty, it being then a good bit after one o'clock. She went away, but quite unhurried. She knew he'd wait. What can I do? I'm crazy about her.'

Trapnel paused. The story still remained beyond comment. However, it was apparently not at an end. Something else too was on Trapnel's mind. Now he looked a shade embarrassed, a rare condition for him.

'You remember I talked to her husband at that party? We got on rather well. I can never think of him as her husband, but all the same he is, and something happened which I wish had never taken place.'

'If you mean you borrowed a quid off him, I know—he told me.'

'He did? In that case I feel better about it. The taxi absorbed my last sixpence. I had to get back to West Kilburn that night by hook or crook. I won't go into the reason why, but it was the case. I'd walked there once from Piccadilly, and preferred not to do it again. That was why I did a thing I don't often do, and got a loan from a complete stranger. The fact was it struck me as I was leaving the party that Mr Widmerpool had been so kind in listening to me—expressed such humane views on housing and such things—that he wouldn't mind helping me over a temporary difficulty. I was embarrassed at having to do so. I think Mr Widmerpool was a bit embarrassed too. He didn't know what I meant at first.'

Trapnel laughed rather apologetically. It was possible to recognize a conflict of feelings. As a writer, he could perfectly appreciate the funny side of taking a pound off Widmerpool; the whole operation looked like a little exercise in the art, introducing himself, making a good impression, bringing off the 'touch'. He had probably waited to leave the party until he saw Widmerpool going down the stairs, instinct guiding him as to the dole that would not be considered too excessive to withhold. At the same time, as a borrower, Trapnel had to keep up a serious attitude towards borrowing. He could not admit the whole affair had been a prepared scheme from the start. Finally, as a lover, he had put himself in a rather absurd relation to the husband of the object of his affections. To confess that showed how far Trapnel's defences were down. He returned to the subject of Pamela.

'Ada says they don't get on too well together. She told me that when I dropped in again on the office the following day. A man who looks like that couldn't appreciate such a marvellous creature.'

'Did you tell Ada how you felt?'

'Not on your life. There's a lot of argument going on about the new novel, as I mentioned, quite apart from notices still coming in for *Bin Ends*. It was perfectly natural for me to look in again. As a matter of fact Ada began to speak of Mrs Widmerpool herself as soon as I arrived. I just sat and listened.'

'Ada's pretty smart at guessing.'

'She doesn't guess how I feel. I know she doesn't. She couldn't have said some of the things she did, if she had. I was very careful not to give anything away—you won't either, Nick, will you? I don't want anyone else to know. But how on earth am I to see her again.'

'Go and pay Widmerpool back his quid, I suppose.'

This frivolous, possibly even heartless comment was made as a mild call to order, a suggestion so unlikely to be followed that it would emphasize the absurdity of Trapnel's situation. That was not at all the way he took it. On the contrary, the proposal immediately struck him not only as seriously put forward, but a scheme of daring originality. No doubt the proposal was indeed original in the sense that repayment of a loan had never occurred to Trapnel as a measure to be considered.

'Christ, what a marvellous idea. You mean I'd call at their place and hand back the pound?'

He pondered this extravagant—literally extravagant—possibility.

'But what would Mr Widmerpool say if he happened to be there when I turned up? He'd think it a bit odd.'

'Even if he did, he'd be unlikely to refuse a pound. A very pleasant surprise.'

Even then it never occurred to me that Trapnel would take this unheard-of step.

'God, what a brilliant idea.'

We both laughed at such a flight of fancy. Trapnel's condition of tension slightly relaxed. Sanity seemed now at least within sight. All the same, he continued to play with the idea of seeing Pamela again.

'I'll get on the job right away.'

There seemed more than a possibility that the pound, so improbably required for potential return to Widmerpool, might be requested then and there, whether or not it ever found its way back into Widmerpool's pocket. The fact no such demand was made may have been as much due to Trapnel's disinclination to borrow in an obviously unornamental manner, as his rule that application to another writer was reluctant. His attack on such occasions was apt to be swift, imperative, self-assured, never less than correct in avoiding a precursory period of uneasy anticipation, often unequivocally brilliant in being utterly unexpected until the last second; at the same time never intrusive, even in the eyes of those perfectly conversant with Trapnel's habits. In the nature of things he met with rebuff as well as acquiescence—the parallel of seduction inevitably suggests itself—but there had been many successes. On this occasion probably Quiggin & Craggs, worsted in the current wrangle about advances, would pay up; anyway a pound. Paradoxical as that might seem, getting the money would be the least of Trapnel's problems, if, in the spirit in which he had first accosted Widmerpool, he wanted to add a grotesque end to the story by settling the debt.

'I can't thank you enough.'

He fell into deep thought, adopting now a different, rather dramatically conscious style. Having derived all that was needed from our meeting, his mind was devoted to future plans. I told him circumstances prevented my staying longer at The Hero. Trapnel nodded absently. I left him, his glass of beer still three-quarters full, rested precariously on the copy of *Sweetskin*. On the way home the whole affair struck me as reminiscent of Rowland Gwatkin, my former Company Commander, revealing at Castlemallock Anti-Gas School his love for a barmaid. Gwatkin's military ambition was narrow enough compared with Trapnel's soaring aspirations about being a 'complete man' and more besides. At the amatory level there was no comparison. Nevertheless, something existed in common, some lack of fulfilment, as Pennistone would say, 'in a higher unity'. Besides, if Trapnel's medical category—not to mention a thousand ineligibilities of character—had not precluded him from recommendation for a commission, no doubt he too would have shared Gwatkin's warlike dreams; a dazzling flying career added to the other personal targets.

After that night Trapnel disappeared. His work for *Fission* continued. The stooges came into play, delivering reviews or other pieces, collecting books and cheques, bringing suggestions for further items. Trapnel himself was no longer available. According to Bagshaw, he even ceased to pursue the question of further payment to assist the completion of *Profiles in String*. Use of surrogates did not prevent complicated negotiations taking place in relation to *Fission* contributions. For example, Trapnel suggested withdrawing what he had written about *Sweetskin*, and replacing the review with a parody. Bagshaw liked the idea. It was better for his own relations with Quiggin that Kydd's novel should not be torn to shreds; better, if it came to that, from my own standpoint too. Alaric Kydd himself might not be altogether pleased to be treated in this fashion, but, a prosecution now pending, he had other things to think about. In any case *Sweetskin* would enjoy more space than in a notice of normal length. Trapnel's lightness of touch in showing up Kydd's weak points as a novelist indicated that the hysterical feelings displayed at The Hero had calmed down; at least infatuation with Pamela had left his talent unimpaired. Possibly this hopeless passion had already been apportioned to the extensive storehouse of forgotten Trapnel fantasies.

Sweetskin was not the only book to cause Quiggin & Craggs worry. Bagshaw reported a serious row blowing up about *Sad Majors*. Here the complexities of politics, rather than those of sex, impinged on purely commercial considerations. Bagshaw was very much at home in this atmosphere. He talked a lot about the Odo Stevens manuscript, which he had been allowed to read, and described as 'full of meat'. However, although written in a lively manner, some of the material dealing with the Communist guerillas with whom Stevens had been in contact was at least as outspoken in its field as Kydd on the subject of sex.

'It appears a British officer operating with a rival Resistance group got rather mysteriously liquidated. Accidents will happen even with the best-regulated secret police. Of course a lot of Royalists were shot, and quite a fair number of people who weren't exactly Royalists, not to mention a crowd of heretical Communists too, the whole party ending, as we all know, in wholesale arrests and deportations. This is, of course, rather awkward for a firm of progressive tone. JG thinks it can be hoovered over satisfactorily. He wants to do the book, because it will sell, but Howard's against. He saw at once there'd be a lot of trouble, if the material appeared in its present form.'

'What will happen?'

'Gypsy won't hear of it.'

'What's Gypsy got to do with it?'

'It's her affair, isn't it, if what Stevens has said is damaging to the Party? She's bloody well consulted, apart from anything else, because Howard's afraid of her—actually physically afraid. He knows about one or two things Gypsy's arranged in her day. So do I. I don't blame him.'

'Have they turned the book down?'

'They're arguing it out.'

The weather was still unthawed when, a month or two later, I dined with Roddy Cutts at the House of Commons. Spring should have been on the way by then, but there was no sign. Our respective wives were both to give birth any day now. Roddy had suggested having a night out together to relieve the strain. A night out with Roddy carried no implications of outrageous dissipation. We talked most of the time about family affairs. He had seen Hugo Tolland the day before, who had been staying at Thrubworth, bringing back an account of how Siegfried, the German POW, was every day growing in local stature.

'Siegfried gives regular conjuring displays now in the village hall. There's talk of his getting engaged to one of Skerrett's granddaughters. He'll be nursing the constituency before we know where we are. Well, I suppose it's about time to be getting along. I'll just see how the debate's going before we make for home.'

Roddy Cutts's large handsome face always became drawn with anxiety when, at the close of any party at which he had been host, he glanced at the bill. This time the look indicated the worst; that he was ruined; parliamentary career at an end; he would have to sell up; probably emigrate. An extravagant charge would certainly have been out of place. Whatever the shock, Roddy made no comment. He dejectedly searched through pocket after pocket in apparently vain attempts to find a sum adequate to meet so severe a demand on a man's resources. The second round through, one of the waistcoat pockets yielded a five-pound note. He smoothed out its paper on the table.

'Give my love to Isobel, and hopes that all will be well.'

'And mine to Susie.'

The change arrived. Roddy sorted it lethargically, at the same time giving the impression that the levy might have been less disastrous than at first feared. His manner of picking up coins and examining them used to irritate our brother-in-law George Tolland. We rose from the table, exchanging the claustrophobic pressures of the hall where the meal had been eaten, for a no less viscous density of parliamentary smoking-rooms and lobbies, suffocating, like all such precincts, with the omnipresent and congealed essence of public contentions and private egotisms; breath of life to their frequenters. Roddy's personality always took on a new dimension within these walls.

'If you'll wait for a minute in the central lobby, I'll just hear how Supplementary Benefits are going.'

Callot-like figures pervaded labyrinthine corridors. Cavernous alcoves were littered with paraphernalia of scaffolding and ropes, Piranesian frameworks hinting of torture and execution, but devised only to repair bomb damage to structure and interior ornament. Roddy reappeared.

'Come along.'

We crossed the top of the flight of steps leading down into St Stephen's Hall, the stairs seeming to offer a kind of emergency exit from contemporary affairs into a mysterious submerged world of mediaeval shadows, tempting to explore if one were alone, in spite of icy draughts blowing up from these spectral depths. Suddenly, from the opposite direction to which we were walking, Widmerpool appeared. He was pacing forward slowly, deliberately, solemnly, swinging his arms in a regular motion from the body, as if carefully balancing himself while he trod a restricted bee-line from one point to another. At first he was too deep in thought to notice our advance towards him. Roddy shouted a greeting.

'Widmerpool, just the man I'm looking for.'

He could never resist accosting anyone he knew, and buttonholing them. Now he began a long dissertation about 'pairing'. Surprised out of his own meditations, Widmerpool seemed at first only aware that he was being addressed by a fellow MP. A second later he grasped the linked identities of Roddy and myself, our relationship, the fact that were brothers-in-law evidently striking him at once as a matter of significance to himself. He brushed aside whatever Roddy was talking about—conversation in any case designed to keep alive a contact with a member of the other side, rather than reach a conclusion—beginning to speak of another subject that seemed already on his mind, possibly the question he had been so deeply pondering.

'I'm glad to come on you both. First of all, my dear Cutts, I wanted to approach you regarding a little non-party project I have on hand—no, no, not the Roosevelt statue—it is connected with an Eastern European cultural organization in which I am interested. However, before we come to public concerns, there are things to be settled about the late Lord Warminster's letter of instructions. They are rather complicated—personal rather than legal bearings, though the Law comes in—so that to explain some of the points to you might save a lot of correspondence in the future. You could then pass on the information by word of mouth to your appropriate relatives, decisions thereby reached in a shorter time.'

Roddy showed attention to the phrase 'non-party project', but, with the professional politician's immediate instinct for executing a disengaging movement from responsibilities that promised only unrewarding exertion, he at once began to deny all liability for sorting out the problems of Erridge's bequests.

'Nicholas and I have no status in the matter whatsoever, my dear Widmerpool, you must address yourself to Hugo or Frederica. They are the people. Either Hugo or Frederica will put you right in a trice.'

Widmerpool must have been prepared for that answer, actually expecting it, because he smiled at the ease with which such objections could be overruled by one of his long experience.

'Of course, of course. I perfectly appreciate that aspect, Cutts, that you and Nicholas are without authority in the matter. You are correct to stress the fact. The point I put forward is that the normal course of action would result in a vast deal of letter-writing between Messrs Turnbull, Welford & Puckering, Messrs Quiggin & Craggs, Messrs Goodness-knows-who-else. I propose to cut across that. I had quite enough of shuffling the bumf round when I was in the army. As a result I've developed a positive mania these days against pushing paper. Man-to-man. That's the way. Cut corners. I fear pomposity is not one of my failings. I can't put up with pompous people, and have often been in trouble on that very account.'

Roddy was determined not to be outdone in detestation of pomposity and superfluous formality. For a moment the two MPs were in sharp competition as to whose passion for directness and simplicity was the more heartfelt, at least could be the more forcibly expressed. At the end of this contest Widmerpool carried his point.

'Therefore I suggest you forget the official executors for the moment, and accompany me back to my flat for the space of half an hour, where we can deal with the Warminster file, also discuss the small non-party committee I propose to form. No, no, Cutts, I brook no refusal. You can both be of inestimable help in confirming the right line is being taken regarding post-mortem wishes, I mean a line acceptable to the family. As a matter of fact you may both be interested to learn more of your late brother-in-law's system of opinion, his intellectual quirks, if I may use the phrase.'

Curiosity on that last point settled the matter. Roddy enjoyed nothing better than having a finger in any pie that happened to be cooking. Here were at least two. It was agreed that we should do as Widmerpool wished.

'Come along then. It's just round the corner. Only a step. We may as well walk—especially as there are likely to be no taxis.'

Along the first stretch of Victoria Street, dimly lighted and slippery, Roddy and Widmerpool discussed 2½% Treasury Stock Redeemable after 1975; by the time we reached the flats, they had embarked on the topic of whether or not, as Governor of the Bank of England, Montagu Norman had adequately controlled the 'acceptance houses'. The entrance, rather imposing, was a high archway flanked by gates. This led into a small courtyard, on the far side of which stood several associated masses of heavy Edwardian building. It was a cheerless spot. I asked if Short still lived here.

'You know Leonard Short? He's just below us. Very convenient it should be so. He's a good little fellow, Short. My Minister has a high opinion of him.'

'Who is your Minister?'

Even Roddy was rather appalled by this ignorance, hastening to explain that Widmerpool had been appointed not long before Parliamentary Private Secretary to a member of the Cabinet; the one, in fact, who had attended the Quiggin & Craggs party, the Minister responsible for the branch of the civil service to which Short belonged. Widmerpool himself showed no resentment at this lapse, merely laughing heartily, and enlarging on his own duties.

'As PPS one's expected to take an intelligent interest in the ministry concerned. The presence there of Leonard Short oils the wheels for me. We're quite an intellectual crowd here. I expect you've heard of Clapham, the publisher, who lives in another of the flats. You may even know him. He is a good type of the old-fashioned publishing man. I find his opinions worthy of attention now I have a stake in that business myself. There's nothing flashy about Clapham, neither intellectually nor socially. He was speaking to me about St John Clarke the other night, whom he knew well, and, so he tells me, still enjoys a very respectable sale.'

The hall was in darkness. There was a lift, but Widmerpool guided us past it.

'I must remind you electricity is now in short supply—shedding the load, as we have learnt to call it. The Government has the matter well in hand, but our lift here, an electric one, is for the moment out of action. You will not mind the stairs. Only a few flights. A surprisingly short way in the light of the excellent view we enjoy on a clear day. Pam is always urging a move. We have decided in principle to do so, inspected a great deal of alternative accommodation, but there is convenience in proximity to the House. Besides, I'm used to the flat, with its special characteristics, some good, some less admirable. For the time being, therefore, it seems best to remain where we are. That's what I'm always telling Pam.'

By this time we had accomplished a couple of flights.

'How is Mrs Widmerpool?' asked Roddy. 'I remember she was feeling unwell at the funeral.'

'My wife's health was not good a year ago. It has improved. I can state that with confidence. In fact during the last month I have never known her better—well, one can say in better spirits. She is a person rather subject to moods. She changes from one moment to the next.'

Roddy, probably thinking of the cipherine nodded heartily. Widmerpool took a key from his pocket. He paused before the door. Talk about Pamela had unsettled him.

'I don't expect Pam will have gone to bed yet. She does sometimes turn in early, especially if she has a headache, or it's been an exhausting day for her. At other times she sits up quite late, indeed long after I've retired to rest myself. We shall see.'

He sounded rather nervous about what the possibilities might be. The small hall was at once reminiscent of the flat—only a short way from here—where Widmerpool had formerly lived with his mother. I asked after her. He did not seem over pleased by the enquiry.

'My mother is still living with relations in the Lowlands. There's been some talk lately of her finding a place of her own. I have not seen her recently. She is, of course, not so young as she was. We still have our old jokes about Uncle Joe in our letters, but in certain other aspects she finds it hard to realize things have changed.'

'Uncle Joe?'

'My mother has always been a passionate admirer of Marshal Stalin, a great man, whatever people may say. We had jokes about if he were to become a widower. At the same time, she would probably have preferred me to remain single myself. She is immensely gratified to have a son in the House of Commons—always her ambition to be mother of an MP—but she is inclined to regard a wife as handicap to a career.'

Widmerpool lowered his tone for the last comment. The lights were on all over the flat, the sound of running water audible. No one seemed to be about. Widmerpool listened, his head slightly to one side, with the air of a Red Indian brave seeking, on the tail of the wind, the well-known, but elusive, scent of danger. The splashing away of the water had a calming effect.

'Ah, Pam's having a bath. She was expecting my return rather later than this. I'll just report who's here. Go in and sit down.'

He spoke as if relieved to hear nothing more ominous was on foot than his wife having a bath, then disappeared down the passage. Roddy and I entered the sitting-room. The tone of furniture and decoration was anonymous, though some sort of picture rearrangement seemed to be in progress. The central jets of a gas fire were lighted, but the curtains were undrawn, a window open. Roddy closed it. Two used glasses stood on a table. There was no sign of whatever had been drunk from them. From the other end of the passage a loud knocking came, where Widmerpool was announcing our arrival. Apparently no notice was taken, because the taps were not turned off, and, to rise above their sound, he had to shout our names at the top of his voice. Pamela's reactions could not be heard. Widmerpool returned.

'I expect Pam will look in later. Probably in her dressing-gown—which I hope you will excuse.'

'Of course.'

Roddy looked as if he could excuse that easily. Widmerpool glanced round the room and made a gesture of simulated exasperation.

'She's been altering the pictures again. Pam loves doing that—especially shifting round that drawing her uncle Charles Stringham left her. I can never remember the artist's name. An Italian.'

'Modigliani.'

'That's the one—ah, there's been a visitor, I see. I'll fetch the relevant documents.'

The sight of the two glasses seemed to depress him again. He fetched some papers. Kneeling down in front of the gas fire, he tried to ignite the outer bars, but they failed to respond. Widmerpool gave it up. He began to explain the matter in hand. Erridge, among other dispositions, had expressed the wish that certain books which had 'influenced' him should, if out of print, be reissued by the firm of Quiggin & Craggs. To what extent such republication was practicable had to be considered in the light of funds available from the Trust left by Erridge. Nothing was conditional. Widmerpool explained that the copyright situation was being examined. At present adjudication was not yet possible in certain cases; others were already announced as to be reissued elsewhere. Subsequent works on the same subject, political or economic—even more often events—had put Erridge's old favourites out of date. On the whole, as Widmerpool had promised, the answers could be effectively dealt with in this manner, though several required brief consideration and discussion. We had just come to the end of the business, Widmerpool made facetious reference to the propriety of canvassing Parliamentary matters, even non-party ones, in the presence of a member of the public, when the door bell rang. Widmerpool looked irritable at this.

'Who on earth can it be? Not one of Pam's odd friends at this hour of the night, I hope. They are capable of anything.'

He went to open the door.

'We don't need to waste any more time here,' said Roddy. 'The Erry stuff is more or less cleared up. The non-party project can be ventilated when Widmerpool and I next meet in the House. I don't want to freeze to death. Let's make a getaway while he's engaged.'

I was in agreement. Widmerpool continued to talk with whoever had come to the front door of the flat. Although he had left the door of the sitting-room open, the subject of their conversation could not be heard owing to the sound of the bath water, still running, or perhaps turned on again. It occurred to me that Pamela, with her taste for withdrawal from company, might deliberately have taken refuge in the bathroom on hearing the sound of our arrival; then turned on the taps to give the impression that a bath was in progress. Such procedure might even be a matter of routine on her part to avoid guests after a parliamentary sitting. The supposition was strengthened by Widmerpool's own lack of surprise at her continued absence. It was like a mythological story: a nymph for ever running a bath that never filled, while her husband or lover waited for her to emerge. Now Roddy was getting impatient.

'Come on. Don't let's hang about.'

We went out into the passage. The visitor turned out to be Short. He looked worried. Although only come from the floor below, apparently to deliver a message, he had taken the precaution of wearing an overcoat and scarf. Whatever the message was had greatly disturbed Widmerpool. One wondered if the Government had fallen, though scarcely likely within the time that had passed since we had left the House of Commons. Our sudden appearance from the sitting-room made Short even less at ease than he was already. He muttered some sort of a good evening. I introduced Roddy, as Widmerpool seemed scarcely aware that we had joined them. Before more could be said, evidently returning to the subject in hand, Widmerpool broke in again.

'How long ago did you say this was?'

'About an hour or two, as I told you. The message was just as I passed it on.'

Short was infinitely, unspeakably embarrassed. Widmerpool looked at him for a moment, then turned away. He walked hurriedly up the passage, lost to sight at the right-angle of its end. A door opened noisily from the direction of the running water. The sound of the flow ceased a moment later. The taps had been turned off sharply. Another door was opened. There came the noise of things being thrown about. Short blew his nose. Roddy got his overcoat and handed me mine. I asked Short what had happened.

'It was just a message left for Kenneth by his wife. She rang the bell of my flat about an hour ago, and asked me to deliver it.'

Short stopped. Whatever the message was had seriously upset him. That left us none the wiser. Short seemed for a moment uncertain whether or not to reveal his secret. Then it became too much for him. He cleared his throat and lowered his voice.

'As a matter of fact the message was—"I've left". We don't know each other at all well. I thought she must mean she was going to catch a train, or something of that sort. Had been delayed, and wanted her husband to know the time of her departure.'

'You mean left for good?'

Short nodded once or twice, almost to himself, in a panic-stricken manner. There could be no doubt that one side of his being had been immensely excited by becoming so closely involved in such a drama; another, appalled by all the implications of disorganization, wrongdoing and scandal. Before more could be told, Widmerpool returned.

'It was very thoughtless of her to have forgotten to turn the bath tap off. The hot one too. Nobody in the place will get any hot water for weeks. You know, Leonard, she must have made this arrangement to go away on the spur of the moment.'

'That's just what it looked like.'

Short spoke as if he saw a gleam of hope.

'She often acts like that. I deprecate it, but what can I do? I see she has taken both her suitcases. They must have been quite heavy, as most of her clothes have gone too. Did you help carry them down?'

'The man was carrying them.'

'Do you mean the porter? I thought he was having flu?'

'Not the regular porter. It might have been the taxi-driver or someone driving a hired car. Perhaps they have a temporary man downstairs.'

'I mean it was not just a friend?'

'He hardly looked like a friend.'

'What was he like?'

'He had a beard. He was carrying the two bags. Your wife had a stick or umbrella under her arm, and two or three pictures.'

This piece of information agitated Widmerpool more than anything that had gone before. Short appeared unable to know what to think. Before Widmerpool's return his words certainly suggested that he himself supposed Pamela had left for good; then Widmerpool's demeanour seemed almost to convince him that this was no more than a whim of the moment to go off and visit friends. Now he was back where he started.

'Repeat to me again exactly what she said.'

'"Tell him I'm leaving, and taking the Modigliani and the photographs of myself. He can do what he likes with the rest of my junk."'

'Nothing more?'

'Of course I supposed she was referring to some domestic arrangement you knew about already, that she wanted to inform you of the precise minute she had vacated the flat. I wondered if you had even taken another one. You have always talked of that. It looked as if she might be starting to move into it.'

Short sounded desperate. He must have been to talk like that. Roddy was desperate too, but only to get away. He was taking no interest whatever in the matter discussed. Now he could stand it no longer.

'Look, my dear Widmerpool, it's really awfully cold tonight. I think I'll have to be getting back, as I want to know how my wife is faring. She's expecting a baby, you know. Not quite yet, but you never can be certain with these little beggars. They sometimes decide to be early. We can have a word about your project in the smoking-room some time—over a drink perhaps.'

Widmerpool behaved very creditably. He accepted, probably with relief, that Roddy was not in the least interested in his affairs.

'Most grateful to you both for having looked in, and run over those points. All I want you to do now is to pass on the proposed decisions informally to the executors. If they have any objections, they can let me know. Then we can get the items sorted out. I'm sorry the evening has been interrupted in this way. We'll discuss the non-party matter on another occasion, Cutts. I must offer my apologies. There is nothing Pam enjoys more than mystifying people—especially her unfortunate husband. Goodnight, goodnight. Come into the flat for a moment, Leonard.'

What he was thinking was not revealed. Control of himself showed how far married life had inured him to sudden discomposing circumstances. If he believed that Pamela had deserted him without intention of return—it was hard to think anything else had happened—he kept his head. Perhaps her departure was after all a relief. It was impossible to guess; nor whether Trapnel was by now a figure known to him in his wife's entourage. Short did not look at all willing to enter the flat for yet another rehash of his encounter with Pamela, but Widmerpool was insistent. He would not accept a denial on account of work with which Short was engaged. Roddy and I took leave of them, and set off down the stairs. Neither of us spoke until we reached the street. Roddy then showed some faint curiosity as to what had been happening.

'What was it? I was too cold to take it in.'

'It looks as if his wife's gone off with a man called X. Trapnel.'

'Never heard of him.'

'He writes novels.'

'Like you?'

'Yes.'

'Is he one of her lovers?'

'So it appears.'

'I gather they abound.'

'All the same, this is a bit of a surprise.'

'God—there's a taxi.'

Not so very long after that evening, Isobel gave birth to a son; Susan Cutts, to a daughter. These events within the family, together with other comings and goings, not to mention the ever-pervading Burton, distracted attention from exterior events. Even allowing for such personal preoccupations, the whole Widmerpool affair, that is to say his wife's abandonment of him, made far less stir than might be expected. There were several reasons for this. In the first place, that Widmerpool should marry a girl like Pamela Flitton had been altogether unexpected; that she should leave him was another matter. Nothing could be more predictable, the only question—with whom? A certain amount of gossip went round when it became known they were no longer under the same roof, but, the awaited climax having taken place, the question of the lover's identity was not an altogether easy one to answer; nor particularly interesting when answered, for those kept alive by such nourishment. Few people who knew Widmerpool also knew Trapnel, the reverse equally true. Besides, could it be stated with certainty that Pamela was living with Trapnel?

Everyone agreed that, even if Pamela had embarked on a romance with Trapnel, however unlikely that might be, nothing was, on the other hand, more probable than that she had left him immediately after. All that could be said for certain was that both had utterly disappeared from sight. That at least was definite. Accordingly, the physical presence of two lovers did not, by public appearance, draw attention to open adultery. In the circumstances, interest waned. The question of 'taking sides', in general so much adding to public concern with such predicaments, here scarcely arose, husband and lover inhabiting such widely separated worlds. There was some parallel to the time, years before, when Mona had left Peter Templer for J. G. Quiggin.

A further reason for the story to develop a strangely muffled character, almost as if leaked through a kind of censorship, was the hard work Widmerpool himself put in to lower the outside temperature. However he might inwardly regard the situation, as an MP he was understandably anxious to play down such a blemish on the life of a public man. Just as he had done to Short on the night of Pamela's departure, he emphasized through all possible channels his wife's undoubted eccentricity, circulating anecdotes about her to suggest that she was doing no more than taking a brief holiday from married life. She would return when she thought fit. That was Widmerpool's line. Her husband, knowing her strange ways, paid little attention. In the end more people than might be expected pretty well accepted that explanation. It was a trump card. At first that was not so apparent as it became later.

Of course a friend of Pamela's like Ada Leintwardine—a position in which Ada was, as a woman, probably unique—was thrown into a great state of commotion when the news, such as it was, broke. It was confirmed by L. O. Salvidge to the extent that two or three weeks before he had seen Trapnel in The Hero, accompanied by a very beautiful girl with a pale face and dark hair. They had stayed in the saloon bar only a few seconds, not even ordering drinks. Trapnel wanted to make some arrangement with one of the auxiliaries. Salvidge's information predated the night at Widmerpool's. Ada conceded not only that she had now lost all touch with Pamela, but—an unexampled admission on Ada's part—could claim no suspicion whatever as to what must have been going on. This amounted to confession that, however profound her own powers of intuition, they had fallen short of paramountcy in probing this particular sequence of emotional development. All she had supposed was that Trapnel had been 'rather intrigued' by Pamela; the notion that he should sufficiently flatter himself as to allow dreams of her mastery was something quite beyond credibility. Ada's alliance with Pamela had, in fact, never taken the form of frequentation of the Widmerpool household. They had just been 'girls together' outside Pamela's married life. Ada continually repeated her disbelief.

'It can't really be Trapnel.'

Not only did Trapnel himself no longer appear at the *Fission* office, his representatives now dropped off too. Bagshaw had recently retired to bed with flu. For once the new number was fully made up, left to be seen through the press by the latest secretary, a red-haired, freckled girl called Judy, whom Bagshaw himself had produced from somewhere or other, alleging that she was not at all stupid, but unreliable at spelling. Judy had just brought in a stack of advance copies of the magazine when in due course I arrived to carry out the normal stint with the books. These were being examined by Quiggin and Ada, who were both on the *Fission* side of the backyard.

Quiggin, possibly under the influence of Ada, had now for the most part abandoned his immediately post-war trappings suggesting he had just come in from skirmishing with a sten-gun in the undergrowth, though traces remained in a thick grey shirt. On the whole he had settled for a no-nonsense middle-aged intellectual's style of dress, a new suit in dark check and bow tie, turn-out better suited to his station as an aspiring publisher. Ada was laughing at what they were reading, Quiggin less certain that he was finding the contribution funny. He had taken his hands from the jacket pockets of the check suit, and was straightening the lapels rather uneasily.

'There's going to be a row,' said Ada.

She was pleased rather than the reverse by that prospect. Quiggin himself seemed not wholly displeased, though his amusement was combined with anxiety, which the *Sweetskin* case was sufficient to explain. An extract from Ada's own novel was to be included in this current number. Her work in progress had not yet been given a title, but it was billed as 'daring', so that in the cold light of print Quiggin might fear the police would now step in where *Fission* too was concerned.

'Are you going to be prosecuted, Ada?'

'I was laughing at X's piece. Read this.'

She handed me a copy of the magazine. It was open at Widmerpool's article *Assumptions of Autarchy v. Dynamics of Adjustment*. Since she had indicated Trapnel's piece as the focus of interest, I turned back to the list of contents to find the page. Ada snatched it from me.

'No, no. Where I gave it you.'

Another glance at the typeface showed what she meant. The page that at first appeared to be the opening of Widmerpool's routine article on politics or economics—usually a mixture of both—was in fact a parody of Widmerpool's writing by Trapnel. I sat down the better to appreciate the pastiche. It was a little masterpiece in its way. Trapnel's ignorance of matters political or economic, his total lack of interest in them, had not handicapped the manner in which he caught Widmerpool's characteristic style. If anything that ignorance had been an advantage. The gibberish, interspersed with *double ententes*, was entirely convincing.

'I do not assert . . . a convincing lead . . . cyclical monopoly resistance . . . the optimum factor . . .'

This was Bagshaw taking the bit between his teeth. However one looked at it, that much was clear. In the course of arranging subjects for Trapnel's parodies he had certainly included contributors to *Fission* before now. Alaric Kydd was not, as it happened, one of these, being somewhat detached from the *Fission* genre of writer, but Evadne Clapham, represented by a short story in the first number, had been one of Trapnel's victims. Always excitable, she had at first talked of a libel action. Bagshaw had convinced her finally that only the most talented of writers were amenable to parody, and she had forgiven both himself and Trapnel. All this was in line with Bagshaw's taste for sailing near the wind, whatever he did, but he had never spoken of setting Trapnel to work on Widmerpool. That was certainly to expose himself to danger. The temptation to do so, once the idea had occurred to an editor of Bagshaw's temperament, would, on the other hand, be a hard one to resist.

If, in the light of his business connexions with the publishing firm and the magazine, it were risky to parody Widmerpool, Widmerpool's lack of respect for Bagshaw's abilities as an editor did not make the experiment any less hazardous. For the parody to appear in print at this moment would certainly liven the mixture with new unforeseen fermentations. It was equally characteristic of Bagshaw to be away from the office at such a juncture. Quiggin himself certainly grasped that, at a moment when lurid theories about the elopement were giving place to acceptance of the Widmerpool version, there was a danger of a severe setback for such an interpretation of the story. He saw that circumstances were so ominous that the only thing to do was to claim the parody as a victory rather than a defeat.

'You have to look at things all ways. Kenneth Widmerpool is taking the line that no catastrophic break in his married life is threatened. Whether or not that is true, we have no reliable evidence how far, if at all, Trapnel is involved. In a sense, therefore, a good-natured burlesque by X of Kenneth's literary mannerisms suggests friendly, rather than unfriendly, relations.'

'Good-natured?'

Quiggin looked at Ada severely, but not without a suggestion of desire.

'Parodies are intended to raise a laugh. Perhaps you did not know that, Ada. If someone had taken the trouble to show me the piece before it was printed, I might have done a little sub-editing here and there. I don't promise it would have improved the whole, so perhaps it was better not.'

This speech indicated that Widmerpool might not have it all his own way, if he made too much fuss. It also confirmed indirectly the resentment of Widmerpool's domination that, according to Bagshaw, Quiggin had begun increasingly to show. Judy, the secretary, feeling that some of these recriminations were directed against herself, or, more probably envious of the attention Quiggin was devoting to Ada, now began to protest.

'How on earth was I to know one man had run away with the other man's wife? Books just handed the copy over to me, saying he had a temperature of a hundred-and-two, and told me to get on with the job.'

'Grown-up people always check on that particular point, my girl,' said Quiggin. 'Don't worry. We're not blaming you. Calm down. Take an aspirin. Isn't it time for coffee? I admit I could have done without Bagshaw arranging this just at the moment the *Sweetskin* case is coming on, and all the to-do about *Sad Majors*.

I enquired as to Quiggin's version of the Stevens trouble.

'Odo's written an excellent account of his time with the Partisans. Adventurous, personal, but a lot of controversial matter. Readers don't want controversy. Why should they? Besides, it would be awkward for the firm to publish a book hinting some of the things Odo's does, with Kenneth Widmerpool on the board. All his support for societies trying to promote good relations with that very country. You want to keep politics out of a book like that.'

'Odo isn't very interested in politics, is he?'

'Not in a way, but he's very obstinate.'

I left them still in a flutter about the parody. There was not much Widmerpool could do. It would increase his opposition to Bagshaw, but Bagshaw probably had a contract of some sort. At the end of that, if the magazine survived, Widmerpool was likely to try and get him sacked anyway. It was a typical Bagshaw situation. Meanwhile, he showed no sign of returning to the office. The message came that his flu was no better. Some evenings later there was a telephone call at home. A female voice asked for me.

'Speaking.'

'It's Pamela Widmerpool.'

'Oh, yes?'

She must have known I was answering, but for some reason of her own preferred to go through the process of making absolutely sure.

'X is not well.'

'I'm very sorry—'

'I want you to come and see him. He needs some books and things.'

'But—'

'It's really the only way—for you to come yourself.'

She spoke the last sentence irritably, as if the question of my bringing Trapnel aid in person had already arisen in the past, and, rather contemptibly, I had raised objections to making myself available. Now, it seemed, I was looking for a similar excuse again. She offered no explanation or apology for thus emerging as representative of the Trapnel, rather than Widmerpool, ménage. In taking on the former position there was not the smallest trace of self-consciousness.

'This man Bagshaw has flu still. I can't get any sense out of the half-witted girl left in charge at the *Fission* office. That's why you must come.'

'I was only going to say that I don't know where you—where X is living.'

'Of course you don't. No one does. I'm about to tell you. Do you know the Canal at Maida Vale?'

'Yes.'

'We're a bit north of there.'

She gave the name of a street and number of the house. I wrote them down.

'The ground-floor flat. Don't be put off by the look of the place outside. It's inhabited all right, though you might not think so. When can you come? Tonight?'

She added further instructions about getting there.

'What's wrong with X?'

'He's just feeling like hell.'

'Has he seen a doctor?'

'He won't.'

'Wouldn't it be wiser to make him?'

'He'll be all right in a day or two. He's got quite a store of his pills. He just wants to talk to somebody. We don't see anybody as a rule. You just happen to know both of us. That's why you must come. Have you got a book to bring? Something for him to review?'

I had taken some review copies from the *Fission* shelves to look through at home. L. O. Salvidge's collection of essays, *Paper Wine*, might do for Trapnel. I told Pamela I would produce something. She rang off without comment.

'Don't get robbed and murdered,' said Isobel.

To visit Trapnel in one of his lairs was a rare experience at the best of times. Once we had both been allowed to have a drink with him at a flat in Notting Hill, within range of the Portobello Road, where he liked to wander among the second-hand stalls. He was then living with a girl called Sally. The invitation had been quite exceptional, possibly intended to establish some sort of an alibi for reasons never revealed. The present expedition was more adventurous. The Paddington area, and north of it, supplied one of the traditional Trapnel areas of bivouac. It was surprising that he and Pamela were to be found no farther afield. Their total disappearance suggested withdrawal from such ground to less established streets. It was of course true to say that, even when not specifically retired to the outer suburbs, one rarely knew for certain where Trapnel was living. The absence of news about him from pub sources indicated experiment with hitherto unfrequented taverns. Such investigation would not be unwelcome; by no means out of character. A fresh round of saloon bars would hold out promise of new disciples, new eccentrics, new bores, new near-criminals. Pamela herself might well have objected to a really radical retreat from the approaches to central London. The part she played was hard to imagine.

At this period the environs of the Canal had not yet developed into something of a *quartier chic*, as later incarnated. Before the war, the indigenous population, time-honoured landladies, inveterate lodgers, immemorial whores, long undisturbed in surrounding premises, had already begun to give place to young married couples, but buildings already tumbledown had now been further reduced by bombing. The neighbourhood looked anything but flourishing. Leaving Edgware Road, I walked along the north bank of the Canal. On either side of the water gaps among the houses marked where direct hits had reduced Regency villas to rubble. The street Pamela had described was beyond this stucco colony. It was not at all easy to find. When traced, the exterior bore out the description of looking uninhabited.

The architecture here had little pretension to elegance. Several steps led up to the front door. No name was quoted above the bell of the ground floor flat. I rang, and waited. The door was opened by Pamela. She was in slacks. I said good-evening. She did not smile.

'Come in.'

Lighted only by a ray from the flat doorway left open, the hall, so far as could be seen in the gloom, accorded with the derelict exterior of the house; peeling wallpaper, bare boards, a smell of damp, cigarette smoke, stale food. The atmosphere recalled Maclintick's place in Pimlico, when Moreland and I had visited him not long before his suicide. By contrast, the fairly large room into which I followed Pamela conveyed, chiefly on account of the appalling mess of things that filled it, an impression of rough comfort, almost of plenty. There were only a few sticks of furniture, a table, two kitchen chairs, a vast and hideous wardrobe, but several pieces of luggage lay about—including two newish suitcases evidently belonging to Pamela—clothes, books, cups, glasses, empty Algerian wine bottles. The pictures consisted of a couple of large photographs of Pamela herself, taken by well-known photographers, and, over the mantelpiece, the Modigliani drawing. Trapnel lay on a divan under some brown army blankets.

'Look here, it's awfully good of you to come, Nick.'

One wondered, at this austere period for acquiring any sort of clothing to be regarded as of unusual design, where he had bought the dirty white pyjamas patterned with large red spots. The circumstances were in general a shade more sordid than pictured. Trapnel had been reading a detective story, which he now threw on the floor. A lot of other books lay about over the bedclothes, among them *Oblomov*, *The Thin Man*, *Adolphe*, in a French edition, all copies worn to shreds. Trapnel looked pale, rather dazed, otherwise no worse than usual. Before I could speak, Pamela made a request.

'Have you a shilling? The fire's going out.'

She took the coin and slipped it into the slot, reviving the dying flame, just going blue. As the gas flared up again, its hiss for some inexplicable reason suggested an explanation of why Pamela had married Widmerpool. She had done it, so to speak, in order to run away with Trapnel. I do not mean she had thought that out in precise terms—a vivid imagination would be required to predict the advent of Trapnel into Widmerpool's life—but the violent antithesis presented by their contrasted forms of existence, two unique specimens as it were brought into collision, promised anarchic extremities of feeling of the kind at which she aimed; in which she was principally at home. She liked—to borrow a phrase from St. John Clarke—to 'try conclusions with the maelstrom'. One of the consequences of her presence was to displace Trapnel's tendency to play a part during the first few minutes of any meeting. That could well have been knocked out of him by ill health, as much as by Pamela. He spoke now as if he were merely a little embarrassed.

'There were one or two things I wanted to talk about. You know I don't much like having to explain things on the telephone, though I often have to do that. Anyway, it's cut off here, the instrument was removed bodily yesterday, and I'm not supposed to go outside for the moment, owing to this malaise I've got. You and I haven't seen each other for some time, Nick. Such a lot's happened. As I'm a bit off colour I thought you wouldn't mind coming to our flat. It seemed easier. Pam was sure you'd come.'

He gave her one of those 'adoring looks', which Lermontov says mean so little to women. Pamela stared back at him with an expression of complete detachment. I thought of King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid, though Pamela was far from a pre-raphaelite type or a maid, and, socially speaking, the boot was, if anything, on the other foot. No doubt it was Trapnel's beard. He had also allowed his hair to grow longer than usual. All the same, he sitting up on the divan, she standing above him, they somehow called up the picture.

'I brought some essays by L. O. Salvidge.'

'*Paper Wine*?'

Trapnel, by some mysterious agency, always knew about all books before they were published. It was as if the information came to him instinctively. He laughed. The thought of reviewing Salvidge's essays must have made him feel better. One had the impression that he had been locked up with Pamela for weeks, like the Spanish honeymoon couples Borrit used to describe, when we were in the War Office together. To get back to the world of reviewing seemed to offer a magical cure for whatever Trapnel suffered. It really cheered him up.

'Just what I need—have we got anything to drink, darling?'

'A bottle of Algerian's open. Some dregs left, I think.'

'I don't want anything at the moment, thanks very much.'

Trapnel lay back on the divan.

'To begin with, that bloody parody of mine.'

'I mistook it at first for the real thing.'

That amused Trapnel. Pamela continued to stand by without comment or change of expression.

'I'm glad you did that. What's happened about it? Any reactions?'

'None I've heard about. There was some trepidation at the *Fission* office that trouble might arise from the obvious quarter. Books is away with flu.'

'What a bloody fool he is. I wrote the thing quite a long time ago at his suggestion. He said he'd have to talk to the others about it. I hadn't contemplated present circumstances then.'

'Nor did anyone else.'

'What about Books?'

'The evidence is that he didn't know.'

'Will Widmerpool believe that?'

'What can he do?' asked Pamela. 'He ought to be flattered.'

Even when she made this comment the tone suggested she was no more on Trapnel's side than Widmerpool's. She was assessing the situation objectively.

'That's what Books told Evadne Clapham,' said Trapnel. 'On that occasion I hadn't also run away with her husband. I suppose everything combined means I won't be able to write for *Fission* any longer. That's a blow, because it was one of my main sources of income, and I liked the magazine.'

'JG didn't seem unduly worried. He's got the *Sweetskin* prosecution on hand, and there's some trouble about Odo Stevens's book.'

'I don't want my publishing connexions messed up too. Quiggin & Craggs have their failings, but they aren't doing too badly with *Bin Ends*. I'm not under contract for the next novel. I'm getting near the end now. I don't want to have to hawk it round.'

At one moment Trapnel would give the impression that he was under contract with Quiggin & Craggs, and wanted to get rid of them; at the next, that he was not under contract, and wanted to stay. That was like him. He pointed to a respectably thick pile of foolscap covered with cuneiform handwriting. Although able to type, to use a typewriter was against Trapnel's principles. The books had to be written by his own hand. This talk about the novel seemed to displease Pamela. She began to frown.

'How's my husband?' she asked.

'I've not seen him lately—not since the night you left.'

'You saw him then?'

'I'd been dining with another MP. We came back to the Victoria Street flat to discuss some things.'

'Which MP?'

'Roddy Cutts—my brother-in-law.'

'That tall sandy-haired Tory?'

'Yes.'

'Were you there when Short delivered the message?'

'Yes.'

'How was it taken?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well or badly?'

'There was no scene.'

A slight flush had come over her face when she asked these questions. There could be no doubt she derived some sort of sensual satisfaction from dwelling on what had happened. Trapnel, acute enough to recognize, and resent, this process of exciting herself by such means, looked uneasy. The manner in which she managed to maintain a wholly unchanged demeanour in these very changed surroundings was notable; yet after all why should she become different just because she had decided to spend a season with Trapnel? With him, with Odo Stevens, with Allied officers, for that matter with Widmerpool, she remained the same, as individuals mostly do within a more intimate orbit; at home; with a lover; under unaccustomed stress. To suppose otherwise is naive. At the same time, some require action, others are paralysed by action. That dissimilarity recognized, people stay themselves. Pamela did not give an inch. She was not rattled. She did the rattling.

The same could not be said of Widmerpool. He was obstinate, not easily deflected from his purpose, but circumstances might rattle him badly. He was not, like Pamela, consistent in never adapting his behaviour to others. Her constant search for new lovers made the world see her as existing solely in the field of sex, but the Furies that had driven her into the arms of Widmerpool by their torments—no doubt his too—at the same time invested her with the magnetic power that mesmerized Trapnel, operated in a manner to transcend love or sex, as both are commonly regarded. Did she and Widmerpool in some manner supplement each other, she supplying a condition he lacked—one that Burton would have called Melancholy? Now she showed her powers at work.

'I'm not satisfied with X's book.'

That was the first aesthetic judgment I had ever heard her make. When she had earlier changed the subject from Trapnel's writing, I thought she found, as some women do, concentration on a husband's or lover's work in some manner vexing. That she should return to his writing of her own volition was unexpected. It looked as if this were another manner of keeping Trapnel on his toes, because he reacted strongly to the comment.

'I'm going to alter the bits you don't like. You know, Nick, Pam's got a marvellous instinct for a sequence that has gone a shade wrong technically. I can't put it all right in five minutes, darling. These things take time and hard work. It'll all be done in due course, when I've thrown off this bloody thing that's playing such hell with work.'

'This is *Profiles in String*?'

'I can't get the *feel* of the end chapters. Most of the bad criticism you read is lack of understanding of what it feels like to get the wheels working internally when you're writing a novel. Not one reviewer in a thousand grasps that.'

Pamela showed no interest in subtleties of literary feeling.

'I'd rather you burnt it than published it as it stands. In fact you're not going to.'

Trapnel sighed. It was unlike him to accept criticism so humbly. On the face of it, there seemed no more reason to suppose Pamela knew how a novel should be written—

from Trapnel's point of view—than did the reviewers. In general, if he allowed himself to seek another opinion about how to deal with some matter in what he was writing—a short story, for example— he was accustomed to argue hard all the way in favour of whatever treatment he himself had in mind. Pamela showed contempt for the abject manner in which her objections had been received. Once more she switched the subject to her own situation.

'What are people saying about us?'

'No one knows quite what has happened.'

'How do you mean?'

She pouted. At that moment the bell rang. Trapnel groaned.

'God, it's the man trying to collect the money for the newspapers. He's come back.'

Pamela made a face.

'Take no notice. He'll go away after a while.'

'He'll see the light. It was daytime when he came before, and he thought we weren't in.'

Pamela turned to me.

'You answer the door. Tell him we're away—that we've lent you the flat.'

I showed unwillingness to undertake this commission. Trapnel was apologetic.

'We're being dunned. It always happens if you allow people to know your address. It's like hotels insisting on cleaning the room out from time to time. There's always some inconvenience, wherever you live. I couldn't help giving the address this time, otherwise we wouldn't have had any papers delivered.'

'Perhaps it's for the other people in the house.'

'They've gone away—decamped, I think. Do deal with it.'

'But what can I say to the man, if he is the newspaper man?'

'Tell him—'

The bell rang again. Pamela showed signs of getting cross.

'Look, X can't get up in his present state. Do go. If you had ten bob—twelve at the most—that would keep him quiet.'

There seemed no way of avoiding the assignment. I took ten shillings from my notecase, in so far as possible to cut short discussion, and went into the hall. To see the way, it was necessary to leave the flat door ajar. Even so, the place was inconveniently dark, and the front door required a certain amount of negotiating to open. It gave at last. The figure waiting on the the doorstep was not the newspaper-man, but Widmerpool. He did not seem in the least surprised that I should be the person to admit him.

'I expect you're here on business about the magazine, Nicholas?'

'Delivering a book to be reviewed, as a matter of fact.'

'I'm rather glad to find you on the premises. Don't go away from a mistaken sense of delicacy. Matters of a rather personal nature are likely to be discussed. I am quite glad to have a witness, especially one conversant with the circumstances, connected, I mean, by ties of business, albeit literary business. Where is Trapnel? This way, I take it?'

The light shining through the sitting-room door showed Widmerpool where to go. He took off his hat, crossed the boards of the hall, and over the threshold of the flat. It had at least been unnecessary to announce him. In fact he announced himself.

'Good evening. I have come to talk about some things.'

Pamela, hands stuck in the pockets of her trousers, was still standing, with her peculiar stillness of poise, in front of the gas fire. If Widmerpool had shown lack of surprise at my opening the door to him, he had at least expressed what seemed to him an adequate explanation as to why I should be with Trapnel. I arranged reviewing at *Fission*; Trapnel reviewed books. That was sufficient reason for my presence. The fact that Trapnel had run away with Widmerpool's wife had nothing to do with the business relationship between Trapnel and myself. To disregard it was almost something to approve. That view was no doubt more especially acceptable in the light of propaganda put about by Widmerpool himself.

Pamela, on the other hand, except insomuch as having left her husband, he might, in one sense, be expected to come and look for her, in another, could scarcely have been prepared for his arrival. So far from showing any wonder, she made no sign whatever of being even aware that an additional person had entered the room. She did not permit herself so much as a glance in Widmerpool's direction. Her expression, one of slight, though not severe displeasure, did not alter in the smallest degree. She seemed to be concentrating on a tear in the wallpaper opposite that ran in a great jagged parabola through a pattern of red parrots and blue storks, freak birds of the same size.

Widmerpool did not speak immediately after his first announcement. He went rather red. He put his hat on top of Trapnel's manuscript, where it lay on the table. Trapnel himself was now sitting bolt upright on the divan. This must, in a way, have been the moment he had been awaiting all his life: a truly dramatic occasion. That he was determined to rise to it was shown at once by the tone of his voice when he spoke.

'Would you oblige me by removing your hat from off my book?'

Widmerpool, whatever else he had taken in his stride, was astonished by this request. No doubt it presupposed an altogether unforeseen, alien area of sensibility. Picking up the hat again, he replaced it on one of the suitcases.

Trapnel maintained a tone of dramatically cold politeness. His voice trembled a little when he spoke again.

'I'm sorry. I must have sounded rude. I did not mean to be that. I have a special thing about my manuscripts—that is, I hate them being treated like any old pile of waste paper. Please take your coat off and sit down.'

'Thank you, I prefer to stand. I shall not be staying long, so that it is not worth my taking off my coat.'

Widmerpool gazed round the room. It was clearly worse, far worse, than he had ever dreamed; if he had thought at all about what he was likely to run to earth. His face showed that, considered in the light of housing insufficiencies inspected in his own constituency, the flat was horrific. Trapnel, possibly remembering the talk they had exchanged on such deplorable conditions, noticed this survey. He almost grinned. Then his manner changed.

'How did you find the house?'

This time Trapnel spoke with the hollow faraway voice of a horror film. He was determined to remain master of the situation. Widmerpool was quite equal to the manoeuvring.

'I came by taxi.'

'I mean how did you discover where I was living?'

'There are such aids as private detectives.'

Widmerpool said that with disdain. Trapnel laughed. The laughter too was of the kind associated with a horror film.

'I always wanted to meet someone who employed a private detective.'

Widmerpool did not answer at once. He appeared to be jockeying for position, taking up action stations before the contest really broke into flame. He cleared his throat.

'I have come here to clarify the situation. By arrival in person, some people might judge that I have put myself in a false position. Such is not my own opinion. A person of your kind, Trapnel, has neither the opportunity to observe, nor capacity to understand, the demands laid on a man who takes up the burden of public life. It is therefore necessary that certain facts should be plainly stated. The best person to state them is myself.'

Trapnel listened to this with the air of an accomplished actor. His 'hollow' laughter was now followed by a 'grim' smile. It was still a performance. Widmerpool had not got him, so to speak, out in the open yet.

'First,' said Widmerpool, 'you borrow money from me.'

Trapnel's defiance had not been geared to that particular form of attack at that moment. He dropped his acting and looked very angry, quite unsimulated rage.

'Then you lampoon me in a magazine of which I am one of the chief supporters.'

Trapnel began to smile again at that. If the first accusation put him in a weak position, the second to some extent restored equilibrium.

'Finally, my wife comes to live with you.'

Widmerpool paused. He too was being melodramatic now. Trapnel had ceased to smile. He was very white. He had lost command of his rôle as actor. Pamela watched them, still showing no change of expression. Widmerpool must have been to some extent aware that by making Trapnel angry, dislodging him from playing a part, he was moving towards ascendancy.

'You can keep my pound. Do not bother, when you are next paid for some paltry piece of journalism, to make another attempt to return it—which was, so I understand, your subterfuge for insinuating yourself into my house. The pound does not matter. Forget about it. I make you a present of it.'

Trapnel did not speak.

'Secondly, I want to express quite clearly my own indifference to your efforts to ridicule my economic theories.

Some people might have thought that an act of ungratefulness on your part. Your own ignorance of the elementary principles of economics makes it not even that. Your so-called parody is a failure. Not funny. Several people have told me so. And at the same time I recognize it as a deliberate insult. That is a matter between the board and Bagshaw—'

Trapnel burst out.

'You're trying to get Books sacked—'

'Don't interrupt me,' said Widmerpool. 'Bagshaw has a contract.'

He made a half turn about in order, more unmistakably, to include Pamela in whatever he was now about to announce. She went so far as to raise her eyebrows slightly. Widmerpool still primarily addressed himself to Trapnel.

'You may fear that I am going to institute divorce proceedings. Such is not my intention. Pamela will return in her own good time. I think we understand each other.'

Widmerpool paused.

'That is what I came to tell you,' he said. 'That—and to express my contempt for the way you live and the way you have behaved.'

Trapnel threw back the army blankets. He rose quite slowly from the divan. His body, seen through the spotted pyjamas, was desperately thin. He retied their cord; then, in his bare feet, walked very deliberately to where the huge wardrobe stood in the corner of the room. Against it was propped the death's-head sword-stick. Trapnel picked up the stick, and pressed the spring at the back of the skull. The blade was released. He threw the sheath on top of *Oblomov*, *The Thin Man*, *Adolphe*, and the several other books lying on the bedclothes.

'Get out.'

Trapnel did not actually threaten Widmerpool with the sword. He held the point to the ground, as if about to raise the weapon in formal salute before joining combat in a duel. It was hard to estimate where exactly his actions hovered between play-acting and loss of control. Widmerpool stood firm.

'No dramatics, please.'

This calmness was to his credit. He knew little of Trapnel, but what he knew certainly gave no guarantee that a man of Trapnel's sort would not be capable of eccentric violence. If it came to that, I felt no absolute assurance on that matter myself. Whatever his merits as a writer, Trapnel could not be regarded as a well-balanced personality. Anything might be looked for from him. Besides, there were his 'pills'. One had the impression that, as such stimulants go, they were fairly mild. At the same time, he could easily have moved on to stronger stuff. Pamela might have encouraged that course; living with her almost necessitated it. Even the pills in their accustomed form might be sufficient to induce indiscreet conduct, especially when the question posed was evicting from a lover's flat the husband of his mistress.

'Are you going?'

'I have no wish to stay.'

Widmerpool picked up his hat from the suitcase. He brushed the felt with his elbow. Then he turned once more towards Pamela.

'I shall be abroad for some weeks in Eastern Europe. As a Member of Parliament I have been invited to enjoy the hospitality of one of the new Governments.'

'I said get out.'

Trapnel raised the sword slightly. Widmerpool took no notice. He continued raspingly to brush the surface of the hat. This time he addressed himself to me.

'The visit should make an interesting *Fission* article. Some apologists for the Liberal and Peasant leaders have suggested that concessions to the Soviet point of view have been too all-embracing. What I always tell people, who are not themselves in the know, is that our own brand of social-democracy, for better or worse, is not always exportable.'

He reorientated himself towards Pamela.

'When I return I shall not be surprised to find that you have reconsidered matters.'

She looked straight at him. Otherwise she gave no sign that she had heard what he said. Widmerpool went very red again. He passed through the door into the hall. The front door slammed, but did not shut. Trapnel in his bare feet ran out of the flat. He could be heard to pull the front door violently open again. From the steps he shouted into the night.

'Coprolite! Faecal débris! Fossil of dung!'

A minute later he returned to the sitting-room. He took the sheath-half of the swordstick from the bed, replaced the blade and returned it to the corner by the wardrobe. Then he climbed under the blankets again, and lay back. He looked quite exhausted. Pamela, on the other hand, now showed signs of life. A faint colour had come into her face, a look of excitement I had never before seen there. She smiled. Something unexpected was afoot. She came across the room, and sat down on the bed. Trapnel took one of her hands. He did not speak. Comment came from Pamela this time.

'I'm glad you were here, Nicholas. I'm glad it all happened in front of someone. I wish there had been a lot more people. Hundreds more. Now you know what my life was like.'

Trapnel patted her hand. He was much shaken. Not well in any case, he was likely to be dissatisfied with the scene that had taken place. He could scarcely be said to have dominated it in the manner of one of his own screen heroes, even if it were better not to have run Widmerpool through, or whatever was in his mind.

'I do apologize for getting you mixed up with all this, Nick. It wasn't my fault. How the hell could I guess he was going to turn up here? I thought there wasn't a living soul knew the address, except one or two shops round here. Private detectives? It makes you think.'

The idea of private detectives obviously fascinated Trapnel's *roman policier* leanings, which were highly developed. He was also worried.

'Will you be awfully good, and keep quiet about all this, Nick? Don't say a word, for obvious reasons.'

Pamela shook back her hair.

'Thank you so much for coming, and for bringing the book. I expect we shall see you again here, as we aren't going out much, as long as X isn't well. I'll ring you up, and you can bring another book some time.'

She spoke formally, like a hostess saying goodbye to a visitor she barely knows, who has paid a social call, and now explains that he must leave. A complete change had come over her after the impassivity she had shown until now. Before I could reply, she spoke again, this time abandoning formality.

'Bugger off—I want to be alone with X.'

5

I LEFT LONDON ONE SATURDAY afternoon in the autumn to make some arrangement about a son going to school. Owing to the anomalies of the timetable, the train arrived an hour or so early for the appointment. There was an interval to kill. After a hot summer the weather still remained warm, but, not uncommon in that watery region, drizzle descended steadily, while a feeble sun shone through clouds that hung low over stretches of claret-coloured brick. It was too wet to wander about in the open. For a time I kicked my heels under a colonnade. A bomb had fallen close by. One corner was still enclosed by scaffolding and a tarpaulin. Above the arch, the long upper storey with its row of oblong corniced windows had escaped damage. The period of the architecture—half a century later, but it took little nowadays to recall him—brought Burton to mind; Burton, by implication the art of writing in general. On this subject he knew what he was talking about:

''Tis not my study or intent to compose neatly . . . but to express myself readily & plainly as it happens. So that as a River runs sometimes precipitate and swift, then dull and slow; now direct, then winding; now deep, then shallow, now muddy, then clear; now broad, then narrow; doth my style flow; now serious, then light; now comical, then satirical; now more elaborate, then remiss, as the present subject required, or as at the time I was affected.'

Even for those with a prejudice in favour of symmetry, worse rules might be laid down. The antithesis between satire and comedy was especially worth emphasis; also to write as the subject required, or the author thought fit at the moment. One often, when writing, felt a desire to be 'remiss'. It was good to have that recommended. An important aspect of writing unmentioned by Burton was 'priority'; what to tell first. That always seemed one of the basic problems. Trapnel used to talk about its complexities. For example, even to arrange in the mind, much less on paper, the events leading up to the demise of *Fission* after a two-year run, the swallowing up (by the larger publishing house of which Clapham was chairman) of the firm of Quiggin & Craggs, demanded an effective grasp of narrative 'priorities'.

Looking out between the pillars at the raindrops glinting on the cobbles of a broad open space, turning the whole thing over in the mind, much seemed to me inevitable, as always contemplating the past. At the same time, although many things had gone wrong, several difficulties had been successfully surmounted. For instance, the prosecution of *Sweetskin* had been parried; the verdict, 'Not Guilty'. Nevertheless, the case had cost money, caused a lot of worry to the directors. Alaric Kydd himself had been so certain that he would be sent to prison for uttering an obscene work that he let his flat on rather good terms for eighteen months; later finding difficulty in obtaining satisfactory alternative accommodation. He was also wounded by the tone of voice—certainly a very silly one—in which prosecuting counsel read aloud in court certain passages from his novel.

More damaging to the firm in a way, though morally rather than financially, was the *Sad Majors* affair. Bagshaw leaked an account of that. He had come back to the office in a restless, resentful mood after his bout of flu, according to Ada, spending the first forty-eight hours of convalescence drinking, then retiring to bed again for a further day before settling down. Whether or not he had deliberately kept the Trapnel parody 'on the spike' for use at the most appropriate occasion was never cleared up. Most probably, as in previous episodes of Bagshaw's history, an infallible instinct for causing trouble had brought guidance without need of exact knowledge. Widmerpool appeared to have made no complaint to the board. He remained out of touch with Quiggin & Craggs long after the Court Circular announced his return from the People's Republic, where he had been paying his visit. No doubt he was busy with parliamentary affairs. There was in any case not much he could do. If *Fission* had not ceased publication, Bagshaw's contract would in any case have run out. He had dropped hints that he himself wanted to move. No one was going to stand in his way. The fact was that Bagshaw was by now attracted by the promise of helping to open up the still mainly unexplored eldorado of television.

Bagshaw took pleasure in elaborating the Odo Stevens story. He did not like Stevens as a man, but admired him as an adventurer. They used to meet when Stevens from time to time looked into the *Fission* office to see if there were a book to review. Stevens had developed an additional contact with the magazine on account of his association with Rosie Manasch. Never backward at publicizing his successes, he did not at present convey more than that he had an ally in that quarter. If Rosie had decided she needed relaxation with a man considerably younger than herself, she was agreed to have had a distressing time in many ways, and Stevens, whatever his failings, had the advantage of being a figure not to be taken too seriously. Both parties were judged well able to look after themselves. That was how it seemed at the time. However, even at an early stage the relationship was sufficiently strong to play a part in the

Quiggin & Craggs upheaval. This came about when the *Sad Majors* controversy, simmering for some little while, took aggressive shape. Bagshaw, always interested in a row of this sort, was ravished by a move now made.

'You can't help admiring the way Gypsy does things. Good old hard-core stuff. You know the trouble about the Stevens book—thought to bring discredit on the Party. Gypsy's performed one of those feats that most people don't think of on account of their ruthless simplicity. She has quite simply liquidated the manuscript. Both copies.'

'Aren't there more than two copies?'

'Apparently not.'

'How did she get hold of them?'

'After much argument, the original MS had been sent to the printer to be cast off. It was to be allowed to go ahead anyway as far as proof. Then Howard said he'd like to re-read the book in peaceful surroundings, so he borrowed the carbon, and took it home with him. A day or two later, Gypsy, that's her story, thought it was another manuscript Howard had asked her to post to Len Pugsley—who sometimes does reading for the firm, he poked Gypsy briefly—and Len says the parcel never arrived. He was moving house at the time. Stevens's carbon seems to have gone astray between the Oval and Chalk Farm. Meanwhile, the printers got a telephone message, the origins of which no one can trace, to send back the MS they were to cast off. There was some question about it to be settled editorially. Now that copy can't be found either.'

'Stevens will have to write it again?'

'That's where the neatness of the sabotage comes in. Rewriting will take a longish time. By the time it's finished the poor impression Stevens gives of the Comrades and their behaviour will, with any luck, be out of date—anyway in the eyes of the reading public. At worst, all ancient history.'

'How's Stevens taking the loss?'

'He's pretty cross. Can you blame him? The more interesting point is that Rosie Manasch is very cross too. In fact she's withdrawn her support from the mag in consequence of her crossness with Quiggin & Craggs as a firm. That's awkward, because—though personally I think a lot of unnecessary fuss was made about the Trapnel parody—the rest of the board don't feel it a good moment to stir up Widmerpool.'

'Is Stevens getting compensation?'

'You haven't studied the writing paper. The greatest care is taken of manuscripts, but no responsibility. However, they've allowed the contract to be cancelled.'

'That was handsome.'

Compared with the Stevens row, the disappointment caused by Sillery's Diary, after all the haggling about terms, and high advance, was a minor blow, though again there were repercussions. The extracts were called *Garnered at Sunset: Leaves from an Edwardian Journal*.

'A masterpiece of dullness,' said Bagshaw. 'JG read it. Howard read it. For once they were in complete agreement. The only thing to do will be to publish, and hope for the best. I'm surprised at Ada. She's strung them along over Sillery.'

Ada's policy in the matter, as not seldom, was enigmatic, probably dictated by a mixture of antagonistic considerations. The Diary, seen as one of the paths to a career, had not been truly subjected to her usually sharp judgment. Its lack of interest had been obscured by inner workings of the curious kind of flirtation she and Sillery had shared. Those elements might be put forward as excuse for the recommendation. It was also possible, knowing Sillery as she did, that Ada had genuinely found *Garnered at Sunset* absorbing. Publishers' readers, as Quiggin remarked, are no less subjective than other animals. It might be thought that this critical lapse on Ada's part would have prejudiced her position in the firm. On the contrary, nothing more retributive was visited on her than that Quiggin proposed marriage.

Bagshaw suggested that an emotional scene contingent on some sort of reprimand on the subject of the Sillery Journal, had brought things to a head, but there can be no doubt an offer of marriage was already at the back of Quiggin's mind. The fact that the firm was moving towards a close had nothing to do with it. He was accepted. As a married man, the place he had found on the board of Clapham's firm would be advantageous; on the whole a step forward in a publishing career. The two of them were quietly married one August afternoon before the Registrar; Mark Members and L. O. Salvidge, witnesses. Craggs and Gypsy were not asked. Craggs had announced he was going into semi-retirement when the firm closed down, but it seemed likely that he would continue his activities, at least in an inconspicuous manner, with many little interests of a political sort that had always engrossed him. All these things played a part, others too, in the winding up of Quiggin & Craggs, representative of common enough impediments to running a publishing house; exceptional, in as much as they were exceptional, only on account of the individuals concerned. The climax, in an odd way, seemed to be the night spent with Trapnel and Bagshaw. That had been rather different. By then, in any case, both magazine and publishing business had received the death sentence. All the same that night—the symbolic awfulness of its events—was something to put a seal on the whole affair. It confirmed several other things too.

Matters had begun with a telephone call from Bagshaw at about half-past nine one evening four or five weeks before. From the opening sentences it was clear he was drunk, less clear what he wanted. At first the object seemed no more than a chat about the sadness of life, perhaps a long one, but entailing merely a sympathetic hearing. That was too good to be true. It soon grew plain some request was going to be made. Even then, what the demand would be became only gradually apparent.

'As the mag's closing down, I thought a small celebration would be justified.'

'So you said, Books. You've said that twice.'

'Sorry, sorry. The fact is everything always comes at once. Look, Nicholas, I want your help. I'd already decided on this small celebration, when Trappy got in touch with me at the office. He rang up himself, which, as you know, he doesn't often do. He's in a lot of trouble. This girl, I mean.'

'Pamela Widmerpool?'

It was as well to make sure.

'That's the one.'

The fact that Pamela might be Widmerpool's wife had made, from his tone of voice, little or no serious impact on Bagshaw. He clearly thought of her as one, among many, of Trapnel's girls . . . Tessa . . . Pat . . . Sally . . . Pauline . . . any of the Trapnel girls Bagshaw himself had known in the course of their acquaintance.

'What's happened?'

'They've had some row about his novel—you know the one—what—can't quite—'

He made a tremendous effort, but I had to intervene.

'*Profiles in String*?'

'That's the book. He's tremendously pleased with it, but can't decide about an ending. He wants one, she wants another.'

'Trapnel's writing the bloody book, isn't he?'

Bagshaw feigned shock at this disregard for authority conferred by a love attachment.

'Trappy was upset. They had a row. Now he doesn't want to go back and find she's left. She may have done. He wants someone to go back with him. Soften the blow. I said I'd do that.'

'Look, Books, why are you telling me all this?'

'I was quite willing to do that. See him home, I mean. Trappy and I went to the pub to talk things over. You know how it is. I'm not quite sure I can get him back unaided.'

'Do you mean he's passed out?'

Bagshaw was insulted at the suggestion that such a fate might have overtaken any friend of his.

'Not in the least. It's just he's in a bit of a state. Sort of nervous condition. That's what I'm coming to. It's really an awful lot to ask. Would it be too great an infliction for you to come along and lend a hand?'

'Is it those pills?'

'Might be.'

'Where are you?'

'Not far from Trappy's flat. Once we've got him under way there'll be nothing to it.'

Bagshaw named a pub I had never heard of, but, from the description of its locality, evidently not far from Trapnel's base, assuming that unchanged from the night I had visited him. Since that night I had heard nothing of him or Pamela. She had not rung up to ask for further books to review. The L. O. Salvidge notice had never been sent in. Salvidge was aggrieved. Trapnel ceased altogether to be a contributor to *Fission* in its latter days.

'Can he walk?'

'Of course he can walk—at least I think so. It's not walking I'm worried about, just I don't know how he'll behave when he gets into the open. After all, which of us does? You'd be a great support, Nicholas, if you could manage to come along. You always get on all right with Trappy, which is more than some do. I'm full of apologies for asking this.'

Although in most respects quite different, the situation seemed to present certain points in common with conducting Bithel, collapsed on the pavement, back to G Mess; restoring Stringham to his flat after the Old Boy dinner. In some sense history was repeating itself, though incapacity to walk seemed not Trapnel's disability.

'All right, I'll be along as soon as I can.'

Isobel was unimpressed by this call for help. There was much to be said for her view of it. Now that Bagshaw was off the line, compliance took the shape of moral weakness, rather than altruism or benevolence.

'Looking after Trapnel's becoming monotonous. Is Mrs Widmerpool still his true-love?'

'She's what the trouble's about.'

The pub turned out to be another of Bagshaw's obscure, characterless drinking places, this time off the Edgware Road. It was fairly empty. Bagshaw and Trapnel were at a table in the corner, both perfectly well behaved. Closer investigation showed Bagshaw as drunk in his own very personal manner, that is to say he would become no drunker however much consumed. There was never any question of going under completely, or being unable to find his way home. Trapnel, on the other hand, did not at first show any sign of being drunk at all. He had abandoned his dark lenses. Possibly he only wore them in hard winters. He was sitting, quietly smiling to himself, hunched over the death's-head stick.

'Hullo, Nick. I've just been talking to Books about a critical work I'm planning. It's to be called *The Heresy of Naturalism*. People can't get it right about Naturalism. They think if a writer like me writes the sort of books I do, it's because that's easier, or necessary nowadays. You just look round at what's happening and shove it all down. They can't understand that's not in the least the case. It's just as selective, just as artificial, as if the characters were kings and queens speaking in blank verse.'

'Some of them are queens,' said Bagshaw.

'Do listen, Books. You'll profit by it. What I'm getting at is that if you took a tape-recording of two people having a grind it might truly be called Naturalism, it might be funny, it might be sexually exciting, it might even be beautiful, it wouldn't be art. It would just be two people having a grind.'

'But, look here, Trappy—'

'All right, they don't have to be revelling in bed. Suppose you took a tape-recording of the most passionate, most moving love scene, a couple who'd—oh, God, I don't know—something very moving about their love and its circumstances. The incident, their words, the whole thing, it gets accidentally taped. Unknown to them the machine's been left on by mistake. Anything you like. Some wonderful *objet trouvé* of that sort. Do you suppose it would come out as it should? Of course it wouldn't. There are certain forms of human behaviour no actor can really play, no matter how good he is. It's the same in life. Human beings aren't subtle enough to play their part. That's where art comes in.'

'All I said was that Tolstoy—'

'Do keep quiet, Books. You've missed the point. What I mean is that if, as a novelist, you put over something that hasn't been put over before, you've done the trick. A novelist's like a fortune-teller, who can impart certain information, but not necessarily what the reader wants to hear. It may be disagreeable or extraneous. The novelist just has to dispense it. He can't choose.'

'All I said was, Trappy, that personally I preferred Realism—Naturalism, if you wish—just as I've a taste for political content. That's how Tolstoy came in. It's like life.'

'But Naturalism's only "like" life, if the novelist himself is any good. If he isn't any good, it doesn't matter whether he writes naturalistically or any other way. What could be less "like" life than most of the naturalistic novels that appear? If he's any good, it doesn't matter if his characters talk like Disraeli's, or incidents occur like Vautrin, smoking a cigar and dressed up as a Spanish abbé, persuades Lucien de Rubempré not to drown himself. Is *Oliver Twist* a failure as a novel because Oliver, a workhouse boy, always speaks with exquisite refinement? As for politics, who cares which way Trimalchio voted, or that he was a bit temperamental towards his slaves?'

'Trappy—no, wait, let me speak—all this started by my saying that, just as masochism's only sadism towards yourself, revolutions only reconcentrate the centre of gravity of authority, and, if you wish, of oppression. The people who feel they suffer from authority and oppression want to be authoritative and oppressive. I was just illustrating that by something or other I thought came in Tolstoy.'

'But, Books, you said Tolstoy wrote "like" life, because he was naturalistic. I contend that his characters aren't any more "like"—in fact aren't as "like"—as, say, Dostoevsky's at their craziest. Of course Tolstoy's inordinately brilliant. In spite of all the sentimentality and moralizing, he's never boring—at least never in one sense. The material's inconceivably well arranged as a rule, the dialogue's never less than convincing. The fact remains, *Anna Karenin*'s a glorified magazine story, a magazine story of the highest genius, but still a magazine story in that it tells the reader what he wants to hear, never what he doesn't want to hear.'

'Trappy, I won't have you say that sort of thing about Tolstoy, though of course Dostoevsky's more explicit when it comes to exhibiting the Marxist contention that any action's justified—'

'Do stop about Marxism, Books. Marxism has nothing to do with what I'm talking about. I'm talking about Naturalism. I'm in favour of Naturalism. I write that way myself. All I want to make clear is that it's just a way of writing a novel like any other, just as contrived, just as selective. Do you call Hemingway's impotent good guy naturalistic? Think what Dostoevsky would have made of him. After all, Dostoevsky did deal with an impotent good guy in love with a bitch, when he wrote *The Idiot*.'

Bagshaw was silenced for the moment. Trapnel was undoubtedly in an exceptionally excited state, unable to stop pouring out his views. He took a gulp of beer. The pause made comment possible.

'We don't know for certain that Myshkin was impotent.'

'Myshkin was as near impotent as doesn't matter, Nick. In any case Hemingway would never allow a hero of his to be made a fool of. To that extent he's not naturalistic. Most forms of naturalistic happening are expressed in grotesque irrational trivialities, not tight-lipped heroisms. Hemingway's is only one special form of Naturalism. The same goes for Scott Fitzgerald's romantic-hearted gangster. Henry James would have done an equally good job on him in non-naturalistic terms. Most of the gangsters of the classic vintage were queer anyway. James might have delicately conveyed that as an additional complication to Gatsby's love.'

Before literary values could be finally hammered out in a manner satisfactory to all parties, the pub closed. We moved from the table, Trapnel still talking. In the street his incoherent, distracted state of mind was much more apparent. He was certainly in a bad way. All the talk about writing, its flow not greatly different from the termination of any evening in his company, was just a question of putting off the evil hour of having to face his own personal problems. No doubt he had gone into these to some extent with Bagshaw earlier. They had then started up the politico-literary imbroglio in progress when I arrived at the pub. Now, even if nothing were said about Pamela, the problem of getting him home was posed. He was, as Bagshaw so positively believed, perfectly able to walk. There was no difficulty about that. His manner was the disturbing element. An air of dreadful nervousness had descended on him. Now that he had ceased to argue about writing, he seemed to have lost all powers of decision in other matters. He stood there shaking, as if he were afraid. This could have been the consequence of lack of proper food, drinking, pills, or the mere fact of being emotionally upset. Burton had noticed such a condition. 'Cousin-german to sorrow is fear, or rather sister, *fidus Achates*, and continual companion.' That was just how Trapnel looked, a man weighed down by sorrow and fear. Suddenly he reeled. Bagshaw stepped towards him.

'Hold up, Trappy. You're tight.'

That was a fatal remark. Not only did open expression of that opinion make Trapnel very indignant, it also had the effect of physically increasing, anyway for the moment, the lack of control that was overcoming him. Trapnel always hated any suggestion that limits existed to his own powers of alcoholic assimilation. Bagshaw must already have known that. The fact that his comment was true made it no more excusable, except for being equally applicable to Bagshaw himself.

'Tight? I'm always being asked by people how it is I'm never drunk, however much I put back. They can't make it out. I can finish a bottle of brandy at a sitting, get up sober as when I started. Drink just doesn't have any effect on me. You don't suppose the few halves of bitter we've had tonight made me drunk, Books, do you? It's you who are a little tipsy, my boy. You've rather a weak head.'

He waved his stick. If the contrast had to be made, this described their capacities in reverse. Bagshaw took it well, having made the initial error by his comment.

'Drunk or sober, we can none of us stand here all night. Shall we head for your place, Trappy?'

This suggestion had a steadying, immediately subduing effect on Trapnel. He seemed to remember suddenly all he had been trying to forget. The outward appearance of drunkenness left him at once. He might have swallowed an instant sedative. The state of utter dejection returned. He spoke to Bagshaw quietly, almost humbly.

'Does Nicholas know what's happened?'

'Roughly.'

'I'd like to be a bit clearer about what's up.'

'There's been some trouble with Pam. It was all over my new book. We never seem to agree about writing, especially my writing. It's almost as if she hates it, doesn't want me to do it, and yet she thinks about my work all the time, knows just where the weak places are. We have a lot of rows about it. We had one this morning. I left the house in a rage. I told her she was mad on Naturalism. That's why the subject was on my mind. Books and I began talking about it. I'm for it too. I told her I was. I've told everyone, and written it. What I can't stand is people giving it their own exclusive meaning. That's what Pam does. She just uses it to pick on the way I write. She brings up all my own arguments against me. Then when I half agree, she takes an absolutely opposite line. It's like Pavlov's dogs. I think sometimes I'll go up the wall.'

'Why discuss your work with her?' said Bagshawe inconsistently. 'Tell her to get on with the washing-up.'

'It's not the first row we've had by a long chalk. Christ, I don't want her to leave me. I know it's pretty awful living the way we do, but I can't face the thought of her leaving. You know I'm not sure there isn't going to be a film in *Profiles in String*. It was the last thing I thought about when I started, but now I believe there might be. It would go over big, if it went over at all.'

At one moment it looked as if Trapnel were going to break down, at the next, that he was about to indulge in one of his fantasies about making money, which overwhelmed him from time to time. These sudden changes of gear were going to require careful handling, if he were to be conveyed back to the flat. It was much more likely that he would want to go to a drinking club of some sort. He usually knew the address of one that would admit him. Bagshaw, grasping the fact that Trapnel needed soothing, now took charge quite effectively. He must have had long experience in persuading fellow-drunks to do what he, rather than they themselves, wanted. He was ruthless about getting his own way when he thought that necessary, showing total disregard for other people's wishes or convenience. That was now all to the good.

'We know what you feel, Trappy. Come on. We'll go back and see how things are. She's probably longing to see you.'

'You don't know her.'

'I admit that, but I've seen her. They're all the same.'

'There's not a drop to drink.'

'Never mind. Nick and I will just see you home.'

'Will you really? I couldn't face it otherwise.'

Trapnel was like a child who suddenly decides to be fretful no longer. Now he was even full of gratitude. We reached Edgware Road with him still in this mood. There was a small stretch of the main highway to negotiate before turning off by the Canal. The evening was warm, stuffy, full of strange smells. For once Trapnel seemed suitably dressed in his tropical suit. We turned down the south side of the Canal, walking on the pavement away from the houses. Railings shut off a grass bank that sloped down to the tow-path. Trapnel had now moved into a pastoral dream.

'I love this waterway. I'd like to have a private barge, and float down it waving to the tarts.'

'Do you get a lot down here?' asked Bagshaw, interested.

'You see the odd one. They live round about, but tend to work other streets. What a mess the place is in.'

Most of London was pretty grubby at this period, the Canal no exception. On the surface of the water concentric circles of oil, undulating in the colours of the spectrum, were illuminated by moonlight. Through these luminous prisms floated anonymous off-scourings of every kind, tin cans, petrol drums, soggy cardboard boxes. Watery litter increased as the bridge was approached. Bagshaw pointed to a peculiarly obnoxious deposit bobbing up and down by the bank.

'Looks as if someone's dumped their unit's paper salvage. I used to have to deal with that at one stage of the war. Obsolete forms waiting to be pulped and made into other forms. An eternal reincarnation. Fitted the scene in India.'

Trapnel stopped, and leant against the railings.

'Let's pause for a moment. Contemplate life. It's a shade untidy here, but romantic too. Do you know what all that mess of paper looks like? A manuscript. Probably someone's first novel. Authors always talk of burning their first novel. I believe this one's drowned his.'

'Or hers.'

'Some beautiful girl who wrote about her seduction, and couldn't get it published.'

'When lovely woman stoops to authorship?'

'I think I'll go and have a look. Might give me some ideas.'

'Trappy, don't be silly.'

Trapnel, laughing rather dementedly, began to climb the railings. Bagshaw attempted to stop this. Before he could be persuaded otherwise, Trapnel had lifted himself up, and was halfway across. The railings presented no very serious obstacle even to a man in a somewhat deranged state, who carried a stick in one hand. He dropped to the other side without difficulty. The bank sloped fairly steeply to the lower level of the tow-path and the water. Trapnel reached the footway. He paused for a moment, looking up and down the length of the Canal. Then he went to the water's edge, and began to poke with the swordstick at the sheets of paper floating about all over the surface.

'Come back, Trappy. You're not the dustman.'

Trapnel took no notice of Bagshaw. He continued to strain forward with the stick, until it looked ominously as if he would fall in. The pieces of paper, scattered broadcast, were all just out of reach.

'We shall have to get over,' said Bagshaw. 'He'll be in at any moment.'

Then Trapnel caught one of the sheets with the end of the stick. He guided it to the bank. For a second it escaped, but was recaptured. He bent down to pick it up, shook off the water and straightened out the page. The soaked paper seemed to fascinate him. He looked at it for a long time. Bagshaw, relieved that the railings would not now have to be climbed, for a minute or two did not intervene. At last he became tired of waiting.

'Is it a work of genius? Do decide one way or the other. We can't bear more delay to know whether it ought to be published or not.'

Trapnel gave a kind of shudder. He swayed. Either drink had once more overcome him with the suddenness with which it had struck outside the pub, or he was acting out a scene of feigned horror at what he read. Whichever it were, he really did look again as if about to, fall into the Canal. Abruptly he stopped playing the part, or recovered his nerve. I suppose these antics, like the literary ramblings in the pub, also designed to delay discovery that Pamela had abandoned him; alternatively, to put off some frightful confrontation with her.

'Do come back, Trappy.'

Then an extraordinary thing happened. Trapnel was still standing by the edge of the water holding the dripping sheet of foolscap. Now he crushed it in his hand, and threw the ball of paper back into the Canal. He lifted the swordstick behind his head, and, putting all his force into the throw, cast it as far as this would carry, high into the air. The stick turned and descended, death's-head first. A mystic arm should certainly have risen from the dark waters of the mere to receive it. That did not happen. Trapnel's Excalibur struck the flood a long way from the bank, disappeared for a moment, surfaced, and began to float downstream.

'Now he really has become unmoored,' said Bagshaw.

Trapnel came slowly up the bank.

'You'll never get your stick back, Trappy. What ever made you do it? We'll hurry on to the bridge right away. It might have got caught up on something. There's not much hope.'

Trapnel climbed back on to the pavement.

'You were quite wrong, Books.'

'What about?'

'It was a work of genius.'

'What was?'

'The manuscript in the water—it was *Profiles in String*.'

I now agreed with Bagshaw in supposing Trapnel to have gone completely off his head. He stood looking at us. His smile was one of the consciously dramatic ones.

'She brought the MS along, and chucked it into the Canal. She knew I should be almost bound to pass this way, and it would be well on the cards I should notice it. We quite often used to stroll down here at night and talk about the muck floating down, french letters and such like. She must have climbed over the railings to get to the water. I'd like to have watched her doing that. I'd thought of a lot of things she might be up to—doctoring my pills, arranging for me to find her being had by the milkman, giving the bailiffs our address. I never thought of this. I never thought she'd destroy my book.'

He stood there, still smiling slightly, almost as if he were embarrassed by what had happened.

'You really mean that's your manuscript over there in the water?'

Trapnel nodded.

'The whole of it?'

'It wasn't quite finished. The end was what we had the row about.'

'You must have a copy?'

"Of course I haven't a copy. Why should I? I told you, it wasn't finished yet.'

Even Bagshaw was appalled. He began to speak, then stopped, something I had never seen happen before. There was certainly nothing to say. Trapnel just stood there.

'Come and look for the stick, Trappy.'

Trapnel was not at all disposed to move. Now the act had taken place, he wanted to reflect on it. Perhaps he feared still worse damage when the flat was reached, though that was hard to conceive.

'In a way I'm not surprised. Even though this particular dish never struck me as likely to appear on the menu, it all fits in with the cuisine. Christ, two years' work, and I'll never feel the same as when I was writing it. She may be correct in what she thinks about it, but I'll never be able to write it again—either her way or my own.'

Bagshaw, in spite of his feelings about the manuscript, could not forget the stick. The girl did not interest him at all.

'You'll never find a swordstick like that again. It was a great mistake to throw it away.'

Trapnel was not listening. He stood there musing. Then all at once he revealed something that had always been a mystery. Being Trapnel, an egotist of the first rank, he supposed this disclosure as of interest only in his own case, but a far wider field of vision was at the same time opened up by what was unveiled. In a sense it was of most interest where Trapnel was concerned, because he seems to have reacted in a somewhat different fashion to the rest of Pamela's lovers, but, applicable to all of them, what was divulged offered clarification of her relations with men. Drink, pills, the strain of living with her, the destruction of *Profiles in String*, combination of all those, brought about a confession hardly conceivable from Trapnel in other circumstances. He now spoke in a low, confidential tone.

'You may have wondered why a girl like that ever came to live with me?'

'Not so much as why she ever married that husband of hers,' said Bagshaw. 'I can understand all the rest.'

'I doubt if you can. Not every man can stand what's entailed.'

'I don't contradict that.'

'You don't know what I mean.'

'What do you mean?'

Trapnel did not answer for a moment. It was as if he were thinking how to phrase whatever he intended to say. Then he spoke with great intensity.

'It's when you have her. She wants it all the time, yet doesn't want it. She goes rigid like a corpse. Every grind's a nightmare. It's all the time, and always the same.'

Trapnel said this with absolute simplicity. Irony, melodrama, narcissism, fantasy, all his accustomed tendency to play a rôle had been this time completely eliminated. The curtain was at least partially drawn aside. A little light had been let in. Stevens had not told all the truth.

'I could take it, because—well, I suppose because I loved her. Why not admit it? I'm not sure I don't still.'

Bagshaw could not stand that. Excessive displays of amative sensibility always disturbed him.

'Even Sacher-Masoch drew the line somewhere, Trappy—true we don't know where. What did her husband think about this, I'd like to know.'

'She told me he only tried a couple of times. Gave it up as a bad job.'

'So that's how things are?'

'For certain reasons it suited him to be married to her.'

'And her to him?'

'She stopped that, if ever true, when she came to live with me.'

Even after what had taken place, Trapnel spoke defensively.

'It gave him a kind of prestige,' he said.

'Not much prestige the way she was carrying on.'

'You don't understand.'

'I don't.'

'It's not what she does, it's what she is.'

'You mean he's positively flattered?'

'That's what she seemed to think. She may be right. That's a form of masochism too. It's not my sort. Not that I can explain my sort, if that's what it is. It doesn't feel unnatural to me. As I said, I love her—at least used to. I don't think I do now. She'll always go on like this. She's a child, who doesn't know any better.'

'Oh, balls,' said Bagshaw. 'I've heard men say that sort of thing about women before. It's rubbish, the scrapings of the barrel. You must rise above that, Trappy. Let's get back to your place anyway.'

I had never seen Bagshaw so agitated. This time Trapnel came quietly. When we reached the bridge, he insisted that he did not want to look for the stick.

'It's a sacrifice. One of those things you dedicate to the Gods. I remember reading about a sacred pool in an Indian temple, where good writing floated on the water, bad writing sank. Perhaps the Canal has the same property, and Pam was right to put my book there.'

Those words meant that he was getting back his normal form. Panache was coming into play. I sympathized with Bagshaw's sentiments as to the deliberate throwing away of a good swordstick, but Trapnel's manner of dealing with the situation had not been without its lofty side. Nothing unexpected was found in the flat. Pamela had packed her clothes, and left with the suitcases. The Modigliani and her own photographs were gone too. No doubt she had strolled down to the Canal, disposed of *Profiles in String*, then returned with a taxi to remove her effects. Trapnel glanced for a second at the spaces left by the pictures.

'She can't have been gone more than a few hours. She must have done it after dark. If only I'd come back earlier in the day she'd still have been here.'

He took off the tropical jacket, slipped it on to a wire coat-hanger pendant from a hook in the door, loosened his tie. After that he stretched. That seemed to give him an idea. He began to look about the room, opening drawers, examining the shelf at the top of the inside of the wardrobe, even searching under the bed. Doubtless he was looking for 'pills' of one sort or another. Pamela might well have taken them away with her. He talked while he hunted round.

'I warned you hospitality would be rather sparse if you came back. Not a drop of Algerian left. I'm sorry for that. It was a great help when you're seeing things through. I'll just have to have a think now as to the best way of tackling life.'

'Will you be all right, Trappy?'

'Absolutely.'

'Nothing we can do?'

'Not a thing—ah, here we are.'

Trapnel had found the box. He swallowed a couple of examples of whatever sustaining globules were kept inside it. Possibly they were no more than sleeping pills. There was now no point in our staying a moment longer.

Both Bagshaw and I tried to say something more of a sympathetic sort. Trapnel shook his head.

'Probably all for the best. Who can tell? Still, losing that manuscript takes some laughing off. I'll have to think a lot about that.'

Bagshaw still hung about.

'Are you absolutely cleaned out, Trappy?'

'Me? Cleaned out? Good heavens, no. Thanks a lot all the same, but a cheque arrived this morning, quite a decent one, from a film paper I'd done a piece for.'

Whether or not that were true, it was a good exit line; Trapnel at his best. Bagshaw and I said goodnight. We passed again along the banks of the Canal, its waters still overspread with the pages of *Profiles in String*. The smell of the flat had again reminded me of Maclintick's.

'Will he really be all right?'

'I don't know about being all right exactly,' said Bagshaw. 'It's hard to be all right when you've not only lost your girl, but she's simultaneously destroyed your life work. I don't know what I'd feel like in the same position. I've sometimes thought of writing another novel—a political one. Somehow there never seems time. I expect Trappy'll pull through. Most of us do.'

'I mean he won't do himself in?'

'Trappy?'

'Yes.'

'God, no. I'd be very surprised.'

'People do.'

'I know they do. There was a chap in Spain when I was there. An anarcho-syndicalist. He'd talk about Proudhon by the hour together. He shot himself in a hotel room. I don't think Trappy will ever take that step. He's too interested in his own myth. Not the type anyway. He'd have done it before now, if he were going to.'

'He says something about suicide in the *Camel*.'

'The *Camel*'s not an exact description of Trappy's own life. He is always complaining people take it as that. You must have heard him. There are incidents, but the novel's not a blow-by-blow account of his early career.'

'I've heard X say that readers can never believe a novelist invents anything. He was at least in Egypt?'

'Do you mean to say he's never told you what he was doing there?'

'I'd always imagined his father was in the Consular, or something of the sort—possibly secret service connexions. X is always very keen on spying, says there's a resemblance between what a spy does and what a novelist does, the point being you don't suddenly steal an indispensable secret that gives complete mastery of the situation, but accumulate a lot of relatively humdrum facts, which when collated provide the picture.'

Bagshaw was not greatly interested in how novelists went to work, but was greatly astonished at this ignorance of Trapnel's life when young.

'A spy? Trapnel *père* wasn't a spy. He was a jockey. Rode for the most part in Egypt. That's why he knew the country. Did rather well in his profession, and saved up a bit. Married a girl from one of those English families who've lived for three or four generations in the Levant.'

'But all this is good stuff. Why doesn't X write about it?'

'He did talk of an article for the mag. Then he thought he'd keep it for a book. Trappy has mixed feelings. Of course he got through whatever money there was, as soon as he laid hands on it. He's not exactly ashamed. Rather proud in a way. All the same, it doesn't quite fit in with his own picture of himself. Hints about the secret service seem more exciting. The other was just ordinary home life, therefore rather dull.'

By this time Bagshaw was all but sober. Our paths lay in different directions. We parted. I made my way home. A great deal seemed to have happened in a comparatively short time. It was still before midnight. A clock struck twelve while I put the key in the door. As if from a neighbouring minaret, a cat muezzin began to call other cats to prayer. The aberrations of love were incalculable. Burton, I remembered, supposed the passion to extend even into the botanic world:

'In vegetal creatures what sovereignty Love hath by many pregnant proofs and familiar example may be proved, especially of palm trees, which are both he and she, and express not a sympathy but a love-passion, as by many observations have been confirmed. *Constantine* gives an instance out of *Florentius* his Georgicks, of a Palm-tree that loved most fervently, and would not be comforted until such time her love applied himself unto her; you might see the two trees bend, and of their own accords stretch out their bows to embrace and kiss each other; they will give manifest signs of mutual love. *Ammianus Marcellinus* reports that they marry one another, and fall in love if they grow in sight; and when the wind brings up the smell to them, they are marvellously affected. *Philostratus* observes as much, and Galen, they will be sick for love, ready to die and pine away . . .'

Now, considering these matters that autumn afternoon under the colonnade, vegetal love seemed scarcely less plausible than the human kind. The damp cobblestones in front gave the illusion of quivering where the sunlight struck their irregular convexities. Rain still fell. The Library presented itself as a preferable refuge from the wet. I was uncertain whether rules permitted casual entry. It was worth trying. At worst, if told to go away, one could remain in the porch until time to move on. It would be no worse than where I was. Abandoning the colonnade, I crossed the road to a grey domed Edwardian building. Beyond its threshold, a parabola of passage-way led into a high circular room, rising to the roof and surrounded by a gallery. The place, often a welcome oasis in the past, seemed smaller than remembered. A few boys were pottering about among the bays of books, with an absent-minded air, or furiously writing at a table, as if life itself depended on getting whatever it was finished in time. A librarian presided at his desk.

Hoping to remain unobserved, I loitered by the door. That was not to be. The librarian looked up and stared. He took off his spectacles, rubbed his eyes, chose another pair from several spectacle-cases in front of him, put them on his nose and stared again. After a moment of this, he beckoned me. Recognizing that I was not to be allowed to kill five or ten minutes in peace, I prepared for expulsion. No doubt there was a regulation against visitors at this hour. The thing to do would be to delay eviction as long as possible, so that a minimum of time had to be spent in the porch. The librarian's beckonings became more urgent. He was a man older than normal for the job, more formally dressed. In fact, this was clearly an assistant master substituting for a regular librarian. Professional librarians were probably unprocurable owing to shortage of labour. I went across the room to see what he wanted. Tactics could be decided by his own comportment. This happy-go-lucky approach was cut short. Sitting at the desk was my former housemaster Le Bas. He spoke crossly.

'Do I know you?'

Boyhood returned in a flash, the instinct to oppose Le Bas —as Bagshaw would say—dialectically. The question was unanswerable. It is reasonable for someone to ask if you know him, because such knowledge is in the hands of the questioned party. How can it be asserted with assurance whether or not the questioner knows one? Powers of telepathy would be required. It could certainly be urged that five years spent under the same roof, so to speak under Le Bas's guidance, gave him a decided opportunity for knowing one; almost an unfair advantage, both in the superficial, also the more searching sense of the phrase. That was the primitive, atavistic reaction. More mature consideration brought to mind Le Bas's notorious forgetfulness even in those days. There was no reason to suppose his memory had improved.

'I was in your house—'

Obviously it would be absurd to call him 'sir', yet that still obtruded as the only suitable form of address. What on earth else could he be called? Just 'Le Bas'? Certainly he belonged to a generation which continued throughout a lifetime to use that excellently masculine invocation of surname, before an irresponsible bandying of first names smothered all subtleties of relationship. In any case, to call Le Bas by a christian name was unthinkable. What would it be, in effect, if so daring an apostrophe were contemplated? The initials had been L. L. Le B.—Lawrence Langton Le Bas, that was it. No one had ever been known to call him Lawrence, still less Langton. Among the other masters, some—his old enemy Cobberton, for example—used once in a way to hail him as 'Le B.' There was, after all, really no necessity to call him anything. Le Bas himself grew impatient at this procrastination.

'What's your name?'

I told him. That made things easier at once. Direct enquiry of that sort on the part of a former preceptor was much to be preferred to Sillery's reckless guessing. Confessed ignorance on the point—as on most points—showed a saner attitude towards life. Le Bas had learnt that, if nothing else. He was probably older than Sillery, a few years the wrong side of eighty. Like Sillery, though in a different manner, he too looked well; leathery, saurian; dry as a bone. Taking off the second pair of spectacles, he again rubbed in the old accustomed fashion the deep, painfully inflamed sockets of the eyes. Then he resumed the earlier pair, or perhaps yet a third reserve.

'What's your generation, Jenkins?'

This was like coming up for sentence at the Last Judgment. I tried to remember, to speak more exactly, tried to decide how best to put the answer clearly to Le Bas.

'Fettiplace-Jones was captain of the house when I arrived . . . my own lot . . . Stringham . . . Templer . . .'

Le Bas glared, as if in frank disbelief. Whether that was because the names conveyed nothing, or my own seemed not to belong amongst them, was only to be surmised. It looked as if he were about to accuse me of being an impostor, to be turned away from the Library forthwith. I lost my head, began to recite names at random as they came into my mind.

'Simson . . . Fitzwith . . . Ghika . . . Brandreth . . . Maiden . . . Bischoffsheim . . . Whitney . . . Parkinson . . . Summers-Miller . . . Pyefinch . . . the Calthorpes . . . Widmerpool . . .'

At the last name Le Bas suddenly came to life.

'Widmerpool?'

'Widmerpool was a year or so senior to me.'

Le Bas seemed to forget that all we were trying to do was approximately to place my own age-group in his mind. He took one of several pens lying on the desk, examined it, chose another one, examined that, then wrote 'Widmerpool' on the blotting paper in front of him, drawing a circle round the name. This was an unexpected reaction. It seemed to have nothing whatever to do with myself. Le Bas now sunk into a state of near oblivion. Could it be a form of exorcism against pupils of his whom he had never much liked? Then he offered an explanation.

'Widmerpool's down here today. I met him in the street. We had a talk. He told me about a cause he's interested in. That's why I made a note. I shall have to try and remember what he said. He's an MP now. What happened to the others?'

It was like answering enquiries after a match—'Fettiplace-Jones was out first ball, sir' . . .'Parkinson kicked a goal, sir' . . . 'Whitney got his colours, sir'. I tried to recollect some piece of information to be deemed of interest to Le Bas about the sort of boys of whom he could approve, but the only facts that came to mind were neither about these, nor cheerful.

'Stringham died in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.'

'Yes, yes—so I heard.'

That awareness was unexpected.

'Templer was killed on a secret operation.'

'In the Balkans. Somebody told me. Very sad.'

Once more the cognition was unforeseen. Its acknowledgment was followed by Le Bas taking up the pen again. Underneath Widmerpool's name he wrote 'Balkans', drew another circle round the word, which he attached to the first circle by a line. It looked more than ever like some form of incantation.

'Now I remember what it was Widmerpool consulted me about. Some society he has organized to encourage good relations with one of the Balkan countries. Now which one? Simson was drowned. Torpedoed in a troopship.'

He mentioned Simson as another relevant fact, not at all as if he did not wish to be outdone in consciousness of widespread human dissolution in time of war.

'What are you doing yourself, Jenkins?'

'I'm writing a book on Burton—the *Anatomy of Melancholy* man.'

Le Bas took two or three seconds to absorb that statement, the aspects, good and bad, implied by such an activity. He had probably heard of Burton. He might easily know more about him than did Sillery. Dons were not necessarily better informed than schoolmasters. When at last he spoke, it was clear Le Bas did know about Burton. He was not wholly approving.

'Rather a morbid subject.'

He had used just that epithet when he found me, as a schoolboy, reading St John Clarke's *Fields of Amaranth*. He may have thought reading or writing books equally morbid, whatever the content. To be fair to Le Bas as a critic, *Fields of Amaranth*—if you were prepared to use the term critically at all—might reasonably be so described. I now agreed, even if on different grounds. The admission had to be made. Time had been on Le Bas's side.

We were interrupted at this moment by a very small boy, who had come to stand close by where we were talking. It would be truer to say we were inhibited by his presence, because no direct interruption took place. Dispelling about him an aura of immense, if not wholly convincing goodness, his intention was evidently to accost Le Bas in due course, at the same time ostentatiously to avoid any implication that he could be so lacking in good manners as to break into a conversation or attempt to overhear it. Le Bas, possibly not unwilling to seek dispensation from further talk about the past, distant or immediate, with all its uncomfortably realistic—Trapnel might prefer, naturalistic—undercurrents, turned in the boy's direction.

'What do you want?'

'I can wait, sir.'

This assurance that his own hopes were wholly unimportant, that Youth was prepared to waste valuable time indefinitely while Age span out its senile conference, did not in the least impress Le Bas, too conversant with the ways of boys not to be for ever on his guard.

'Can't you find some book?'

'Sir—the *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*.'

'Brewer's?'

'I think so, sir.'

'You've looked on the proper shelf?'

'Of course, sir.'

'What's your name?'

'Akworth, sir.

Le Bas rose.

'It will be the worse for you, Akworth, if Brewer turns out to be on the proper shelf.'

I explained to Le Bas why I had come; that it was time to move on to my appointment.

'Good, good. Excellent. I'm glad we had a—well, a chat. Most fortunate you reminded me of that society of Widmerpool's. I don't know why he should think I am specially interested in the Balkans—though now I come to think of it, Templer's . . . makes a kind of link. You know, Jenkins, among my former pupils, I should never have guessed Widmerpool would have entered the House of Commons. Fettiplace-Jones, yes—he was another matter.'

Le Bas paused. He had immediately regretted this implied criticism of Widmerpool's abilities.

'Of course, they need all sorts and conditions of men to govern the country. Especially these days. Sad about those fellows who were killed. I sometimes think of the number of pupils of mine who lost their lives. Two wars. It adds up. Come along, Akworth.'

The boy smiled, conveying at once apology for disruption of our talk, and his own certainty that its termination must have come as a relief to me. As he hurried off towards one of the shelves, beside which he had piled up a heap of books, he gave the impression that quite a complicated intellectual programme for ragging Le Bas had been planned. Le Bas himself sighed.

'Goodbye, Jenkins. I hope the school will have acquired a regular librarian by your next visit.'

It was still wet outside, but, by the time my appointment was at an end, the rain had stopped. A damp earthy smell filled the air. The weather was appreciably colder. In spite of that a man in a mackintosh was sitting on the low wall that ran the length of the further side of the street in front of the archway and chapel. It was Widmerpool. He looked in great dejection. I had not seen him since the night at Trapnel's flat, when he had, so to speak, expressed his confidence in Pamela's return. Now that had come about. He had prophesied truly. Isobel, about a month before, soon after the destruction of *Profiles in String*, had pointed out a paragraph in a newspaper listing guests at some public function. The names 'Mr Kenneth Widmerpool MP and Mrs Widmerpool' were included. It was just as predicted. In the Governmental reshuffle at the beginning of October Widmerpool had received minor office. In spite of these two matters, both showing himself undoubtedly in the ascendant, he sat lonely and cheerless. I should have been tempted to try and slip by unnoticed, but he saw me, and shouted something. I crossed the road.

'Congratulations on your new parliamentary job.'

'Thanks, thanks. What are you doing down here?'

I told him, adding that I had been talking with Le Bas.

'I ran into him too. I took the opportunity of giving him some account of my Balkan visit. Whatever one may think of Le Bas's capabilities as a teacher, he is supposedly in charge of the young, and should therefore be put in possession of the correct facts.'

'How did your trip go?'

'We hear a lot about what is called an "Iron Curtain". Where is this "Iron Curtain", I ask myself? I found no sign. That was what I told Le Bas. You might think him a person to hold reactionary views, but I found that was not at all the case, now that the idea of world revolution has been dropped. By the way, how are you employed since *Fission* has closed down?'

I mentioned various concerns that involved me. Widmerpool showed no embarrassment in mentioning the magazine. He even asked if it were true that Bagshaw had secured a job in television. However, when I enquired why, on such a damp and increasingly cold evening, he should be sitting on the wall, apparently just watching the world go by, he shifted uneasily, stiffening at the question.

'Pam and I came down for the day.'

He laughed.

'She's got a young friend here whom she met somewhere during his holidays, and he invited her to tea. She's having tea in his room now. I'm waiting for her.'

'A boy, you mean?'

'Yes—I suppose you'd call him a boy still.'

'I meant still at the school?'

'He was leaving, but stayed on for some reason—to captain some team, I think. Son or nephew of one of the Calthorpes. Do you remember them? Pam thought it would be an amusing jaunt. She insisted I mustn't spoil the party by coming too. Rather a good joke.'

All the same, he did not look as if he found it specially funny. Blue-grey mist was thickening round us. I had a train to catch. The Widmerpools had come by car. They had no fixed plan about getting back to London. Pamela hated being tied down by too positive arrangements. She was going to pick her husband up hereabouts when the tea-party was over. I thought of what Trapnel had said of her couplings.

'I must be off.'

'I don't believe I ever sent you details about that society I was telling Le Bas about. My secretary will forward them. I received Quiggin & Craggs's Autumn List recently—their last. There were some interesting titles. Clapham has asked me to continue my association with publishing by joining his board.'

I too had received the list; later heard Quiggin's comments on it. Sillery's *Garnered at Sunset*, unexciting as the selection might be, had been noticed respectfully. Shernmaker, for example, was unexpectedly approving. Sales were not too bad, even if the advance was never recouped. Sillery might be said to have successfully imposed his will in this last fling. So did Ada Leintwardine. *I Stopped at a Chemist* upset several of the more old-fashioned reviewers who had survived the war, but they admitted a novel-writing career lay ahead of her. Even Evadne Clapham was impressed. In fact, *Golden Grime* was the last of Evadne Clapham's books in her former style. Her subsequent manner followed Ada's. *Engine Melody*—truncated title of *The Pistons of Our Locomotives Sing the Songs of Our Workers*—believed to be not too well translated, was by no means ignored, Nathaniel Sheldon's mention including the phrase 'muted beauty'. Vernon Gainsborough's *Bronstein: Marxist or Mystagogue?*, with seven other books on similar subjects, was favourably noticed in a *Times Literary Supplement* 'front'.

'It's a real *apologia pro vita sua*,' said Bagshaw. 'Conversion from Trotskyism expressed in such unqualified terms must have warmed Gypsy's heart after her reverses.'

The last reference was to *Sad Majors*. Odo Stevens had dealt effectively with efforts, such as they were, to suppress his book. He had enjoyed exceptional opportunities for knowing about such things. That may have put him at an advantage. As usual, he also had good luck. So far from being inconvenient, the whole matter worked out in his best interests. Having already grasped that he might have done better financially by going to some publisher other than Quiggin & Craggs, he at once recognized that the loss of the two typescripts would give a potent reason for requiring release from his contract. He did not mention the third typescript, which had been all the time in the hands of Rosie Manasch. Rosie had apparently suggested that her former Fleet Street contacts might be useful in exploiting serial possibilities. She was right. *Sad Majors* was serialized on excellent terms. It was published in book form in the spring.

L. O. Salvidge, rather an achievement in the light of current publishing delays, got out a further volume of essays to follow up *Paper Wine*. The new one, *Secretions*, was much reviewed beside Shernmaker's *Miscellaneous Equities*. It was a notable score for Salvidge to have produced two books in less than a year. After the unsuccessful prosecution, Kydd's *Sweetskin* at first failed to recover from the withdrawal at the time of the injunction, but, given a new wrapper design, Kydd himself alleged that it picked up relatively well. That season also appeared David Pennistone's *Descartes, Gassendi, and the Atomic Theory of Epicurus*, the work of which he used to speak so despairingly when we were in the army together. I busied myself with Burton, even so only just managing to see *Borage and Hellebore: a Study* in print by the following December.

The scattered pages of *Profiles in String*, with the death's-head swordstick, floated eternally downstream into the night. It was the beginning of Trapnel's drift too, irretrievable as they. He went underground for a long time after that night. When at last he emerged, it was to haunt an increasingly gruesome and desolate world. There were odds and ends of film work, stray pieces of journalism, an occasional short story. In the last, possibly some traces reappeared of what had gone into *Profiles in String*, though in a much diminished form. Something of it may even have emerged on the screen. Another novel never got written. Trapnel himself always insisted that a novel is what its writer is. The definition only opens up a lot more questions. Perhaps he had taken a knock from which he never recovered; perhaps he had used up already what was in him, in the way writers do. In these sunless marshlands of existence, a dwindling reserve of pep-pills, a certain innate inventiveness, capacity for survival, above all the mystique of panache—in short, the Trapnel method—just about made it possible to hang on. That was the best you could say.

I once asked Dicky Umfraville—whose own experiences on the Turf made his knowledge of racing personalities extensive—whether he had ever heard of a jockey called Trapnel, whose professional career had been made largely in Egypt.

'Heard of him, old boy? When I was in Cairo in the 'twenties, I won a packet on a French horse he rode called Amour Piquant.'

Temporary Kings

for

Roland

1

THE SMELL OF VENICE SUFFUSED the night, lacustrine essences richly distilled. Late summer was hot here. A very old man took the floor. Hoarse, tottering, a few residual teeth, arbitrarily assembled and darkly stained, underpinning the buoyancy of his grin, he rendered the song in slower time than ordinary, clawing the air with his hands, stamping the floor with his feet, while he mimed the action of the cable, straining, creaking, climbing, as it hauled upward towards the volcanic crater the capsule encasing himself and his girl, a journey calculated to stir her ungrateful heart.

Iamme, iamme, via montiam su là.
Iamme, iamme, via montiam su là.
Funiculì funiculà, via montiam su là.

A first initiatory visit to Italy, travelling as a boy with my parents, had included a week at this same hotel. It overlooked the Grand Canal. Then small, rather poky even, its waterfront now extended on either side of the terrace, where, by tradition, the musicians' gondola tied up. Near-tourist outfits replaced evening dress antique as the troupe itself, in other respects the pattern remained unaltered, notably this veteran and the 'business' of his song. Could he be the same man? A mere forty years—indeed three or four short of that—might well have passed without much perceptible transmutation in a façade already radically weathered by Time when first observed. The gestures were identical. With an operatic out-thrust of the body, he intimated the kingdoms of the earth ranged beneath funicular passengers for their delectation.

Si vede Francia, Procida, la Spagna,
E io veggo te, io veggo te.

The century all but within his grasp, the singer might actually recollect the occasion for which the song had been composed; on that great day, as the words postulated, himself ascended Vesuvius accompanied by his inamorata, snug together in the newly installed spaceship, auspicious with potentialities for seduction. Had a dominating personality, the suggestive rotations of the machinery, Procida's isle laid out far below, like a girl spreadeagled on her back, all combined to do the trick? The answer was surely affirmative. Even if marriage remained in question—conceivably the librettist's deference to convention—at least warmer contacts must have been attained.

The stylized movements of the hands were reminiscent of Dicky Umfraville at one of his impersonations. He too should have harnessed his gift, in early life, to an ever renewing art from which there was no retiring age. To exhibit themselves, perform before a crowd, is the keenest pleasure many people know, yet self-presentation without a basis in art is liable to crumble into dust and ashes. Professional commitment to his own representations might have kept at bay the melancholy—all but chronic Frederica and his stepchildren complained—now that Umfraville had retired from work as agent at Thrubworth. Sometimes, after a day's racing, for example, he might return to the old accustomed form. Even then a few misplaced bets would bring the conviction that luck was gone for good, his life over.

'Christ, what a shambles. Feeling my back too. Trumpeter, what are you sounding now?—*Defaulters*, old boy, if your name's Jerry Hat-Trick. You know growing old's like being increasingly penalized for a crime you haven't committed.'

'Which ones haven't you committed?' said Frederica. 'You've never grown up, darling. You can't grow old till you've done that.'

Sufferance, as well as affection, was implied, though Frederica had never tired of Umfraville, in spite of being often cross with him.

'I feel like the man in the ghost story, scrambling over the breakwaters with the Horrible Thing behind him getting closer and closer. There hasn't been a good laugh since that horse-box backed over Buster Foxe at Lingfield.'

As a rule Umfraville disliked mention of death, but the legend of Buster Foxe's immolation under the wheels of a kind of Houyhnhnm juggernaut, travelling in reverse gear, was the exception. It had resolutely passed into Umfraville myth. Captain Foxe's end (he had been promoted during the war) was less dramatic, though certainly brought about by some fatal accident near the course, terminating for ever risk of seeing an old enemy at future race-meetings. It would be worth asking Umfraville if he had his own version of *Funiculì-Funiculà*, an accomplishment by no means out of the question.

The present vocalist to some extent controverted Frederica's argument, supporting more St John Clarke's observation that 'growing old consists abundantly of growing young'. The aged singer looked as if thoughts of death, melancholy in any form, were unknown to him. He could be conceived as suffering from rage, desire, misery, anguish, despair; not melancholy. That was clear; additionally so after the round of applause following his number. The clapping was reasonably hearty considering the heat, almost as oppressive as throughout the day just passed. Dr Emily Brightman and I joined in. Acknowledgment of his talent delighted the performer. He bowed again and again, repeatedly baring blackened sporadic stumps, while he mopped away streams of sweat that coursed down channels of dry loose skin ridging either side of his mouth. Longevity had brought not the smallest sense of repletion where public recognition was in question. That was on the whole sympathetic. One found oneself taking more interest than formerly in the habits and lineaments of old age.

In spite of the singer's own nonchalance, the susceptive tunes of the musicians, the gorgeous dropscene, the second carafe of wine, infected the mind not disagreeably with thoughts of the evanescence of things. At the beginning of the century, Marinetti and the Futurists had wanted to make a fresh start—whatever that might mean—advocating, among other projects, filling up the Venetian canals with the rubble of the Venetian palaces. Now, the Futurists, with their sentimentality about the future, primitive machinery, vintage motor-cars, seemed as antiquely picturesque as the Doge in the *Bucentaur*, wedding his bride the Sea, almost as distant in time; though true that a desire to destroy, a hatred and fear of the past, remained a constant in human behaviour.

'Do you think the soubrette is his mistress, or his great-granddaughter?' asked Dr Brightman. 'They seem on very close terms. Perhaps both.'

From our first meeting, at the opening session of the Conference (when friendly contacts had been achieved by mutual familiarity with *Borage and Hellebore*, my book about Burton, and her own more famous work on The Triads), Dr Brightman had made clear a determination to repudiate the faintest suspicion of spinsterish prudery that might, very mistakenly, be supposed to attach to her circumstances. Discreetly fashionable clothes emphasized this total severance from anything to be thought of as academic stuffiness, a manner of dress quietly but insistently smart. One of her pupils at the university (our niece Caroline Lovell's best friend) alleged a reputation of severity as a tutor, effortless ability to reduce to tears, if necessary, the most bumptious female student. Dr Brightman, it was true, was undoubtedly a little formidable at first impact. We touched on the Dark Ages. She spoke of her present engagement on Boethius, in a form likely to prove controversial. The male don of her name, known to me when myself an undergraduate, appeared to be only a distant relation.

'You mean Harold Brightman, who played some part in organizing a dinner to celebrate the ninetieth birthday of that old rascal Sillery? He's a cousin of some sort. There are scores of them engaged in the learned professions. We all stem from the Revd Salathiel Brightman, named in *The Dunciad* in connexion with some long forgotten squabble about a piece of Augustan pedantry. He composed *Attick and Roman Reckonings of Capacity for Things Liquid and Things Dry reduced to the Common English Mensuration for Wine and Corn*. I believe the great Lemprière acknowledges indebtedness in preparation of his own tables of proportion at the end of the *Bibliotheca Classica*. Salathiel is said to have revolutionized the view held in his own day of the cochlearion and oxybaphon, though for myself I haven't the smallest notion of how many of either went to an amphora. Speaking of things liquid and things dry, shall we have a drink? Tell me, Mr Jenkins, did Mark Members persuade you to come to this Conference?'

'You, too?'

'Not without resistance on my own part. I had planned a lot of work this long vac. Mark positively nagged me into it. He can be very tyrannical.'

'I resisted too, but was in difficulties about a book. It seemed a way out.'

To say that was to make the best of things, let oneself down gently. Writing may not be enjoyable, its discontinuance can be worse, though Members himself must by then have been safely beyond any such gnawings of guilt. By now he was a hardened frequenter of international gatherings for 'intellectuals' of every sort. He had been at the game for years. The activity suited him. It brought out hitherto dormant capabilities for organization and oratory, neither given a fair chance in the course of an author's routine dealings with publishers and editors; nor for that matter—Members having tried reversing the rôles—trafficking with authors as editor or publisher. The then ever-widening field of cultural congresses pleased and stimulated his temperament. At one of them he had even found a wife, an American lady, author and journalist, a few years older than himself, excellently preserved, not without name and useful connexions in her own country. She was also, as Members himself boasted, 'inured to writers and their inconsequent ways'. That was probably true, as Members was her fourth husband. The marriage still remained in a reasonably flourishing condition, in spite of hints (from the critic, Bernard Shernmaker, chiefly) that Members had dropped out of the Venetian rendezvous because another, smaller conference was to include a female novelist in whom he was interested. A reason for supposing that particular imputation unjust was that several other literary figures had thought the rival conference more tempting. These differed in this from Members only insomuch as he had played some part in organization of the Venetian gathering at the London end. That was why, to avoid becoming vulnerable in his own apostasy, he had to find, at short notice, one or two substitutes like Dr Brightman and myself. He brushed aside pretexts that I never took part in such activities.

'All the more reason to go, Nicholas, see what such meetings of true minds have to offer. I should not be at all surprised if you did not succumb to the drug. It's quite a potent one, as I've found to my cost. Besides, even at our age, there's a certain sense of adventure at such jamborees. You meet interesting people—if writers and suchlike can be called interesting, something you and I must often have doubted in the course of our *via dolorosa* towards literary crucifixion. At worst it makes a change, provides a virtually free holiday, or something not far removed. Come along, Nicholas, bestir yourself. Say yes. Don't be apathetic.

> Leave we the unlettered plain its herd and crop;
>   Seek we sepulture
> On a tall mountain, citied to the top,
>   Crowded with culture!

It's not sepulture, and a tall mountain, this time, but the Piazza San Marco—my patron saint, please remember—and a lot of parties, not only crowded with culture, but excellent food and drink thrown in. There's the Biennale, and the Film Festival the following week, if you feel like staying for it. Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn? Take a chance on it. You'll live like a king once you get there.'

'One of those temporary kings in *The Golden Bough*, everything at their disposal for a year or a month or a day—then execution? Death in Venice?'

'Only ritual execution in more enlightened times—the image of a declining virility. A Mann's man for a' that. Being the temporary king is what matters. The retribution of congress kings only takes the form, severe enough in its way, I admit, of having to return to everyday life. Even that, my dear Nicholas, you'll do with renewed energy. Like the new king, in fact.

> Here upon earth, we're kings, and none but we
> Can be such kings, nor of such subjects be.

That's what the Venice Conference will amount to. I shall put your name down.'

'Who else is going?'

'Quentin Shuckerly, Ada Leintwardine. They're certain. Not Alaric Kydd, which is just as well. The new Shuckerly, *Athlete's Footman*, is the best queer novel since *Sea Urchins*. You ought to have a look at it, if you've got time. You won't regret the decision to go to Venice. I'm *désolé* at not being able to attend myself. Unfortunately one can't be in two places at once, and I have a duty to make myself available elsewhere. There will be a lot of international figures there, some of them quite distinguished. Ferrand-Sénéschal, Kotecke, Santos, Pritak. With any luck you'll find a very talented crowd. I'd hoped to hear Ferrand-Sénéschal on the subject of Pasternak and the Nobel Prize. His objections —he will certainly demur at the possibility—will be worth listening to.'

In suggesting that the international fame of several foreign writers liable to attend the Conference was not to be entirely disregarded in assessing its attractions, Members was speaking reasonably enough. To meet some of these, merely to set eyes on them, would be to connect together a few additional pieces in the complex jigsaw making up the world's literary scene; a game never completed, though sometimes garishly illuminated, when two or three unexpected fragments were all at once coherently aligned in place. To addicts of this pastime, the physical appearance of a given writer can add to his work an incisive postscript, physical traits being only inadequately assessable from photographs. Ferrand-Sénéschal, one of the minor celebrities invoked by Members, was a case in point. His thick lips, closely set eyes, ruminatively brutal expression, were familiar enough from newspaper pictures or publishers' catalogues, the man himself never quite defined by them. I had no great desire to meet Ferrand-Sénéschal—on balance would almost prefer to be absolved from the effort of having to talk with him—but I was none the less curious to see what he looked like in person, know how he carried himself among his fellow nomads of the intellect, Bedouin of the cultural waste, for ever folding and unfolding their tents in its oases.

There was another reason, when Members picked Ferrand-Sénéschal's name out of the hat as a potential prize for attending the Conference, why a different, a stronger reaction was summoned up than by such names as Santos, Pritak, Kotecke. During the war, staff-officers, whose work required rough-and-ready familiarity with conditions of morale relating to certain bodies of troops or operational areas—the whole world being, in one sense, at that moment an operational area—were from time to time given opportunity to glance through excerpts, collected together from a wide range of correspondence, inspected by the Censorship Department. This symposium, of no very high security grading, was put together for practical purposes, of course, though not with complete disregard for light relief. The anonymous anthologist would sometimes show appreciation of a letter's comic or ironic bearing. Ferrand-Sénéschal was a case in point. Scrutinizing the file, my eye twice caught his name, familiar to anyone whose dealings with contemporary literature took them even a short way beyond the Channel. Ferrand-Sénéschal's letters were dispatched from the United States, where, lecturing at the outbreak of war, he had remained throughout hostilities. Always a Man of the Left (much in evidence as such at the time of the Spanish Civil War, when his name had sometimes appeared in company with St John Clarke's), he had shown rather exceptional agility in sitting on the fence that divided conflicting attitudes of the Vichy Administration from French elements, in France and elsewhere, engaged in active opposition to Germany.

Cited merely to illustrate the current view of a relatively well-known French author domiciled abroad through the exigencies of war, Ferrand-Sénéschal's couple of contributions to the Censor's digest deftly indicated the deviousness of their writer's allegiance. No doubt, in one sense, the phrases were intended precisely to achieve that, naturally implying nothing to be construed as even covertly antagonistic to the Allied cause. Whatever else he might be, Ferrand-Sénéschal was no fool. Indeed, it was his own appreciation of the fact that his letters might be of interest to the Censor —any censor—which provoked a smile at the skill shown in excerpting so neatly the carefully chosen sentences. In addition, personal letters, even when deliberately composed with an eye to examination, official or unofficial, by someone other than their final recipient, give a unique sense of the writer's personality, often lacking in books by the same hand. They are possibly the most revealing of all, like physical touchings-up of personal appearance to make some exceptional effect. In the case of Ferrand-Sénéschal, as with his portraits in the press, the personality conveyed, not to be underrated as a force, was equally not a specially attractive one.

Avoidance, during this expatriate period, of all outward participation, even *parti pris*, in relation to the issues about which people were fighting so fiercely, turned out no handicap to Ferrand-Sénéschal's subsequent career. Not only did he physically survive those years, something he might easily have failed to do had he remained in Europe, but he returned to France unembarrassed by any of the inevitable typifications attached to active combatants of one sort or another. Some of these had, of course, acquired distinction, military or otherwise, which Ferrand-Sénéschal could not claim, but, in this process, few had escaped comparatively damaging sectarian labels. In fact, Ferrand-Sénéschal, who had worked hard during his exile in literary and academic spheres in both American continents, found himself in an improved position, with a wider public, in a greatly changed world. He now abandoned a policy of non-intervention, publicly announcing his adherence to the more extreme end of his former political standpoint, one from which he never subsequently deviated. From this vantage point he played a fairly prominent rôle in the immediately post-war period of re-adjustment in France; then, when a few years later cultural congresses settled down into their swing, became—as emphasized by Members—a conspicuous figure in their lively polemics.

Remembrance of these censored letters had revived when I was 'doing the books' on *Fission*. A work by Ferrand-Sénéschal turned up for review. Quiggin & Craggs had undertaken a translation of one of his philosophico-economic studies. Although the magazine was, in theory, a separate venture from the publishing house producing it, the firm—Quiggin especially—was apt to take amiss too frequent disregard of their own imprint in the critical pages of *Fission*. I should in any case have consulted Bagshaw, as editor, as to whether or not a Quiggin & Craggs book might be safely ignored. Bagshaw's preoccupations with all forms of Marxism, orthodox or the reverse, being what they were, he was likely to hold views on this one. He did. He was at once animated by Ferrand-Sénéschal's name.

'An interesting sub-species of fellow-traveller. I'd like to have a look myself. Ferrand-Sénéschal's been exceedingly useful to the Party at one time or another, in spite of his heresies. There's always a little bit of Communist propaganda in whatever he writes, however trivial. He also has odd sexual tastes. Political adversaries like to dwell on that. In America, they allege some sort of scandal was hushed up.'

Bagshaw turned the pages of Ferrand-Sénéschal's book. He had accepted it as something for the expert, sitting down to make a closer examination.

'You won't find anything about his sexual tastes there. I've glanced through it.'

'I'll take it home, and consider the question of a reviewer. I might have a good idea.'

By the following week Bagshaw had a good idea. It was a very good one.

'We'll give Ferrand-Sénéschal to Kenneth Widmerpool for his routine piece in the mag. It's not unlike his own sort of stuff.'

That was Bagshaw at his best. His editor's instinct, eccentric, unguarded, often obscure of intent, was rarely to be set aside as thoughtless or absurd. He reported Widmerpool as being at first unwilling to wrestle with the Ferrand-Sénéschal translation (having scarcely heard of its author), but, on reading some of the book, changing his mind. The article appeared in the next issue of *Fission*. Widmerpool himself was delighted with it.

'One of my most successful efforts, I think I can safely aver. Ferrand-Sénéschal is a man to watch. He and I have something in common, both of us intellectuals in the world of action. In drawing analogy between our shared processes of thought, I refer to a common denominator of resolution to break ruthlessly with old social methods and outlooks. In short, we are both realists. I should like to meet this Frenchman. I shall arrange to do so.'

The consequences of the Ferrand-Sénéschal article were, in their way, far reaching. Ferrand-Sénéschal, who visited London fairly often in the course of business—cultural business—was without difficulty brought into touch with Widmerpool on one of these trips. Some sort of a fellow-feeling seems to have sprung up immediately between the two of them, possibly a certain facial resemblance contributing to that, people who look like one another sometimes finding additional affinities. In the army, for example, tall cadaverous generals would choose tall cadaverous soldier-servants or drivers; short choleric generals prefer short choleric officers on their staff. Whatever it was, Widmerpool and Ferrand-Sénéschal took to each other on sight. As a member of some caucus within the Labour Party, Widmerpool invited Ferrand-Sénéschal to meet his associates at a House of Commons luncheon. This must have gone well, because in due course Ferrand-Sénéschal returned the compliment by entertaining Widmerpool, when passing through Paris on his way back from Eastern Europe, touring there under the banner of a society to encourage friendship with one of the People's Republics.

This night-out in Paris with Ferrand-Sénéschal had also been an unqualified success. That was almost an understatement of the gratification it had given Widmerpool, according to himself. Either by chance or design, his comments on the subject had come straight back to the *Fission* office. That was the period when Widmerpool, deserted by his wife, was keeping away from the magazine. Not unreasonably, he may have hoped, by deliberately building up a legend of high-jinks with Ferrand-Sénéschal, to avoid seeming an abandoned husband, unable to amuse himself, while Pamela lived somewhere in secret with X. Trapnel. That could have been the motive for spreading broadcast the tidings of going on the Parisian spree; otherwise, it might be thought, an incident wiser to keep private. Certainly highly coloured rumours about their carousal were in circulation months after its celebration. Apart from other considerations, such behaviour, anyway such brazenness, was in complete contrast with the tone in which Widmerpool himself used to deplore the *louche* reputation of Sir Magnus Donners.

This censure could, of course, have been a double-bluff. When we had met at a large party given for the Election Night of 1955—the last time I had seen him—Widmerpool deliberately dragged in a reference to the weeks spent together trying to learn French at La Grenadière, adding that it was 'lucky for our morals Madame Leroy's house had not been in Paris', words that seemed to bear out, on his part, desire to confirm a reputation for being a dog. That was early in the evening, before Pamela's incivility had greatly offended our hostess, or Widmerpool himself heard (towards morning, after Isobel and I had gone home) that he had lost his seat in the House. In *Fission* days, Bagshaw had been sceptical about the Paris story, without dismissing it entirely.

'I suppose some jolly-up may have taken place. The brothels are closed nowadays officially, but that wouldn't make any difference to someone in the know. I'm not sure what Ferrand-Sénéschal is himself supposed to like—being chained to a crucifix, while a green light's played on him—little girls—two-way mirrors—I've been told, but I can't remember. He may have given Kenneth a few ideas. I shall develop sadistic tendencies myself, if that new secretary doesn't improve. She's muddled those proofs of the ads again. I say, Nicholas, we've still too much space to spare. Just cast your eye over these, and see if you've any suggestions. You'll bring a fresh mind to the advertisement problem. It's a blow too we're not going to get any more Trapnel pieces. Editing this mag is driving me off my rocker.'

In the light of what I knew of Widmerpool, the tale of visiting a brothel with Ferrand-Sénéschal was to be accepted with caution, although true that he had more than once in the past adopted a rather gloating tone when speaking of tarts, an attitude dating back to our earliest London days. Moreland used to say, 'Maclintick doesn't like women, he likes tarts—indeed he once actually fell in love with a tart, who led him an awful dance.' That taste could be true of Widmerpool too; perhaps a habit become so engrained as to develop into a preference, handicapping less circumscribed sexual intimacies. Such routines might go some way to explain the fiasco with Mrs Haycock, even the relationship—whatever that might be—with Pamela. That Ferrand-Sénéschal, as Bagshaw suggested, had been the medium for introduction, in middle-age, to hitherto unknown satisfactions, new, unusual forms of self-release, was not out of the question. By all accounts, far more unlikely things happened in the sphere of late sexual development. Bagshaw was, of course, prejudiced. By that time he had decided that Widmerpool was not only bent on ejecting him from the editorship of *Fission*, but was also a fellow-traveller.

'He probably learnt a lot from Ferrand-Sénéschal politically, the latter being a much older hand at the game.'

'But what has Widmerpool to gain from being a crypto?'

Bagshaw laughed loudly. He thought that a very silly question. Political standpoints of the extreme Left being where his heart lay, where, so to speak, he had lost his virginity, the enquiry was like asking Umfraville why he should be interested in one horse moving faster than another, a football fan the significance of kicking an inflated bladder between two posts. At first Bagshaw was unable to find words simple enough to enlighten so uninstructed a mind. Then a lively parallel occurred to him.

'Apart from anything else, it's one of those secret pleasures, like drawing a moustache on the face of a pretty girl on a poster, spitting over the stairs—you know, from a great height on to the people below. You see several heads, possibly a bald one. They don't know where the saliva comes from. It gives an enormous sense of power. Like the days when I used to throw marbles under the hooves of mounted policemen's horses. Think of the same sort of fun when you're an MP, or respected civil servant, giving the whole show away on the quiet, when everybody thinks you're a pillar of society.'

'Isn't that a rather frivolous view? What about deep convictions, all the complicated ideologies you're always talking about?'

'Not really frivolous. Such spitting itself is an active form of revolt—undermining society as we know it, spreading alarm and despondency among the bourgeoisie. Besides, spitting apart, you stand quite a good chance of coming to power yourself one day. Giving them all hell. The bourgeoisie, and everyone else. Being a member of a Communist *apparat* would suit our friend very well politically.'

'But Widmerpool's the greatest bourgeois who ever lived.'

'Of course he is. That's what makes it such fun for him. Besides, he isn't a bourgeois in his own eyes. He's a man in a life-and-death grapple with the decadent society round him. Either he wins, or it does.'

'That doesn't sound very rational.'

'Marxism isn't rational, Nicholas. Get that into your head. The more intelligent sort of Marxist tells you so. He stresses the point, as one of its highest merits, that, like religion, Marxism requires faith in the last resort. Besides, my old friend Max Stirner covers Kenneth—"Because I am by nature a man I have equal rights to the enjoyment of all goods, says Babeuf. Must he not also say: because I am 'by nature' a first-born prince I have a right to a throne?" That's just what Kenneth Widmerpool does say—not out aloud, but it's what he thinks.'

Bagshaw had begun on his favourite political philosopher. I was not in the mood at that moment. To return instead to sorting the *Fission* books was not to deny there might be some truth in the exposition: that Widmerpool, conventional enough at one level of his life—conventional latterly in his own condemnation of conventionality—might at the same time nurture within himself quite another state of mind to that shown on the surface; not only desire to reshape the world according to some doctrinaire pattern, but also to be revenged on a world that had found himself insufficiently splendid in doing so. Had not General Conyers, years ago, diagnosed a 'typical intuitive extrovert'; cold-blooded, keen on a thing for the moment, never satisfied, always wanting to get on to something else? In one sense, of course, the world, from a material assessment, had treated Widmerpool pretty well, even at the time when Bagshaw was talking. On the other hand, people rarely take the view that they have been rewarded according to their deserts, those most rewarded often the very ones keenest to be revenged. Possibly Ferrand-Sénéschal was just such another.

Whatever Ferrand-Sénéschal's inner feelings, the meeting with him in Venice was not to be. Not even a glimpse on the platform. His death took place in London only a few days before the Conference opened. He suffered a stroke in his Kensington hotel. The decease of a French author of international standing would in any case have rated a modest headline in the papers. The season of the year a thin one for news, more attention was given to Ferrand-Sénéschal than might have been expected. It was revealed, for example, that he had seen a doctor only a day or two before, who had warned him against excessive strain. Accordingly no inquest took place. Death had come—as Evadne Clapham remarked, 'like the book'—in the afternoon. Later that evening, so the papers said, Ferrand-Sénéschal had been invited to 'look in on' Lady Donners after dinner—'not a party, just a few friends', she had explained to the reporters—where he would have found himself, so it appeared, among an assortment of politicians and writers, including Mr and Mrs Mark Members. Social engagements of this kind, together with a stream of acquaintances and journalists passing in and out of his suite at the hotel, had evidently proved too much for a state of health already impaired.

The London obituaries put Léon-Joseph Ferrand-Sénéschal in his sixtieth year. They mentioned only two or three of his better known books, selected from an enormous miscellany of novels, plays, philosophic and economic studies, political tracts, and (according to Bernard Shernmaker) an early volume, later suppressed by the author, of verse in the manner of Verlaine. This involuntary withdrawal would make little difference to the Conference. Well known intellectuals were always an uncertain quantity when it came to turning up, even if they did not suddenly succumb. Pritak, Santos, Kotecke, might equally well find something better to do, though not necessarily meet an unlooked-for end. I made up my mind to ask Dr Brightman, when opportunity arose, whether she had ever encountered Ferrand-Sénéschal; if so, what she thought of him.

The youngest and best-looking of the troupe, the one Dr Brightman had called the Soubrette, took a plate round for the collection. The rest burst *en masse* into *Santa Lucia*. The programme came to an end. Preparations began for moving on to another hotel. Before they got under way, the old singer, in participation with the Soubrette, surreptitiously examined the takings, both gesticulating a good deal, whether with satisfaction or irony at the extent of the offering was uncertain.

'To sing Neapolitan songs in Venice is rather like a Scotch ballad in Bath,' said Dr Brightman. 'Naples is unique. Even her popular music doesn't export as far north as this. A taste for Naples is one of the divisions between people. You love the place, or loathe it. The character of the traveller seems to have no bearing on the instinctive choice. Personally I am devoted to the Parthenopean shore, although once victim of a most unseemly episode at Pompeii when younger. It was outside the lupanar, from which in those days ladies were excluded. I should have been affronted far less within that haunt of archaic vice, where I later found little to shock the most demure, except the spartan hardness of the double-decker marble bunks. I chased the fellow away with my parasol, an action no doubt deplored in these more enlightened days, as risking irreparable damage to the responses of one of those all too frequent cases of organ inferiority.'

She briskly shook the crop of short white curls cut close to her head. They looked like a battery of coiled wire (like the Dark Lady's) galvanizing an immensely powerful dynamo. The bearing of the anecdote brought Ferrand-Sénéschal's name to mind again. I asked if she had ever met him.

'Yes, I once was introduced to Ferrand-Sénéschal in the not very inviting flesh. He told me he despised "good writing". I praised his French logic in that respect. As you doubtless know, his early books are ridiculously stilted, his later ones grossly slipshod. I was at once hustled away by his court of toadies. Certain persons require a court. Others prefer a harem. That is not quite the same thing.'

'Some like both.'

'Naturally the one can merge with the other—why, hullo, Russell.'

The young American who had come up to our table seemed to be the only one of his countrymen at the Conference. He was called Russell Gwinnett. We had sat next to each other at luncheon the day before. He had explained that he taught English at a well-known American university for women, where Dr Brightman herself had spent a year as exchange professor, so that they had known one another before meeting again at the Conference.

'How are you making out, Russell? Have you met Mr Nicholas Jenkins? This is Mr Russell Gwinnett, an old friend from my transatlantic days. You have? Come and join us, Russell.'

The serious business of the Conference, intellectuals from all over the world addressing each other on their favourite topics, took place at morning and afternoon sessions on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. To reanimate enthusiasms imperilled by prolonged exposure to the assiduities of congress life, extension of the syllabus to include an official luncheon or dinner was listed for almost every day of our stay. These banquets were usually linked with some national treasure, or place of historic interest, occasions to some extent justifying the promise of Members that we should 'live like kings'. They gave at the same time opportunity to 'get to know' other members of the Conference. Through the medium of one of these jaunts, which took place at a villa on the Brenta, famous for its frescoes by Veronese, Gwinnett and I had met.

He was in his early thirties, slight in figure, with a small black moustache that showed a narrow strip of skin along the upper lip above and below its length. That he was American scarcely appeared on the surface at first, then something about the thin bone formations of arms and legs, the sallowness and texture of the skin, suggested the nationality. The movements of the body, supple, not without athletic promise, also implied an American, rather than European, nervous tension; an extreme one. He wore spectacles lightly tinted with blue. His air, in general unconformist, did not strongly indicate any recognizable alignment.

I had not sat next to him long the previous day before unorthodoxy was confirmed. Having invoked the name of Dr Brightman, Gwinnett (like her) created the usually advantageous foundation of good understanding between writers—one by no means always available—by showing well-disposed knowledge of my own works. That was an excellent start. He turned out to hold another ace up his sleeve, but did not play that card at once. In showing control, he began as he went on. After the gratifying, if subjective, offering made in the direction of my own writing, he became less easy. In fact he was almost impossible to engage, drying up entirely, altogether lacking in that reserve of light, reasonably well-informed social equipment, on the whole more characteristic of American than British academic life. This lapse into a torpid, almost surly reluctance to cooperate conversationally suggested an American version of the least flexible type of British don, that quiet egotism, self-applauding narrowness of vision, sometimes less than acceptable, even when buttressed with verified references and forward-looking views. If Gwinnett showed signs almost of burlesquing a stock academic figure, he was himself not necessarily lacking in interest on that account, if only as a campus specimen hitherto unsampled; especially as he seemed oddly young to have developed such traits. Even at the outset I was prepared for this diagnosis to be wide of the mark. There was also something not at all self-satisfied about him, an impression of anxiety, a never ceasing awareness of impending disaster.

At table he had messed about the food on his plate, a common enough form of expressing maladjustment, though disconcerting, since the dishes happened to be notably good. He refused wine. It might be that he was a reprieved alcoholic. He had some of that sad, worn, preoccupied air that suggests unquiet memories of more uproarious days. Above all there was a sense of loneliness. I talked for a time with the Belgian writer on my other side. Then the Belgian became engaged with his neighbour beyond, leaving Gwinnett and myself back on each other's hands. Before I could think of anything new to say, he put an unexpected question. This was towards the end of the meal, the first sign of loosening up.

'How does the Veronese at Dogdene compare with the ones on the wall here?'

That was a surprise.

'You mean the one Lord Sleaford's just sold? I've never been to Dogdene, so I haven't ever seen it in anything but reproduction. I only know the house itself from the Constable in the National Gallery.'

The Sleaford Veronese had recently realized at auction what was then regarded as a very large sum. The picture had always been a great preoccupation of Chips Lovell, who used often to grumble about his Sleaford relations never recognizing their luck in ownership of a work by so great a master. Lovell, who agreed with Smethyck (now head of a gallery), and with General Conyers, that the picture ought to be cleaned, was also in the habit of complaining that the public did not have sufficient opportunity to inspect its beauties. In those days admission to Dogdene was about three days a week throughout the summer. After the war, in common with many other mansions of its kind, the house was thrown open, at a charge, all the year round. Even so, the Veronese had to be sold to pay for the basic upkeep of the place. In spite of the publicity given at the time of the sale, I was impressed that Gwinnett had heard of it.

'I've been told it's not Veronese at his best—*Iphigenia*, isn't it?'

That had been Lovell's view in moods of denigration or humility. Gwinnett seemed more interested in the subject of the picture than whether or not Veronese had been on form.

'That's an intriguing story it depicts. The girl offering herself for sacrifice. The calm dignity with which she faces death. Tiepolo painted an Iphigenia too, more than once, though I've only seen the one at the Villa Valmarana. There's at least one other that looks even finer in reproduction. It's the inferential side of the myth that fascinates me.'

Gwinnett sounded oddly excited. His manner had altogether altered. The thought of Iphigenia must have strangely moved him. Then he abruptly changed the subject. For some reason speaking of the Veronese had released something within himself, made it possible to introduce another, quite different motif, one, as it turned out, that had been on his mind ever since we met. This matter, once given expression, a little explained earlier lack of ease. At least it suggested that Gwinnett, when broaching topics that meant a lot to him, was not so much vain or unaccommodating, as nervous, paralysed, unsure of himself. That was the next impression, equally untrustworthy as a judgment.

'You knew the English writer X. Trapnel, Mr Jenkins?'

'Certainly.'

'Pretty well, I believe?'

'Yes, I was quite an authority on Trapnel at one moment.'

Gwinnett sighed.

'I'd give anything to have known Trapnel.'

'There were ups and downs in being a friend.'

'You thought him a good writer?'

'A very good writer.'

'That's OK. Me too. That's why I'd have loved to meet him. I could have done that when I was a student. I was over in London. I get mad at myself when I think of that. He was still alive. I hadn't read his books then. I wouldn't have known where to go and see him anyway.'

'All you had to do was to have a drink at one of his pubs.'

'I couldn't just speak to him. He wouldn't have liked that.'

'If somebody had told you one or two of his haunts—The Hero of Acre or The Mortimer—you could hardly have avoided hearing Trapnel holding forth on books and writers. Then you might have stood him a drink. The job would have been done.'

'Trapnel's the subject of my dissertation—his life and works.'

'So Trapnel's going to have a biographer?'

'Myself.'

'Fine.'

'You think it right?'

'Quite right.'

Gwinnett nodded his head.

'I ought to say I'd already planned to get in touch with you, Mr Jenkins—among others who'd known Trapnel—when I reached England after this Conference. I never calculated to find you here.'

After the statement of Gwinnett's Trapnel project, relations might have been expected to become easier. That did not happen; at least easing was by no means immediate. For a minute or two he seemed even to regret the headlong nature of the confession. Then he recovered some of the earlier more amenable manner.

'You did not go on seeing Trapnel right up to his death, I guess?'

'Not for about four or five years before that. It must be the best part of ten years now since I talked to him—though he once sent me a note asking the date when some book had been published, the actual month, I mean. He went completely underground latterly.'

'What book was that—the one he wanted to know about?'

'A collection of essays by L. O. Salvidge called *Paper Wine*. There had been some question of Trapnel reviewing it, but the notice never got written.'

'Where was Trapnel living when he wrote you?'

'He only gave an accommodation address. A newspaper shop in the Islington part of the world.

'I want to see Mr Salvidge too when I get to London.'

'As you know, he contributed an Introduction to a posthumous work of Trapnel's called *Dogs Have No Uncles*.'

'It's good. Not as great as *Camel Ride to the Tomb*, but good. What a sense of doom that other title gives.'

In contrast with the passing of a prolific writer like Ferrand-Sénéschal, Trapnel's end, in spite of aptness of circumstances, took place unnoticed by the press. That was not surprising. He had produced no 'serious' work during his latter days. Throughout his life he had been accustomed to 'go underground' intermittently, when things took an unfavourable turn; the underground state becoming permanent after the Pamela Widmerpool affair, her destruction of his manuscript, return to her husband. That was when Trapnel disappeared for good. I knew no one who continued to hobnob with him. He must have made business contacts from time to time. His name would occasionally appear in print, or on the air, in connexion with hack work of one kind or another. This was usually radio or television collaboration with a partner, a professional, safely established, to whom Trapnel had passed on a saleable idea he himself lacked energy or will to hammer out to the end. In these exchanges he must have inclined to avoid former friendly affiliations, reminders of 'happier days'. It had to be admitted Trapnel had known 'happier days', even if of a rather special order.

Bagshaw was a case in point of Trapnel deliberately rejecting overtures from an old acquaintance. As he had himself planned after the liquidation of *Fission*, when such fiefs were comparatively easy to seize, Bagshaw had carved out for himself an obscure, but apparently fairly prosperous, little realm in the unruly world of television. Now he was known as 'Lindsay Bagshaw', the first name latent until this coming into his own. I never saw much of him after the magazine ceased publication, though we would run across each other occasionally. Once we met in the lift at Broadcasting House, and he began to speak of Trapnel. Even by then Bagshaw had become rather a changed man. Success, even moderate success, had left a mark.

'I'd have liked Trappy to appear in one of my programmes. Quite impossible to run him to earth. I caught sight of him one day from the top of a 137 bus. It wasn't so much the beard and the long black greatcoat, as that melancholy distinguished air Trappy always had. I couldn't jump off in full flight. It was one of those misty evenings in Langham Place. The lights were shining from all the rows of windows in this building. Trappy was standing by that church with the pointed spire. He was looking up at those thousand windows of the BBC, all ablaze with light. Something about him made me feel very sad. I couldn't help thinking of the Scholar Gypsy, and Christ-Church hall, and all that, even though I wasn't at the university myself, and it wasn't snowing. I thought it would have been a splendid shot in a film. I wondered if he'd agree to do a documentary about his own failure in life—comparative, I mean. About a month later, I ran into one of his understrappers in a pub. He was going to see Trappy later that evening. I sent a note, but it wasn't any good. No answer.'

There was also the occasional Trapnel story or article to appear, nothing to be ashamed of, at the same time nothing comparable with the old Trapnel standard. This submerged period of Trapnel's life could not have been enviable. He abandoned The Hero of Acre, all the other pubs where he had been accustomed to harangue an assemblage of chosen followers. The roving intelligentsia of the saloon bar—cultural nomads of a race never likely to penetrate the international steppe—professional topers, itinerant bores, near-criminals, knew him no more. They were thrown back on their own resources, had to keep themselves instructed and amused in other ways. Where Trapnel himself went, whom he saw, how he remained alive, were all hard to imagine. Probably there remained women to find him still passable enough even in decline; more or less devoted mistresses to maintain survival of a sort. As Trapnel himself might have insisted—one could hear his dry harsh voice speaking the words—a washed-up condition is not necessarily an unattractive one to a woman. That had also been one of Barnby's themes: 'Ladies like a man to rescue. A job that offers a challenge. They can annex the property at a cheap rate, and ruthlessly develop it.'

Trapnel may have been annexed by a woman, not much development feasible, minimum financial security about the best to be hoped. That in itself was after all something. Gwinnett agreed the plausible assumption, after the collapse of Trapnel's hopes, was personal administration taken over by a relatively prudent wage-earning mistress; even a good-hearted landlady, whose commonsense regulated money matters, such as they were, warding off actual destitution. That is, Gwinnett had nothing else to offer. His accord was not enthusiastic. Comparative reluctance to accept that a woman might have kept Trapnel going, made me wonder whether Gwinnett were not homosexual. He might be a homosexual as well as a redeemed drunk; the former state, possibly repressed, seeking outlet in the latter. Then he brought back the subject of women himself.

'I'd like to ask you about this girl—the castrating one.'

'Pamela Widmerpool?'

'I've been spun so many yarns about her.'

The stories he had been told were, on the whole, garbled in a manner to make the true circumstances of Trapnel's life all but unrecognizable. It was in any case a field where accuracy was hard to come by. At the same time, if Gwinnett's information had percolated through misinformed sources, he himself showed unexpected flashes of insight. Enormous simplifications were possibly necessary to carry a deeper truth than lay on the surface of a mass of unsorted detail. That was, after all, what happened when history was written; many, if not most, of the true facts discarded. Besides, what could be called unreservedly true when closely examined, especially about Trapnel? The stories told to Gwinnett became notably blurred in their inferences about Pamela Widmerpool. Trapnel's relationship with her emerged as little more than a love affair that had gone wrong, something that might have happened to anybody. Naturally, in one sense, it *was* a love affair that had gone wrong, but subtlety was required to express the unusual nature of that love affair, its start, progress, termination. All these had been conveyed with such lack of finesse that no kind of justice was done to the exceptional nature of those concerned: Pamela: Widmerpool: Trapnel himself. For Gwinnett, too, there existed the seldom remittent difficulty of translating the personalities and doings of English material into American terms.

The impression these reports had left with him was of a man's luck—Trapnel's luck—having suddenly, meaninglessly, taken a turn for the worse. From being, in his way, a notable writer, a promising career ahead of him, Trapnel had been suddenly, inexorably, struck down by misfortune, although leading much the same sort of life as he had always led, with girls not so wholly different from Pamela, before he had linked himself to her. Sometimes Gwinnett hedged a little, but that main interpretation was the one he was prepared, even if unwillingly, to accept.

'Trapnel's crack-up is easy for an American to understand. If you don't mind my saying so, to find a writer of even your age on his feet, and working, is not all that common with us.'

'Some of the violent consuming nervous American energy was characteristic of Trapnel too.'

'He'd no American blood?'

'Not that I know of.'

'I'd like to think he had.'

'His father was a jockey in Egypt. If Trapnel had written about that we'd have a completer picture.'

'Completion was one of the things Trapnel aimed at, you said—the idea of the Complete Man. Did he achieve some of that? I think so.'

'Vigny says the poet is not a sport of nature, his destiny is the human predicament.'

'And the concept was challenged by this girl—as it were invalidated.'

Gwinnett thought about that for a moment, almost as if he were hoping to rebut his own conjecture. Then he laughed, and changed his tone.

'It was the god Hercules deserting Antony.'

'As a matter of fact the god Hercules returned in Trapnel's case. There was music in the air again, though only briefly.'

Gwinnett had heard more misleading accounts. The best in existence was probably Malcolm Crowding's. It was at least first-hand. No doubt Crowding's story had been a little ornamented with the passage of time, no worse than that. The basic facts were that Trapnel had found himself in possession of a hundred pounds. No one argued about that, a fact in itself sufficiently extraordinary. What was additionally astonishing, almost a miracle, was the sum being in notes. A cheque might have brought quite different consequences. Where opinion chiefly differed was in the provenance of the money. It was usually designated, rather pedestrianly, as payment for forgotten 'rights', which had finally borne fruit in some medium functioning in long delayed action, possibly from a foreign country. Alternatively, more picturesquely, the hundred pounds was said to be a legacy left to Trapnel's father, the celebrated jockey, as one of the items in the eccentric will of a grateful backer of the winning horse, ridden by Trapnel *père*, at a long forgotten Egyptian race-meeting. By slow but workmanlike processes of the law, the bequest had in due course been deflected to Trapnel himself as heir and successor, the sum delivered to him. If the latter origin were true, the whimsical testator must either have had a long memory, or omitted to overhaul his will for a great many years. In either case, almost equally surprising, Trapnel was traced, the money handed over in cash. The only colourable explanation was that Trapnel, improbable as that might seem, having found his way personally to the intermediary—lawyer, accountant, publisher, agent—by his old skill induced whoever was in charge to accept a receipt for notes. If so, that final mustering of Trapnel's long dormant forces proved dramatically, in a sense appropriately, fatal.

Were the hypothesis of the female guardian a correct one (situation reminiscent of Miss Weedon curing Stringham of drink), she would in the normal course of things certainly intercept any money Trapnel might earn, or, more credibly, derive from 'public assistance'. Even in his less calamitous days, there had been interludes in the past of signing on at 'the Labour'—the Labour Exchange—though what trade or vocation Trapnel claimed at such emergencies was never revealed. When, so transcendentally, the hundred pounds in cash materialized into his hands in the manner of a highly proficient conjuror, Trapnel (like Stringham) must have evaded his keeper, reverted to type in the traditional manner, decided, now the money had come his way in this utterly unforeseen manner, to squander it gloriously in The Hero of Acre.

Malcolm Crowding's account of Trapnel's apotheosis in The Hero was likely to be the most reliable. He had been there in person. Besides, his own works proclaimed him a writer of little or no imagination. He could never have invented such a story. By that time he had ceased to publish verse, and was lecturing on English literature at a newly-founded provincial university, in fact spending the night in London in connexion with the editing of a textbook. He approached the subject of Trapnel, like his own academic work, in a spirit of the severest literary puritanism. On impulse, a wish to call up old times, he had dropped in that night to The Hero.

'I expect he hoped to pick up a boy-friend,' said Evadne Clapham. 'The Hero was full of queers when I was taken there last. It was much against my will in any case. They were all standing round wide-eyed watching that old wretch Heather Hopkins giving an imitation of John Foster Dulles in his galoshes.'

Whatever Malcolm Crowding's original intention, Trapnel's arrival in The Hero offered something worth while; in fact supplied a story to become, ever after, Crowding's most notable set-piece.

'It was Lazarus coming back from the Dead. Better than that, because Lazarus didn't buy everyone a drink—at least there's no mention of that in Holy Writ.'

Somebody present—probably Evadne Clapham again, bent on disorganizing the side-effects of Crowding's story—suggested that free drinks were to be inferred on the earlier resurrectionary occasion from Tennyson:

> 'When Lazarus left his charnel-cave . . .
> The streets were filled with joyful sound.'

Crowding refused to allow his narrative to be obstructed by inconclusive pedantry of that sort. He merely increased the vibrant note of his rather shrill voice. Evadne Clapham, or whoever else it was interrupting, ceased to argue. Crowding, feeling the Tennysonian phrase appropriate enough for Trapnel's sojourn in outer darkness, developed new metaphor in the direction of Shelley.

'The charnel cave was put behind him. It was Trapnel Unbound.'

There were present in The Hero old stagers who had endured in that spot since Trapnel's own great days, when, tall, bearded, loquacious, didactic, draped in his dyed greatcoat, toying with the death's head swordstick, he had laid down the law on literature, commanded the price of a drink (though never as now), dominated the length of the saloon bar. His arrival was a thunderbolt. Even the most complacent of The Hero's soaks were jolted by it from their evening's drinking. Crowding never tired of telling the story.

'X started in at once—Wodehouse and Wittgenstein, Malraux and the Marx Brothers—it was just like the old days, though never before had The Hero known a night like that for free drinks.'

Unlike the mourners of Lazarus—to accept Crowding's apprehension of the incident, rather than Evadne Clapham's—the mourners of Trapnel, as, on the strength of his resurrection, they were soon to become, were stood round after round. The Hero, one of those old-fashioned pubs in grained pitchpine with engraved looking-glass (what Mr Deacon used to call a 'gin palace'), was anatomized into half-a-dozen or more separate compartments, subtly differentiating, in the traditional British manner, social subdivisions of its clientèle, according to temperament or means: saloon bar: public bar: private bar: ladies' bar: wine bar: off-licence: possibly others too. Customers occupied in these peripheries were all included in the Trapnel largesse, no less than those in the saloon bar, where he had manifested himself. Swept in, too, were several birds of passage, transients buying half-a-bottle in the off-licence. The fountains ran with wine, more precisely with bitter and scotch. News of this boundless munificence got round immediately, not only emptying The French-polishers' Arms opposite—according to Crowding, lately a serious rival to The Hero in draining off a sediment of discontented intellectuals—but also considerably reducing numbers in The Marquess of Sleaford round the corner, where intellectuals were virtually unknown. Not only were these two latter pubs practically cleared of customers, but what Crowding called a 'thirsty concourse' poured into The Hero from The Wheelbarrow (at the time of Bagshaw's first marriage, his last port of call on the way home, owing to staying open until eleven), auxiliary drinkers from other taverns being all hospitably received by Trapnel, if they could only get near enough to him. Crowding, telling the story, would here shake his head.

'X looked dreadfully ill. As near the image of Death as the knob of that stick he used to carry round, before he threw it into the Grand Union Canal. His face was even whiter.'

Trapnel had been at the height of his old form, talking at the top of his voice, laughing, shouting, contradicting, laying down the law about books and writers, films and film stars, giving prolonged imitations of Boris Karloff; in general reconstructing in its most intrinsic aspects his own persona of years gone by. Not only Crowding, but many others, agreed The Hero had never known such a night. That could not go on for ever. An end had to come. Finally, inexorably, closing time was announced. This moment always represented the peak of Crowding's narrative.

'X walked through the doors of The Hero like a king. There was real dignity in his stride. It was a royal progress. Courtiers followed in his wake. You can imagine—free drinks—there was quite a crowd by that time, some of them singing, as it might be, chants in a patron's praise. X stopped outside, and they all stood round. He waited for a moment by the kerb. Everyone kept back somehow, as if they didn't dare be too familiar. X gazed up the street, then down it, in that proud way of his. He must have been looking for a taxi. He hadn't said yet where he wanted to go. I noticed for the first time that his beard was turning grey. Suddenly he gave a start, remembering something. He wrung his hands, rushed back, tried to get into the pub again through the outer doors, which they were barring up. They wouldn't let him back. He gave a loud cry.

' "I've forgotten my stick. I've lost my stick. My death's head stick."

'Of course they wouldn't let him in again after closing time. Somebody told him he hadn't brought a stick with him. Whoever it was couldn't have known about the sword-stick. X didn't take that in for a second or two. When he did, he began to laugh. He laughed and laughed, like one of his own impersonations of a horror film—and it was pretty horrible too. He went on laughing for some minutes, walking slowly back to the edge of the pavement. People close said his look was quite frightening.

' "No," he said. "Of course I haven't got a stick any longer, have I? I sacrificed it. Nor a bloody novel. I haven't got that either."

'Then he heeled over into the gutter. Everybody thought he was drunk.'

At this point in the narrative Crowding would pause, his face apt to twitch so violently that the more sensitive of his listeners had to turn away. He would then slow up the tempo of the narrative for its termination.

'Drunk? They were sadly in error. I watched Trapnel the whole time we were in the saloon bar together. He consumed exactly one bloody double Three Star in the course of the whole bloody time he was in The Hero.'

After adding this comment as a kind of tailpiece to his chronicle, Crowding always stopped, and glared round like a man expecting contradiction of the most vigorous kind. Contradiction never came. Even Evadne Clapham was silent. Whether that was owed to the force of Crowding's recital, or because most of the audience usually knew Trapnel had never been a great drinker, was uncertain. The surmise that alcohol in itself played no great part in his final collapse was no doubt correct, though he may have allowed himself that night an unwise admixture of drink and 'pills'; simply too many pills. Either could have resulted from finding himself unexpectedly in funds. An inner fatigue, utter moral exhaustion, had to be taken into consideration too. He was removed from the street in due course, to a hospital, dying an hour or two later. By the time the ambulance arrived, the near-criminal potential of the traditional Trapnel entourage had extracted from his pockets all remnants, if such there were, of the hundred pounds. He died quite penniless. At that particular juncture, he appeared to be living alone. That probably explained getting his hands on the money. Crowding never mentioned this last fact, but he would change his tone, from pub crony to academic critic, as he drew to an end.

'I respected the man more than his work. He became a legend in his own lifetime. He often said so himself, and with truth. Sometimes my students ask me to tell them about him—and did you once see Trapnel plain? I reply "I did", and often stopped and spoke with him. At the same time I am put in a quandary. These young people find the intellectual climate of *Camel Ride to the Tomb* unsatisfying. I cannot in all fairness blame them. Where, they say, is the social conscience? I have to reply, they look in vain.'

At the time of his death, Trapnel's *œuvre*, so far as I knew, consisted of *The Camel*; the selection of short stories published as *Bin Ends*; a fair amount of additional stories, never yet collected, some dating back to his early days as a writer before the war (when he had kept himself alive by all sorts of odd employments); a miscellany of occasional pieces, criticism (some of it quite good), articles, parodies, stuff written for papers like *Fission*, and never brought together; finally the *conte* (unpublished in Trapnel's lifetime on account of some legal battle over 'rights') *Dogs Have No Uncles*. A work in Trapnel's liveliest manner, almost long enough to be called a novel, its posthumous appearance with Salvidge's Introduction had done something to prevent Trapnel's reputation from slumping too severely after his death. All this did not constitute a large aggregate of work, but, together with what was available in other material, should make a respectable critical biography. In any case, Trapnel's was still an unexplored period. Gwinnett added another item.

'Did you know he kept a *Commonplace Book* during his last years?'

'Where is it?'

'I have it myself.'

Gwinnett seemed for a moment uncertain as to what he was prepared to say on the subject. Then, after this hesitation, described how the librarian of his university, knowing about Gwinnett's interest in Trapnel, had drawn attention to an English bookseller's catalogue, which listed, among other manscripts offered for sale, certain papers of Trapnel's come on the market. The price was not high, the College authorities uninterested. Gwinnett acquired these odds and ends himself. None of them turned out of startling interest, even the *Commonplace Book*, though there was enough there to make its purchase worth while to a potential biographer. That was Gwinnett's own account.

'I'll show you the book. Some of the notes—they're all abbreviated, almost a code—are surely about the castrating girl. You say she's married to—is the name Widmerpool?'

'Yes, she's still married to him.'

That was strange enough. In the course of a dozen years or more of the Widmerpools' married life many stories had gone round, the least of them lurid enough to imply the union could scarcely persist a week longer, yet it had persisted. They remained together; anyway to the extent of living under the same roof. That phrase did not, in fact, define the situation realistically. Each was usually under the different roof of one or other of Widmerpool's two places of residence. There was the flat in Westminster (one of a large block near the River), and his mother's former cottage in the Stourwater neighbourhood, which (Widmerpool mentioned when we met) had been 'enlarged and improved'.

Stourwater Castle was now a girls' school; rather a fashionable one. The Quiggin twins, Amanda and Belinda, were being educated there.

The existence of these two separate Widmerpool establishments was sometimes offered as explanation of a capacity to remain undivorced, which certainly required elucidation. Pamela would disappear now and then with other men, behaviour apparently accepted by Widmerpool himself, so that it became, as it were, accepted by everyone else, a matter of comparatively little interest. People recently returned from abroad would report that Pamela Widmerpool had been seen in Spain with an ambitious journalist; among the islands of the Ægean with a fashionable don; that one of the generals at a NATO headquarters had fallen out with another senior officer, when she was staying with him; that her visit to an embassy in Asia had resulted in a reshuffle of diplomatic personnel; that the TUC had been put in a flutter one year at their conference by her presence with a delegate at a local hotel. A Pamela Widmerpool anecdote might stop the gap in a languishing dinner-table conversation, but, unless highly spiced, was by now unlikely to hold the attention of the company for long.

'My wife loves travel,' said Widmerpool. 'She likes seeing how other people live.'

No convincing answer had been offered to the question why she did not leave him for one of her many, if soon disillusioned lovers; nor why Widmerpool himself never chose his moment to divorce her. For some reason the *status quo* seemed to suit both. Trapnel, alleging the Widmerpool marriage to exclude sexual relationship (scarcely even tried out), had also spoken in a few tortured sentences of the frustration, agony, alienation, inspired in himself—though he loved her—by Pamela's blend of frigidity with insatiable desire. People who went in for more precise ascriptions in such matters, especially far-fetched or eccentric ones, explained this matrimonial paradox by the theory that Widmerpool actually took pleasure in his wife's infidelities, derived masochistic satisfaction, at the very least felt flattered, by the agitation she inspired. Pamela too, so these amateurs of psychology concluded, on her own side luxuriated no less in enjoyment of a recurrent thrill at being unfaithful. Another husband, less tolerant, could prove less satisfactory. Such hypotheses, if not widely accepted, remained comparatively unchallenged by more convincing speculation. At least they attempted to make sense of an otherwise inexplicable situation. They even offered a dim outline of a genuine, if macabre, bond of union; one very different from Trapnel's enslavement. Even Dicky Umfraville's comment had a certain force.

'Anyway they've remained married. Took me five attempts, even if I placed the right bet in the end.'

Loss of his seat in the Commons did not prevent Widmerpool from remaining a fairly prominent figure in public affairs, though there was some surprise when (a few weeks before the Conference opened in Venice) he was created a Life Peer. This advancement, proceeding through the medium of a Conservative Government, must undoubtedly have been conferred after consultation with Labour sources of authority, then in Opposition. Roddy Cutts, who held a minor post in the Tory administration, agreed that Widmerpool's elevation to the Lords had aroused adverse comment on both sides of the House. At the same time, Cutts was sure the recommendation must have been cleared with the Leader of the Opposition, in spite of his reputed dislike for Widmerpool himself. Cutts was inclined to dismiss talk, such as Bagshaw's, of Widmerpool's fellow-travelling.

'After all, if you're on the Left, you have to take a Leftward line in public. That doesn't necessarily mean you're a Communist. Widmerpool may have had leanings in that direction once—certainly his own side thought so—but after all he's not the only one. Personally I'm inclined to think all that's over and done with. There was a story about his being mixed up with Maclean and Burgess. I can't remember which. It was even said he lent a hand in tipping them off. Somebody did, but I'm sure it wasn't Widmerpool. Besides, I don't believe the man's a bugger for a moment. Labour peers had to be created. It wasn't at all easy to settle on suitable names. Not everyone wants to be kicked upstairs to the Lords. Widmerpool lost his seat. He'd made himself very useful on the financial side at one time or another, no matter what the talk about fellow-travelling. Yes, I mean contribution to Party funds. Why not? The money's got to come from somewhere. Probably undisclosed inner workings of the Labour Party machine played a rôle too. Patronage? Might be. These things happen. No different to ourselves in that respect. A political party has to be operated. The PM would never have gone over Hugh's head. When Widmerpool arrived in the House I found him abrasive about marginal issues. Latterly we've got on pretty well. We may be opponents, that's no reason why one should doubt his sincerity. What is true—probably played a part in the peerage—is the active manner Widmerpool's promoted East/West trade, naturally a sphere where some community of political thought, anyway outward acceptance of the other fellow's point of view, is likely to oil the wheels. Whatever he did in that direction had, of course, the blessing of the Board of Trade. He must have made a packet too. Do you ever drink that wine from round the Black Sea? We don't at all despise it at home. Tastes a bit sultry at times, but has the merit of being cheap. Kenneth Widmerpool's got to do something to bring the pennies in with a wife like that. I daresay he wanted the peerage to induce her to stay.'

This last supposition was unconvincing. It was possible to accept Bagshaw's theory, up to a point, that Widmerpool dreamed of revenging himself on the world; in addition, that his marriage was one of the areas where that mood might seem to some extent justified. The notion that a Life Peerage would impress Pamela was improbable; typical of the unimaginative side of Roddy's nature. That was one's first thought. Then, reconsidering the evidence, the view emerged as one Widmerpool himself might easily hold. Pamela was unlikely to be interested, one way or the other, in whatever prestige might be supposed to attach to that transmutation. She had never shown the smallest inclination to reach out towards more considerable aggrandizements for herself. They were reported, according to good authority, to have been on offer from lovers at different times. Her disregard for anything of the kind, provided its active expression remained within not too outrageous bounds, was one of his wife's few characteristics potentially advantageous to Widmerpool's public life. He could convincingly point to her behaviour as embodiment of contempt for 'The Establishment', an abstraction increasingly belaboured by him in speeches and articles. In fact, considering the Life Peerage in the light of Pamela's past conduct, so far from its creation—as Cutts put forward—assuring an irreducibly solid foundation for a marriage often rocked by upheaval, the reverse appeared more likely, similar landmarks in her husband's career having been emphasized in the past by proportionately augmented scandals. A Life Peerage, as an extreme example of Moreland's conviction that matrimonial discord vibrates on an axis of envy, rather than jealousy, could even portend final severance.

To explain all that, even a small part of it, to Gwinnett, in hope of enlarging his view of the Widmerpools in relation to Trapnel, was not easy; certainly not within the time allotted for sitting under the Veroneses. Nothing about the Trapnel story was simple. Although Gwinnett was quick to grasp things, nothing about his own personality was simple either. He was an altogether unfamiliar type. He himself seemed almost painfully aware of our mutual difficulties of intercommunication. That made things no easier. There was an innate awkwardness about him. Now, for instance, he stood by the table, unable to make up his mind whether or not to accept Dr Brightman's invitation to sit with us.

'What will you drink?'

Without answering, he caught a passing waiter and ordered a citronade. On such a night nothing was more natural than to prefer a cooling soft drink to something stronger, yet again one speculated for some reason about the possibility of an alcoholic past. Something about him suggested rigid control, concealment, an odd way of life. He had the air of punishing himself, possibly for his own supposed social inadequacies. When he sat down, all Dr Brightman's briskness was required to dispel the threat he brought of damped conversation. He had been carrying a newspaper under his arm, which he laid on the table. It was French, the name folded out of sight.

'We were talking of courts and harems, Russell,' said Dr Brightman. 'Those who need them. I'm sure you must have experienced friends like that.'

Gwinnett smiled, but did not comment. The relationship between himself and Dr Brightman appeared good, the best yet, so far as observable. There was none of the coyness that might be suggested by the idea of a distinguished female professor becoming friends with a young academic colleague of the opposite sex. You felt they liked each other, had perhaps learnt from each other, would not for a second hesitate to be tough with each other, if required by circumstance. There was no suggestion of sentimental feelings, a kind of mother/son relationship, just because Dr Brightman had been far from home, Gwinnett something of an oddity in his own surroundings.

'Talking of harems', she said, 'the owner of the Palazzo we're invited to visit tomorrow bears the famous name of Bragadin, and claims to be descended from Casanova's patron, though not, of course, in the legitimate line.'

Gwinnett showed no great interest in that. I asked which of the several Bragadin palaces this was. I had not studied the extra-mural programme carefully, preferring these excursions to come as a series of bracing surprises.

'One never open to the public. Our Conference is greatly favoured. There's a Tiepolo ceiling there on which I've longed to gaze for years. In fact the hint that Conference members might gain access was the chief weapon of Mark Members in overcoming any hesitation in agreeing to attend.'

'It's the Jacky Bragadin one reads about in gossip columns?'

Dr Brightman nodded.

'The Palazzo wasn't inherited. All sorts of people have lived there at one time or another. Jacky Bragadin—though I've no right to speak of him in this familiar manner—bought it just after the war.'

Gwinnett, who had been looking about him without paying much apparent attention to what Dr Brightman was saying, joined in at that.

'Jacky Bragadin's mother's was one of the big American fortunes of the last century. She was a Macwatters of Philadelphia. That's where the funds for the Bragadin Foundation come from.'

'Which have been of good use to most of us in our time,' said Dr Brightman. 'My knowledge of the benefactor, like that of Mr Jenkins, derives chiefly from gossip columns. His well publicized personality remains, all the same, for me an elusive one, beyond an evident taste for entertaining persons as rich as himself. Remarkable that he should have found time enough from that hobby to have given birth to a Foundation.'

'He's not married, I think?'

'Do you imply the Bragadin Foundation is illegitimate too? A case of parthenogenesis, I expect. In any case, I am more concerned with his Tiepolo.'

Tiepolo ranking with Poussin as one of my most admired Masters, I asked the subject of the ceiling, the very existence of which was unknown to me. The bare fact that members of the Conference could visit the Palazzo had been announced, knowledge of its contents no doubt taken for granted in an assembly of intellectuals.

'One of the painter's classical scenes—*Candaules and Gyges*. The subject, thought to have some contemporary reference, caused trouble at the time the ceiling was painted. That's why the tradition of playing the picture down, keeping it almost a secret, has persisted to the present day. The owner is in any case said to be more than a little neurasthenic in approach to his possessions, and much else too.'

Gwinnett knew about the ceiling.

'I've been told it's not unlike the Villa Valmarana *Iphigenia* in composition,' he said. 'The owner won't allow it to be photographed.'

He turned to me.

'Speaking about the *Iphigenia* again made me think of what we were talking about at that luncheon.'

He picked up from the table the paper he had brought with him, opened it, folding back a page. It was *Détective*, *Içi Paris*, or another of those French periodicals that explore at greater length cases, usually already reported, which through expansion promise more pungent details of crime or scandal. Gwinnett singled out two sheets, the central spread. He was about to hand them over, but Dr Brightman, catching the name under a photograph, intercepted the paper.

'Good gracious,' she said. 'That ugly little man? I should never have thought it.'

I looked over her shoulder. The headline ran along the top of both pages.

L'APRES-MIDI D'UN MONSTRE?

Two large cut-out photographs stretched across the typeface, the story, whatever it was, fitting round their edges. In spite of Dr Brightman's lack of principle in appropriating the letterpress to herself, and although I was not close enough to read the sub-titles, the likenesses of the two persons portrayed were immediately recognizable. Both photographs had manifestly been taken some years before, ten at least. In fact that of Ferrand-Sénéschal made him look a man in early middle-age. He had been caught on some public occasion, mouth wide open, hands raised above his head in a passionate gesture, almost as if he, too, were singing *Funiculì-Funiculà*, miming the ascending cable. No doubt he had been snapped addressing a large audience on some political or cultural theme.

The other photograph, also far from recent, though less time-expired than Ferrand-Sénéschal's, was more interesting. It was of Pamela Widmerpool. Her hair-do suggested the end of the war, or not long after. The picture could have dated from the year of her marriage to Widmerpool, possibly even taken at the moment of emergence from the ceremony. In spite of heavy touching-up on the part of the blockmaker, the expression was resentful enough for that. This touching-up had added a decidedly French air to her appearance. That could have been acquired not only from the cupid's bow mouth, brutally superimposed on her own, but, more universally, from the manner in which photographic portraiture in the press automatically assumes the national characteristics of whatever country has processed the blocks, fabricated their 'screen'; an extension of the law that makes the photographer impose his personal view of them on individuals photographed. Dr Brightman scrutinized carefully both pictures.

'Lady Widmerpool? A very bedworthy gentlewoman, I understand. But Ferrand-Sénéschal? I am frankly surprised. I should never have guessed . . . assoiffé de plaisir . . . dévoré de désir . . . terrible obsession . . . How unchanged remains the French view of English life—phlegmatic, sadistic aristocrats, moving coldly and silently from one atrocity to another through the fogs of le Hyde Park and les Jardins de Kensington.'

I tried to peer over Dr Brightman's shoulder at what was written. Clutching the paper obstinately, she refused to surrender an inch of its surface.

'The implication is that Lady Widmerpool visited Ferrand-Sénéschal in his luxurious hotel suite—accommodation Sardanapalus would have found over-indulgent—only a few hours before the Reaper. Even that is chiefly my own assumption. Nothing definite is even hinted.'

Gwinnett laughed abruptly, rather uncomfortably. His laugh was high and nervous. He addressed me again.

'Isn't that the lady we talked about—Trapnel's girl?'

'Certainly.'

'The implication is she was in bed with this Frenchman after he was dead.'

'Is that how you read it?'

Dr Brightman disregarded our exchange, too engrossed to hear, or because Trapnel's name meant nothing to her. From time to time she read out a phrase that took her fancy.

'Fougueuse sensualité . . . étranges caprices . . . amitiés équivoques . . . We never seem to get anything solid. Odieux chantages . . . but of whom? Situation genanté . . . Then why not tell us about it? Le scandale éclate . . . It never seems to have done so. I am still not at all sure what happened, scarcely wiser than after reading the headline.'

She handed the paper over at last. Reservations about its interest were more than justified. As usual in such journalism, promise was far short of performance. There was a hint that some scandal about Ferrand-Sénéschal had been hushed up in France fairly recently, no details given, only pious horror expressed. That social engagements since arrival in London sufficiently explained taking an afternoon's rest, even between sheets, in the light of medical advice, was altogether ignored. References to Pamela—called 'Lady Pamela Widmerpool'—were even less specific. Indeed, they were written without serious attempt to fit her into the Ferrand-Sénéschal story, such as it was. Nothing whatever was alleged against her, except that she—apparently other persons too—had visited the hotel suite at one time or another. By implication, Ferrand-Sénéschal's habits so notorious, that visit in itself was damaging enough. Her own pranks were touched on only vaguely, not very accurately, though more directly than the law of libel would have allowed an English paper. Widmerpool was treated simply as a great nobleman of the Old School.

'One of my maiden aunts—a social category no longer extant—used to live permanently in that hotel,' said Dr Brightman. 'I'm sure she had no idea things like that were going on there. The place did not at all suggest gaiety. She would have been surprised. Rather thrilled too, I think.'

The respectable, unpretentious style of Ferrand-Sénéschal's hotel disavowed the *grand luxe* attributed to his two-room suite. It was only a few streets away from the former Jeavons residence in South Kensington, converted by Ted Jeavons after the war into several small flats, one of which he inhabited himself. The fact that Ferrand-Sénéschal was on his way to the Conference later on found no place in the *Détective* story, probably regarded as a banal detail likely to prejudice inferences that he had come to London with the sole purpose of participating in an orgy. Dr Brightman reached out for the paper again. She examined the picture of Pamela.

'I can add my own small contribution to the bulletin,' she said. 'The lady in question is in Venice at this moment.'

Gwinnett, who had been sitting silent, chewing at his thumbnail, shifted forward.

'She is, Emily? You've seen her?'

This time he sounded quite excited. Dr Brightman made a gesture to indicate she had enjoyed no such luck.

'I was so informed by a French colleague, who is also attending the Conference. We normally correspond about Gallo-Roman personal names, with special reference to Brittany. On this occasion I fear we descended to gossip. My friend must be unaware of the reference here to Lady Widmerpool, or I'm sure he would have mentioned it. He had witnessed what he described as an extraordinary incident at the French Embassy in London, where Lady Widmerpool, quite deliberately, broke the back of a small gilt chair during supper. That made such an impression, he immediately recognized her profile seen at Quadri's.'

'I'd give something to meet that lady.'

Gwinnett did not sound hopeful. Dr Brightman and I assured him there should be no difficulty in arranging that.

'You've just got to sit in the Piazza long enough. You see everyone in the world, if you do that.'

'But I don't know Lady Widmerpool.'

'I'll introduce you.'

That was said in the heat of the moment. Afterwards, immediately afterwards, it was to be seen as a rash offer. I hoped she would not walk into the hotel at that moment. The very idea of her being in Venice made Gwinnett restless, a state alternating in him with a kind of torpor. He rose from the table, then paused for a moment, again unsure what he wanted to do. He came to a decision.

'I'll take a stroll in the Piazza right now. Do you mind if I retain this journal?'

That could not be refused, since it belonged to him, though I had not yet studied the piece thoroughly. He folded it again, stood in thought for a moment, said goodnight. We said goodnight to him in return. It was not impossible that he might see Pamela Widmerpool in St Mark's Square. Perhaps he hoped to pick up someone there in any case. A girl? A man? One felt rather ashamed of these speculations, as earlier of wondering whether he was an ex-alcoholic. He had shown no sign whatever of seeking in Venice any sort of dissipation. The notion that he was bent on some such goal, no doubt quite unfounded, attached to his withdrawn mysterious air, a little uncommon in an American, anyway in Gwinnett's form. As soon as he was gone, Dr Brightman, without any prompting, began to speak of him.

'Let me tell you about Russell Gwinnett.'

'Please do.'

'He is a small fragment detached from the comparatively extensive and cavernous grottoes of gothic America. He is part of an Old America—the oldest—yet has become in some respects the New America. I hardly know how to put it.'

'Halfway between Henry Adams and Charles Addams?'

'Not bad. In fact alpha plus, insomuch as Henry Adams says that true eccentricity is in a tone, and only the conventional approach loves to assume unconventionality. Russell is unconventional by nature, not by choice. Even then, only in certain respects. He is good at such sports as racquets, skating, skiing. If there is a superfluity of Edgar Allan Poe brought up to date, there is also a touch of Edwin Arlington Robinson.'

'You outrun my literary bounds.'

'But you can at least understand that Russell is at once intensely American, yet allergic to American life. That, in itself, can be paralleled, though not quite in Russell's terms. To quote Adams again, he is not one of those Americans who can only assert or deny. I did not use the comparison of the two poets recklessly. Russell, too, hoped to be a poet. He was sufficiently self-critical to see that was not to be. He also draws quite well. Almost always portraits of himself. We saw a lot of each other when I was over there. He is a nice young man, cagey in certain moods.'

'You know he is writing a book about X. Trapnel. That's why he wants to meet Pamela Widmerpool.'

'Trapnel is only a name to me. One of my pupils used to rave about his books. If Russell does that, he will do it well. He is industrious, in spite of his singularities, perhaps because of them. Had he been an English undergraduate, his rooms would have been equipped with black candles, skulls, the odour of incense. He likes Death. That atmosphere is not the American tradition. The taste has told against him, notwithstanding the significance of his name. There was also some kind of a tragedy in his early college days. He was friendly with a girl who committed suicide—at least she seems to have committed suicide. Perhaps it was an accident. He was not in the smallest degree to blame.'

'Why is his name significant?'

'He is descended—collaterally, I understand—from what is known as a "Signer", one Button Gwinnett, who set his name to the Declaration of Independence. Both halves of the name are of interest to persons like oneself, "Gwinnett", of course, "Gwynedd", meaning North Wales—the Buttons, a South Wales family, probably *advenae*. A small piece of topographical history neatly established by nomenclature.'

'I don't know how these things are looked on in America.'

'Like so much else, the attitude is ambivalent. In general, anyway in the right circles, to be descended from a Signer can be highly regarded, even if many such have passed into obscurity. Some Americans will, of course, deny any interest whatever in such trivial matters.'

'Kind hearts are more than Cabots?'

'And simple faith than Mormon blood. This is something of a paradox in that the transgression—crime perhaps—of America has been to reject Classicism for Romanticism. The national distaste for moderation—to which Henry Adams referred—inevitably leads to such a choice. Russell himself is far from immune, though you might not guess that from outward bearing. Profound Romanticism is bound in due course to dilate towards its gothic extremities. In his particular case, family history may have helped.'

'It is often pointed out that one form of Romanticism is to be self-consciously Classical, but what you say accords with Gwinnett's choice of Trapnel as a subject. Let's hope he treats Trapnel's own Romanticism in a Classical manner.'

'Naturally the terms are hopelessly imprecise. That does not make them valueless. Baudelaire and Swinburne have Classical statements to make—more than many people are aware who regard them as pure Romantics—but their gothic side is equally undeniable. Underneath Russell Gwinnett's staid exterior I suspect traces of an American Byron or Berlioz. I spoke of Poe, the preoccupation with Death. When there was trouble about this girl, it was because he had broken into the place where her body was. Some found it deeply touching . . . others . . . well . . .'

'Were there a lot of girls?'

'Apparently none after that. No one seems to know why. Again, some look on that with admiration, others deem it unsatisfactory.'

'As to Byron—what you said about Button Gwinnett—was this Gwinnett brought up in a similar tradition of high descent, I mean in American terms?'

'His grandfather was a fairly successful lawyer, the father some sort of a bad lot, alcoholic, spendthrift, deserted Russell's mother at an early age. He is still alive, I believe. There were money difficulties about going to college, and so on. But we will talk more of Russell Gwinnett, and American gothicism, another time. Now I must go to bed. Fatigue comes on one suddenly here, delayed action after listening to all those speeches in demotic French about the Obligations of the Intellectual. I shall bid you goodnight. Tomorrow we meet under the Tiepolo ceiling.'

Not long after that I turned in too. The night had become a trifle cooler. Through the window of my bedroom the musicians' refrain was to be heard in the distance. Perhaps the songs were no longer theirs, cadences wafted now synthetically from the radio. For a while I tried to read in bed, *The Castle of Fratta*, a translation brought with me as appropriate. Nievo's view of Bonaparte's invasion of Italy was an antidote to Stendhal's. The novel might make a good film in the epic manner. I rather regretted not staying on for the Film Festival, more since I had never attended a Film Festival than because of anything very exciting on offer. A German picture about a prostitute who blackmailed her clients aroused a faint sense of curiosity. Then there was a British one, much recommended, adaptation of a Thomas Hardy story, in which Polly Duport was playing the lead.

I had seen Polly Duport act quite often, never again met her, since the day when we had travelled back to the War Office, with her mother and stepfather, Colonel Flores, in his official car, after the Victory Day Service at St Paul's. Then she had seemed charming, well brought up, a beauty too, with that unfledged look of a young, shy, slender animal. Now she was quite a famous actress. Her gifts had turned out for the Theatre, rather than everyday life, public rather than private. Anyone immersed in the English

Theatre would undoubtedly put her among the three or four of her age and sex at the top of the profession. It was, so it seemed to me, not a very 'interesting' talent, though immensely 'finished'. She had been married for a time to a well-known actor. They had separated. Far from given to love affairs, she lived almost as a nun, it was said, devoted to the stage and its life. This was unlike her mother, whose voice and gestures Polly Duport sometimes recalled on the stage, without any of the mystery Jean had once seemed to exhale. Possibly something of her father's business ability, in one sense, taste for work, accounted for his daughter's serious approach to her profession, lack of interest in private life. The Hardy part was a new line for her. She was said to excel in it anything she had done before. That estimate might be consequence of an energetic publicity campaign.

Musings about the past shifted to the time when I had stayed in this hotel as a boy, to that eternal question of what constitutes experience. A close examination of what happened at any given period in itself provokes an unnatural element, like looking at a large oil painting under a magnifying glass, the over-all effect lost. Nievo, for example, was an over-all effect writer, even when he dealt with childhood. I tried to reconstruct the earlier visit. We had come to Venice because my father liked spending his 'leave' in France or Italy. However much they might be wanting in other respects, he approved of the Latin approach to sex and food. That did not mean he was always at ease on the Continent, but then, in any fundamental sense, he was rarely at ease in his own country. His temperament, a craft of light tonnage, borne effortlessly into heavy seas no matter how calm the weather on setting sail, was preordained to violent ups and downs in foreign waters. Language, currency, timetables, passports, cabmen, waiters, guides, touts, all the paraphernalia and hubbub incidental to travel, were scarcely required for the barometer to register gale force. He was, at the same time, always prepared to undertake any expedition, intricate or arduous, in the interests of sightseeing—or ingenious economy, like sitting up on a station platform for a special train in the small hours—though not necessarily displaying a tolerant spirit while such excursions were in progress. His aesthetic tastes were varied, sometimes comparatively daring, sometimes stolidly conventional, but, once he had taken a fancy to a work of art, monument, building, landscape, that another critic might set a lower value on it than himself was altogether beyond his comprehension. He never stood in front of the Mona Lisa without remarking that, in the eyes of trivial people, the chief interest of Leonardo's masterpiece was to have once been stolen from the Louvre; thereby—as with much else in life—managing to have his cake and eat it, taste the sweets of banality, while ostensibly decrying their flavour.

My mother, too, liked these Continental trips. She enjoyed sightseeing, to which she brought a good deal of general knowledge, wholly untouched by intellectual theory; except possibly as provided by a much earlier, almost pre-Victorian tradition of upbringing. Garlic apart, she too was well disposed to the menus of France and Italy, insomuch as she ever allowed herself any self-indulgence; except perhaps indulgence of an emotional kind, even that rather special in expression. More important, for this last reason, was the manner in which foreign travel, at least in theory, offered relaxation to my father from a pretty chronic state of tension about his career, health, money, housing, hobbies, everything that was his; an innate fretfulness of spirit that seemed automatically to generate good reason to fret.

To emerge from a bank in Rome, notecase filled a moment before with the relatively large sum drawn to settle a week's hotel bill for three persons, and buy tickets for the return journey to England, then have your pocket picked while standing on the outside platform of a crowded tram, is a misadventure to fall to anyone's lot. On the other hand, for a French porter's carrying-strap to split assunder as he mounted the gangway of a Channel steamer with two suitcases across his shoulder, precipitating both into Dieppe harbour, was likely to befall only a traveller in a peculiar degree subject to such tribulations. It was additionally characteristic that the submerged suitcases (home forty-eight hours later in the immutably briny condition of a sea-god's baggage) contained not only a comparatively new dinner jacket (then a feature of Continental hotels), but also the two volumes of Pennells' *Life of Whistler*. Whistler was a painter my father admired. He had bought the books in Paris because his old friend Daniel Tokenhouse reported the French edition to have the same illustrations as the English, the price appreciably cheaper. To recall that was a reminder that I must make an effort to see Tokenhouse before I left Venice.

My father had few friends. The cause of that was not, I think, his own ever smouldering irascibility. People put up surprisingly well with irascibility, some even finding in it a spice to life otherwise humdrum. There is little evidence that the irascible, as a class, are friendless, and my father's bursts of temper may, for certain acquaintances, have added to the excitement of knowing him. It was more a kind of diffidence, uncertainty of himself (to some extent inducing the irascibility) that also militated against intimacy. Whatever the reason, by the time he reached later life, he had quarrelled with the few old friends who remained, or given them up as a matter of principle. Daniel Tokenhouse hung on longer than most, possibly because he too was decidedly irascible. In the end a row, brisk and rigorous, parted them for good.

Tokenhouse, going back to earliest days, had been a Sandhurst contemporary, though friendship, from the first tempered by squabbles, took root in the years after the South African War. The relationship had some basis in a common leaning towards the arts, a field in which Tokenhouse was the more instructed. It was strengthened by a shared taste for arguing. Those were the similarities. They differed in that Tokenhouse—like Uncle Giles—complained from the beginning that the army did not suit him, while my father, addicted to grumbling like most professional soldiers, never seriously saw himself in another rôle. Tokenhouse had specific ambitions. My father put them in a nutshell.

'For reasons best known to himself, Dan always hankered after publishing picture books.'

At the outset of the 'first' war, Tokenhouse, serving with the Expeditionary Force, contracted typhoid. He remained in poor health, through no fault of his own, doing duty in a series of colourless military employments, which took him no further than the rank of major. Whether or not he would have remained in the army had not some relation died, I do not know. As it was, he was left just enough money to be independent of his pay. He resigned his commission, taking immediate steps to gratify the aspiration towards 'picture books'. Tokenhouse did that with characteristic thoroughness, learning the business from the beginning, then investing his capital in a partnership of the kind he had in mind, a firm trafficking not only in 'the fine arts', but also topography and textbooks. One consequence of this was that I myself spent several years of early life in the same business, Tokenhouse my boss. We got on pretty well together. He had an unusual flair for that sort of publishing, making occasional errors of judgment—St John Clarke's Introduction to *The Art of Horace Isbister* one of the minor miscalculations—but on the whole a mixture of hard work, shrewdness, backing his own often eccentric judgment, produced successful results.

When it came to being hasty in temper, idiosyncratic in conduct, my father and Tokenhouse could, so to speak, give each other a game, but, acceptable as a brother-officer less successful than himself, Tokenhouse became gradually less admissible as a very reasonably prosperous civilian; more especially after my father himself was forced to leave the army on account of ill health. Minor skirmishes between them began to take on a note of increasing asperity.

'Dan would have been axed anyway,' said my father. 'Just as well there was a trade to which he could turn his hand, and money enough to buy his way into it. Dan would never have wriggled himself through the bottleneck for officers of his type and seniority. You know, as a young man, old Dan seriously thought of going into the Church. It was touch and go. Then some bishop made a public statement of which he disapproved, and he decided for the army, which his family had always wanted.'

Whether or not that was true, there could be no doubt Tokenhouse's nature included an inveterate puritanism, which army life had by no means decreased. Having abandoned the idea of taking Holy Orders, he developed an absolutely fanatical hatred for religion in any form, even the association of his own forename with a biblical character, thereby suggesting involuntary commitment, becoming a vexation to him. This puritanism also showed itself in dislike for any hint of sensuality in the arts, almost to the extent of handicapping a capacity for making money out of them. Even my parents, who knew him well, admitted that Tokenhouse's sex life had remained undisclosed throughout the years. Not the smallest interest in women had ever been uncovered; nor, for that matter, in his own sex either. He seemed quite unaware of the physical attributes of those he came across, though perhaps an unusually good-looking lady would just perceptibly heighten his accustomed brusqueness. That was my own impression after working for several years in the same office, a condition that can reveal a colleague, especially a superior, with an often devastating clarity.

This apparent non-existence of sexual partiality could have been due to the fact that Tokenhouse was aware of none. General Conyers (had they met, which never happened) might have hazarded a favourite solution, 'a case of exaggerated narcissism'. The peculiarities of Tokenhouse's subsequent conduct may have had their roots there; reaction perhaps from too rigid control, physical and emotional. The only personal relaxation he ever allowed himself, so far as was known, consisted in fairly regular practice of sparetime painting. Otherwise he was always engaged in business, direct or indirect in form.

Painting was a hobby of long standing. The pictures, if a school had to be named, showed faintly discernible traces of influence filtered down from the Camden Town Group. Rising to no great heights as masterpieces of landscape, they did convey an absolutely genuine sense of inner moral discomfort. A Tokenhouse canvas possessed none of the self-conscious professionalism of Mr Deacon's scenes from Greek and Roman daily life, flashy in their way, even when handled without notable competence. Tokenhouse, on the contrary, took pride in being an amateur. He always made a point of that status. It was therefore a surprise to his friends—matter of disapproval to my father—when he announced that he was going to retire from publishing, and take up painting as a full-time occupation. That was about six months before 'Munich'. By that time I had left the firm for several years.

For some little while before taking that decision, Tokenhouse had been behaving in rather an odd manner, having rows with publisher colleagues, laying down the law at dinner parties, in general showing signs of severe nervous tension. This condition must have come to a head when he exchanged publishing for painting; being simultaneously accompanied by a comparatively violent mental crisis about political convictions. No one had previously supposed Tokenhouse to possess strong political feelings of any sort, his desultory grumblings somewhat resembling those of Uncle Giles, even less coherently defined, if possible. To invoke Mr Deacon again, Tokenhouse had never shown the least sign of leanings towards pacifist-utopian-socialism. In making these two particular comparisons, it should equally be remembered that neither Uncle Giles nor Mr Deacon had ever showed any of Tokenhouse's sexual constraint.

Whatever the reason for this metamorphosis, the final row between Tokenhouse and my father took place on the subject of 'Munich'. It was an explosion of considerable force, bursting from a substratum of argument about world strategy, detonated by political disagreement of the bitterest kind. They never spoke again. It was the final close of friendship, so that by the time of the Russo-German Pact in 1939—when Tokenhouse suffered complete breakdown and retired to a psychiatric clinic—there could be no question of going to visit him. There he stayed for the early part of the war, emerging only after the German invasion of the USSR. When I ran across him buying socks in London, not long after I came out of the army, Tokenhouse said he was making preparations to live in Venice.

'Always liked the place. Couldn't go there for years because of Mussolini. Now they've strung him up, it may be tolerable again. Better than this country, and Attlee's near-fascist Government. Come and see me, if you're ever there. Ha, yes.'

Although he had long since shaved off the scrubby toothbrush moustache of his army days, the ghost of its bristles still haunted his upper lip, years of soldiering for ever perpetuating in Tokenhouse the bearing of a retired officer of infantry. He must have carried out this migration expeditiously and in good order. Not long after our meeting, letters with a Venetian address began to appear in the papers, especially the weeklies, excoriating American foreign policy, advocating the 'Nuclear Campaign', protesting about the conduct of British troops in occupation of Germany, a great many kindred subjects too, signed 'D. McN. Tokenhouse, Maj. (retd)'. Once he sent me a roneo-ed letter of protest about several persons imprisoned in South America for blowing up a power station. Since then we had lost touch with each other.

Before coming to Venice, I had felt that I should see Tokenhouse for old times' sake, at least speak with him on the telephone. We had not met for twenty years or more, so that any such renewal of contact would require tactful handling. In short, I had thought it best to send a note announcing date of my arrival. The telephone, even if Tokenhouse had installed one, might seem too much like holding a pistol to his head. He had always been a man to treat with caution. A note gave time to think things over, make an excuse, also by letter, if he did not wish the matter to be carried further. The Conference he was likely to view with irony, if not open laughter. He had always affected to find the goings-on of self-styled 'intellectuals' ridiculous, although not wholly detached from appertaining to that category himself. I reckoned that Tokenhouse must be in his middle to late seventies. One thought of the ancient singer. If he were really the same man, he was much older than that, still going strong enough. His voice or another's echoed on the summer night.

Iamme, iamme, via montiam su là.
Iamme, iamme, via montiam su là.
Funiculì funiculà, via montiam su là.

2

THE BRAGADIN PALACE WAS APPROACHED on foot. Gwinnett and I walked together. Shared acquaintance with some of the circumstances of Trapnel's life had not made Gwinnett's behaviour less reserved. If anything, he was more farouche than before. Possibly he felt that to speak of the *Commonplace Book* had been indiscreet. Although he had emphasized that Trapnel's 'remains' contained little of interest, many researchers in Gwinnett's place might have kept the fact of its existence to themselves. In that respect he could not be called 'cagey', as Dr Brightman had characterized him at times. This lack of response was something less crude than 'caginess', almost suggesting terms like 'alienation' or 'withdrawal.' No doubt he was merely one of those persons, not so very uncommon, with whom every subsequent meeting after the first entails a fresh start from the beginning. The anxious air always remained. I should have liked to probe his views on the Ferrand-Sénéschal article, no more than skimmed, but something about Gwinnett's manner made this not the moment.

'Did you run across anyone you knew when you reconnoitred the Piazza last night?'

'How do you mean?'

'See anyone from the Conference?'

Gwinnett wriggled his neck.

'No.'

He drawled out the negative, making it sound as if he thought the question in itself uncalled for, a trifle intrusive. I asked if he knew what the Palazzo would be like. Gwinnett was more responsive to that. He began to speak of Venetian architecture, of which he evidently knew something, going on to recommend the book written about Venice by William Dean Howells when American consul here. Then he abandoned porticos and pediments, and fell into a long silence, suggesting a mood to be left alone. We made our way through narrow calles towards an area beyond the Accademia. I wondered how best we could disembarrass ourselves of each other's company without too blatantly seeming to do so. Suddenly Gwinnett came out of his dream with a sort of jerk, one of his characteristic nervous movements, which were not necessarily resentful. He spoke now as if referring to a matter he had been pondering for some little time, using that habitually low tone often hard to catch.

'It seems Louis Glober is house-guest at the Palazzo.'

'The publisher?'

'Glober was that one time. He's been a heap of other things too.'

'When I met him years ago he was in publishing. That's why I think of him as a publisher. I was in a firm that produced art books myself. He came to see us.'

'Glober's been more associated with pictures.'

'Paintings, you mean, or films?'

'Movies. I guess he owns some sort of a modern picture collection too.'

'He was keen on paintings thirty years ago. He wanted my firm to do a series on the Cubists. That was when we met. It was quite a funny occasion. I wonder whether he remembers. Do you know him?'

Gwinnett shook his head.

'I just saw a paragraph about him in the Continental *Herald-Tribune*. It said the well-known playboy-tycoon Louis Glober was here for the Film Festival, and was staying with Mr Jacky Bragadin.'

'I thought Glober an amusing figure. Since then I've never done more than read about him in the paper in his playboy-tycoon capacity. I suppose he's a typical Jacky Bragadin guest. Did the *Herald-Tribune* name any others?'

'Just Glober. It seems he's come on here from the German Grand Prix.'

'Racing?'

'Automobile racing. World Championship.'

'He's in that game too?'

'Sure.'

To the eye of a fellow American I saw Glober must present a very different outline to that of my own remembrance. If not exactly the daily meat of the columnist, Louis Glober was a reasonably tasty snack, always available on the back shelf of the larder, where public personalities of a minor sort are stored in case of need. He was neither dished up too often to cause surfeit, nor left too long on ice to become stale. Contradictory features hampered his definition. The *Herald-Tribune* had termed him playboy-tycoon, this type-casting to cover publisher, film-producer, sportsman, 'socialite', a lot of other more or less news-valued labels, most with some basis in fact. The last photograph I had seen of Glober had been driving a vintage car. Gwinnett thought activities like sailing or motor racing had latterly taken the form of promotion, rather than too laboriously personal a rôle. That did not prevent Glober from still figuring as a noted rider, shot, golfer, yachtsman, or whatever else was required by the context. A taste for amusing himself had not inhibited making money, though again Glober was said to lose fortunes as easily as win them.

'The point I remember about Glober was that he seemed rather intelligent.'

'Ah-ha.'

The answer was non-committal, possibly disapproving, either because Gwinnett thought such a judgment, even if favourable, impertinent to pass on another human being, or because he was himself reluctant to allow the laurels of intelligence to decorate a brow of Glober's type. As not seldom when Americans utter that sound, hard to transliterate, I was uncertain. We talked of some of the reputed exploits; the blazing Hollywood restaurant from which Glober had carried shoulder-high down a ladder a famous film star—Dietrich, Hepburn, Harlow—neither of us was certain of the heroine; the methusalem of champagne that burst celebrating the return from Europe of Texas Guinan; the fight (almost won) in some night-club with an ex-middle-weight champion of Australia. A reporter never seemed far away to chronicle these vignettes of Glober as a picturesque or glamorous figure, his own clear-cut sense of the dramatic occasion endearing him to press and public wherever he went. Even in England, where he was not much known, editors instinctively printed the intermittent Glober item, compressed into a couple of lines on the back page. I mentioned that.

'Would they report him today?'

'Perhaps not.'

'Glober must be about washed up.'

'What is he? In his sixties? Just about.'

Gwinnett gave the impression of not greatly caring for the idea of Glober, at the same time granting some respect to a romantic so unusually successful at giving public expression to his romanticism; showing ability too, even if a fluctuating one, in making a success of financial ventures. My own memory of Glober was far from unsympathetic, even if he now sounded rather different—though not all that different—from the young American first set eyes on. The mere fact that he was staying with Jacky Bragadin for the Film Festival, that he had been car-racing in Germany, argued survival powers of a sort; resilience not always found in characters of his type.

'Who's he married to now?'

Glober's wives had always been beauties. Once, very briefly, he had been husband of a world-famous film star. These unions lasted only a few years before being dissolved; soon renewed in similar fashion to the accompaniment of further widespread exudations of publicity in the appropriate quarters.

'No one, so far as I know. His last wife died quite a long while ago. They'd been wed only a very short time. It was leukemia, I think. Glober was photographed kneeling at her grave. There was a blanket of lilies, and, on a card written large enough to read in a newspaper picture, a message: *Farewell, Fleurdelys, farewell, fair one*.'

'Fleurdelys was her name?'

'It looked almost as if Glober was lying in the grave.'

Gwinnett spoke with an odd sense of excitement. He stared at me hard. I did not know quite whether he were criticizing Glober, or applauding him, expressing irony or admiration. The thought of what Dr Brightman had said about the dead girl came back.

'He was in a different mood when I met him.'

That had been towards the end of the nineteen-twenties. Glober had arrived in London as representative of a recently founded New York publishing house. Even before he landed, his name went round among the London publishers as a young American colleague with a head full of bright new ideas; by no means an unqualified recommendation to that particular community. Glober came to call on my own firm. He saw Daniel Tokenhouse. One of the bright ideas was the Cubist series. The suggestion was to produce generously illustrated, cheaply produced studies of these painters, blocks to be made in Holland or Germany by some newly devised process. Apart from the fact that the Cubists were still very generally regarded as wild men, if not worse, certainly unwise to encourage, transactions that included overseas production always entailed risks not every publisher was prepared to take. That was where Tokenhouse came in. Tokenhouse did not mind an element of risk. His predisposition for certain forms of rebellion against a humdrum approach to life was one of his unexpected sides. He also derived pleasure from the thought of how much the series would annoy other publishers, not to mention booksellers. Then at quite an early stage, something went wrong in connexion with the issue of the series. I did not remember exactly what upset the project, but it never went forward. There had been rather a row, money and tempers lost. I was in too subordinate a position at the time to be concerned, or greatly interested, except so far as being well disposed to 'modern art'. There were other things to think about, better ones, it then seemed, the business aspects forgotten among elements more memorable.

Tokenhouse was still occupied when Glober arrived for his appointment. Negotiations on the matter of St John Clarke's Introduction to *The Art of Horace Isbister* had just begun. St John Clarke was still haggling about payment. He was too well known a novelist to be dismissed out of hand, so Glober could not be received. The manager, with whom I shared a not over-luxurious office, was wrangling with a binder in the firm's waiting-room, a cubicle from its austerity in any case unsuitable for reception of another publisher, especially an American one. Tokenhouse rang through on the house-telephone with instructions to hold Glober in play for the further few minutes required to dislodge St John Clarke. The room where the manager and I passed our days, its walls grimly lined with file copies, was almost as comfortless as the waiting-room, but Glober was shown in. From the moment he entered, there was no need to provide distraction from the frugality of the surroundings. Glober himself took charge. In a matter of seconds we seemed already on the friendliest of terms. That was Glober's speciality. I made some apology for this delay after an appointment had been made.

'Don't worry. It's great to draw breath. There's a lot of running round in London. I didn't get to bed till late last night.'

He sat down in the collapsed armchair, and looked about him.

'You've got a real Dickensian place here.'

'*Bleak House?*'

Glober laughed his quiet attractive laugh.

'*The Old Curiosity Shop*,' he said. 'In the illustration.'

I supposed him thirty, possibly a year or two more, to my own twenty-two or twenty-three, but his self-confidence, maturity of manner, separated us by several decades. Unusually tall, incontrovertibly good-looking, Glober's features —in the later words of Xenia Lilienthal—were those of a 'young Byzantine emperor'. One saw what she meant. It showed she had taken in that aspect of him, in spite of her bad cold. His quietly forceful manner suggested a right to command, inexhaustible funds of stored up energy, overwhelming sophistication, limitless financial resource. At that age I did not notice a hard core of melancholy lurking beneath these assets. Perhaps in those days that side of his nature was better concealed. The instinct he so essentially possessed was getting on the right terms with everybody, no matter how transiently encountered. This intuitive impulse caused him to move from illustrating Dickens to pictures in general, the fact that he himself wanted to buy an Augustus John drawing before he left England. The gallery handling John's work had shown him nothing he fancied. Had I any ideas? I suggested direct approach to the painter himself, all the time feeling there was some quite easy answer, which Glober's flow of questions had put from my head.

'John's out of the country. If I could meet some private person that had a drawing he was willing to trade.'

Then I remembered such an opportunity had been announced the previous week. The Lilienthals were trying to sell a John drawing for Mopsy Pontner. Moreland had mentioned the fact. Moreland had been searching for a secondhand copy of *The Atheist's Tragedy* in the Lilienthals' bookshop, and Xenia Lilienthal had told him that Mopsy Pontner—more correctly, Mopsy Pontner's husband—had an Augustus John drawing to sell. The Lilienthals were accustomed to take books off Mr Deacon's hands, when included in miscellaneous 'lots' acquired by him at auction to add to his stock of antiques. Mr Deacon was not above marketing the odd volume of *curiosa*—eroticism preferably confined to the male sex—but did not care to be bothered with the sale of more humdrum literary works. The Lilienthal's shop was just around the corner. They were familiar with his quirks, like the Pontners, frequenters of The Mortimer, though not regularly.

Moreland (these were days before marriage to Matilda) always commended Mopsy Pontner's looks, but was a friend of Pontner, who was musically inclined in a manner Moreland could approve, a qualification by no means common. Moreland tended to keep off his friends' wives. Pontner, who knew several languages pretty well, earned a living by translating. He also bought paintings and drawings, when he could afford them, partly because he had a taste for pictures too, partly as a speculation. I ought to have thought of that when Glober raised the subject. This must have been a moment when money was required to tide over a financial crisis, take a holiday, or, as likely as either, invest in another work of art, which Pontner considered a better bet for a rise on the market. Pontner was older than his wife. The fact that Moreland found Mopsy attractive, liked talking about her, probably accounted for his passing on the information. At that time I had never met her, though knew she was reputed quite a beauty in her way. Suddenly remembering about this drawing, I told Glober it had been on offer a week or more before.

'Do you think it's still unsold?'

'Shall I make enquiries?'

'Go ahead. This is great. Mr Jenkins, we just had to meet.'

Glober was full of enthusiasm. He must have recognized one of his own characteristic situations taking shape before his eyes. His next reaction was that everyone must come to dinner with him to discuss the deal. By now he was certain the drawing remained unsold. Its existence revealed, it was now his by law of nature. Before the matter could be gone into further, Tokenhouse appeared in the doorway, having disembarrassed himself of St John Clarke, who could be heard coughing painfully, in a disgruntled manner, as he made his way down the stairs. Tokenhouse uttered his characteristically rather brusque apologies for the delay. Before they disappeared together Glober took my hand.

'Call me up at the hotel between four and five this evening, Mr Jenkins. Even suppose the drawing is sold, I'd like to have you dine with me.'

Tokenhouse heard that a shade suspiciously. He was jealous of outside contacts, not least American ones. Glober stayed for about an hour. I did not see him when he left. In the course of the day I made several telephone calls, finding the Augustus John drawing still available, Pontners and Lilienthals delighted to find a buyer. I informed Glober.

'And they'll all have dinner with me?'

'Of course.'

Everyone was pleased with the idea. The party took place in Glober's sitting-room on one of the upper floors of the hotel, an old-fashioned establishment (pulled down a couple of years later) in the Curzon Street neighbourhood. It was a favourite haunt at that period of the more enlightened sort of American publisher. The place was just Glober's mark. When I arrived, he was inspecting the table laid for dinner.

'Good to see you. I've asked quite a crowd.'

Mopsy Pontner, bringing the drawing with her, arrived alone. At the last moment her husband had been prevented from coming by another engagement, arisen at short notice, having professional bearing on one of his translations. Pontner rightly judged his wife fully competent to negotiate the business of the drawing on her own. There were a dozen or more guests by the time we sat down. The Lilienthals arrived late, and rather drunk, having had a long session at The Mortimer with a customer who could not make up his mind whether or not to buy a Conrad first-edition in their catalogue. Xenia Lilienthal, small, with ginger corkscrew curls and a beseeching expression, was suffering from a heavy cold in her nose. Lilienthal, his mind on business, kept fingering the hairs of his sparse black beard. Glober had roped in another American publisher and wife, met the previous day in London, both hitherto unknown to him. They were on their way to the south of France. He wanted them to deliver by hand a present to a friend they had in common, who was staying at Antibes. A young man with a lisp and honey-coloured hair, come to the hotel earlier in the evening to sell Glober a Georgian silver tankard, had been asked to stay for dinner. This young man told the Lilienthals he had once met them with Mr Deacon, to which they assented without much warmth. There was a lesbian called 'Bill' (apparently lacking a surname), seen much at parties, who admitted soon after arrival that she was uncertain as to how firm her invitation had been to this one. Old Mrs Maliphant was present, who had been on the stage in the 'seventies. She was alleged to have slept with Irving; some said Tree; possibly both. Glober had encountered her at the house of one of the several publishers to whom she had promised her Memoirs. Moreland, to some extent responsible for the whole assembly, arrived in poorish form, absent in manner, probably weighed down with a current love affair gone wrong. Other guests, now forgotten, may also have been entertained. If so, their presence did not affect what happened.

The years invest the muster-roll of Glober's dinner-party with a certain specious picturesqueness, if anything increased by being a shade grotesque. At the time, at least on the surface of things, the evening turned out heavy going. That was Glober's fault only so far as he had been over-reckless in mixing people, always risky, sometimes fatal. In this particular venture, he had, as an American, underrated the intractable strain in English social life, even at this undemanding London level, an easy thing to do for anyone not conversant with its heterogeneous elements, their likes and dislikes. Food and drink were both reasonably good. Conversation never got properly under way. Something was lacking.

Glober bought the Augustus John drawing on sight. He made no demur about the price, a fairly steep one in the light of the then market. It was a three-quarter length of a model called Conchita, a gipsy type Barnby, too, sometimes employed. Glober's own demeanour, as when he had visited the office, was enormously genial, but even he did not appear to find the going easy with Mopsy Pontner, whom he had placed next to himself at table. He sat between her and the American publisher's wife, a statuesque lady from Baltimore. Mopsy, with dark straggling hair and very red lips, perfectly civil, was uncommunicative in manner. She made Glober do all the talking. He probably did not mind that, but had earned the right to a little more notice than he seemed to be getting. He had also to work hard with the Baltimore lady, though not because she did not talk. The trouble was her anxiety about reservations on the Blue Train the following day. She continually returned to this preoccupation. When Xenia was not snuffling, she and Lilienthal exchanged secondhand-book chat across the table. The young silver salesman and 'Bill', recognizing no harmony in common, did not communicate with each other at all. Mrs Maliphant rambled on in a monologue about old Chelsea days, saying 'Wilde' when she meant 'Whistler', and 'Sargent' for 'Shannon'. Moreland left early. I left early too; early that is in the light of the sort of party intended, and the fact that my flat in Shepherd Market was only a few yards away. Glober said an effusive goodbye.

'Call me up when you're next in New York, Mr Jenkins. I'd like to have you meet James Branch Cabell.'

That was the last I saw of Glober. His firm fell into liquidation the following year. Several go-ahead American publishing houses went bust about that time. The fact was regarded as an amelioration of whatever row had taken place about the Cubists, indicating our own firm was well out of the commitment.

Glober's character was further particularized when, also about a year later, I came to know Mopsy Pontner better. It appeared that the evening at the hotel, anyway the latter part of it, had been less prosaic than might have been supposed at the time. Mopsy herself gave me an account of its consummation; no vague term in the context. She had, so she related, stayed on after the rest of the party had gone home. Glober, it seemed, had been more attractive to her, far more attractive, than outwardly revealed by her demeanour at dinner. In admitting that, she went so far as to declare that she had greatly approved of him at sight, as soon as she entered the room where we were to dine. Glober must have felt the same. The natural ease of his manner concealed such feelings, like Mopsy's exterior reserve. Later that night mutual approval took physical expression.

'Glober did me on the table.'

'Among the coffee cups?'

'We broke a couple of liqueur glasses.'

'You obviously found him attractive.'

'I believe I'd have run away with him that night, if he'd asked me. I was all right a day or two later, quite recovered. The affair stopped dead there. In any case he was sailing the next day. Some men are like that. Isn't it funny? One rather odd thing about Glober, he insisted on taking a cutting from my bush—said he always did that after having anyone for the first time. He produced a pair of nail-scissors from a small red leather case. He told me he carried them round with him in case the need arose.'

'We all of us have our whims.'

Mopsy laughed. So far as Glober was concerned, I do not put her conquest unduly high, though no doubt she was quite a beauty in her way. To exaggerate Glober's achievement would be mistaken, lacking in a sense of proportion, even though Mopsy was capable of refusal, having turned Barnby down. Barnby made a good story about his failure to please on that occasion, which was one way of dealing with the matter. Such sudden adventures as this one of Glober's can be misleading, unless considered in their context, time and place (as Moreland always insisted) both playing so vital a part. Nevertheless, this vignette, taken at an early stage of his career, suggests Glober's vivacity, liberality, wide interests, capacity for attack; Mopsy's footnote adding a small touch of the unusual, the exotic. These were no doubt the qualities that had carried him advantageously through the years of the Depression; New York to

Hollywood, and back again; lots of other places too; until here he was at Jacky Bragadin's Venetian palace. I enquired about Glober's background. Gwinnett gave a rather satirical laugh.

'Why do the British always ask that?'

'One of our foibles.'

'That's not what Americans do.'

'But we're not Americans. You must humour our straying from the norm in that respect.'

Gwinnett laughed again.

'Glober's people were first generation Jewish emigrants. They were Russian. They took a German name to assimilate quicker, so I've heard said. Glober was from the Bronx.'

'What we'd call the East End?'

'His father made a sizeable pile in building. Glober himself didn't begin on the breadline.'

'You mean there was plenty of money before he started his publishing and film career?'

'He made plenty more. Lost plenty too. Money is no problem to Glober.'

Gwinnett spoke with conviction. The comment that Glober was a man to whom money-making was no problem recalled Peter Templer having once made the same remark about Bob Duport. Duport, of course, had always been on a smaller scale financially than Glober, also without any claims to newspaper fame. I felt that side of Glober, the newspaper fame, was not without a certain fascination for Gwinnett, even if he hesitated to approve of Glober as an individual. An idea suddenly struck me.

'Does he write?'

'Does Glober write?'

'Yes?'

'Sure—did he refuse to sign his name to a contract you showed him in London on the grounds he couldn't write? I'll bet it wasn't true, and he can.'

Gwinnett was unbending a little.

'I meant books. It's always a temptation for a publisher to have a go at writing a book. After all, they think, if authors can do that, anybody can.'

'Glober's withstood the temptation so far.'

'What I was leading up to is Glober having something of Trapnel about him—a Trapnel who brought off being a Complete Man. Of course if Glober can't write, the comparison ceases to be valid, unless you accept as alternative Glober's experience as entrepreneur in the arts. That might to some extent represent Trapnel's literary sensibility.'

Gwinnett seemed unprepared for a comparison of that kind.

'I just can't imagine Trapnel without his writing,' he said.

'Certainly in his own eyes that would be a contradiction in terms. But all the beautiful girls, all the publishing and movie triumphs of one sort or another, all the publicity—yet the implied failure too. Experience of the other side of fortune. Losses, as well as gains, in money. Sadness in love, implicit in the changes of wives. In business, changes of interests. Nothing fails like success. Surely all that's part of being complete in Trapnel's eyes? Why shouldn't Glober be Trapnel's Complete Man at sixty?'

Gwinnett thought for a moment, but did not answer. The concept, even if it possessed a shred of interest, did not please him. He smiled a little grimly. There was no point in pressing the analogy. In any case, we had now reached the campo, along one side of which stood the palace to be visited; a Renaissance structure of moderate size, its exterior, as Gwinnett had explained on the way, severely restored in the eighteenth century. In the Venetian manner, the more splendid approach was by water, but it had been found more convenient to admit members of the Conference through the pillared entrance opening on to the square.

We passed between massively sententious caryatids towards a staircase carpeted in crimson. Dr Brightman drew level.

'This Palazzo is not even mentioned in most guide-books,' she said.

'I've ascertained the whereabouts of the Tiepolo, and will lead you to it. Follow me, after we've made our bow.'

At the top of the stairs, supported by a retinue of the Conference's Executive Committee, and civic officials, Jacky Bragadin was receiving the guests. The municipality had helped to promote the Conference, in conjunction with the Biennale Exhibition, which fell that year, as well as the Film Festival. A small nervous man, in his fifties, Jacky Bragadin's mixed blood had not wholly divested him of that Venetian physiognomy, noticeable as much in the contemporary city as in the canvases of its painters; somewhat as if most Venetians wore Commedia dell'Arte masks fashioned in the Orient, only a guess made at what Europeans look like. Into such features Jacky Bragadin had fused those of his American ancestry. He did not appear greatly at ease, fidgeting a good deal, a scarcely discernible American accent overlaying effects of English schooldays. The more consequential members of the Conference, after shaking hands, paused to have a word, or chat with the entourage, standing about on a landing ornamented with baroque busts of Roman emperors. The rest moved forward into a frescoed gallery beyond.

'Come along,' said Dr Brightman. 'The ceiling is in an ante-room further on, not at all an obvious place. These Luca Giordanos will keep most of them quiet for the time being. We shall have a minute or two to inspect the Tiepolo in peace.'

Gwinnett, preferring to go over the Palazzo at his own speed, strolled away to examine the Roman emperors on their plinths. He may also have had an interest in Luca Giordano. I followed Dr Brightman through the doors leading into the gallery of frescoes. We passed on through further rooms, Dr Brightman expressing hurried comments.

'These tapestries must be Florentine—look, *The Drunkenness of Lot*. The daughter on the left greatly resembles a pupil of mine, but we must not tarry, or the mob will be upon us again.'

She also disallowed for inspection a rococo ball-room, white walls, festooned with gold foliage and rams' heads, making a background for Longhi caricatures, savants and punchinellos with huge spectacles and bulbous noses.

'How much they resemble our fellow members of the Conference. The ante-room should be at the far end here.'

We entered a small almost square apartment, high ceilinged, with tall windows set in embrasures.

'Here we are.'

She pointed upward. Miraculous volumes of colour billowed, gleamed, vibrated, above us. Dr Brightman clasped her hands.

'Look—*Candaules and Gyges*.'

At our immediate entry the room had seemed empty. A second later, the presence of two other persons was revealed. The unconventional position both had chosen to assume, for a brief moment concealed, as it were camouflaged, their supine bodies, one male, the other female. In order the better to gaze straight ahead at the Tiepolo in a maximum of comfort, they were lying face upwards, feet towards each other, on two of the stone console seats, set on either side of the recess of a high pedimented window. The brightness of the sun flowing in had helped to make this couple invisible. At first sight, the pair seemed to have fainted away; alternatively, met not long before with sudden death in the vicinity, its abruptness requiring they should be laid out in that place as a kind of emergency mortuary, just to get the bodies out of the way pending final removal. Dr Brightman, noticing these recumbent figures too, gave a quick disapproving glance, but, without comment on their posture, began to speak aloud her exposition on the ceiling.

'As Russell Gwinnett said, one is a little reminded of Iphigenia in the Villa Valmarana, or the Mars and Venus there. The usual consummate skill in handling aerial perspectives. The wife of Candaules—Gautier calls her Nyssia, but I suspect the name invented by him—is obviously the the same model as Pharaoh's daughter in *Moses saved from the water* at Edinburgh, also the lady in all the Antony and Cleopatra sequences, such as those at the Labia Palace, which I was once lucky enough to see.'

To make no mistake, I took another swift look at the couple lying on the ledges under the window. There was no mistake. They were sufficiently far away to convey quietly to Dr Brightman that we were in the presence of her 'very bedworthy gentlewoman', heroine, by implication, of 'L'après-midi d'un monstre'. The horizontal figure on the left was certainly Pamela Widmerpool; the man on the right, lying like an effigy of exceptional length on a tomb, was not known to me. Dr Brightman as usual kept her head. Adjusting her spectacles, so as to make a more thorough survey of Pamela when the moment came, she continued to gaze for a few seconds upwards, her tone, at the same time, showing the keen interest she felt in this disclosure.

'Lady Widmerpool? Indeed? I'll curb my aesthetic enthusiasms in a moment in order to scan her surreptitiously.'

She concentrated for at least a minute on the Tiepolo, before making an inspection in her own time and manner. Leaving her to do that, I crossed the floor to where Pamela had brought her body into almost upright position in order to cast a disdainful glance on whoever had entered the room. As I advanced she gave one of her furious looks, then, without smiling, accepted that we knew each other.

'Hullo, Pamela.'

'Hullo.'

Much of the beauty of her younger days remained in her late thirties. She had allowed her hair to go grey, perhaps deliberately engineered the process, silver tinted, with faint highlights of strawberry pink that glistened when caught by sunlight. She looked harder, more angular in appearance, undiminished in capacity for putting less aggressive beauties in the shade. Apart from the instant warning of general hostility to all comers that her personality automatically projected, an unspoken declaration that no man or woman could remain unthreatened by her presence, she did not appear displeased at this encounter, merely indifferent. Even indifference was qualified by a certain sense of suppressed nervous excitement, suggesting tensions almost compliant to interruption of whatever she was doing. Usually her particular form of self-projection excluded conceding an inch in making contacts easier, outward expression, no doubt, of an inner sexual condition. She was like a royal personage, prepared to converse, but not bestowing the smallest scrap of assistance to the interlocutor, from whom all effort, every contribution of discursive vitality, must come. Now, on the other hand, she unbent a little.

'Jacky didn't mention you were staying. I suppose you arrived in that ghastly middle-of-the-night plane. Who's the old girl? One of Jacky's dykes?'

That was about the furthest I had ever heard Pamela go in the way of taking conversational initiative, for that matter, in showing interest in other people's doings. I explained that neither Dr Brightman nor myself was the latest addition to the Bragadin house-party; for fun, subjoining a word about Dr Brightman's academic celebrity. Pamela did not answer. She had the gift of making silence as vindictive as speech. Dr Brightman continued to examine the ceiling, while at the same time she moved discreetly in our direction. When she was near enough I introduced them. Dr Brightman's manner was courteously firm, Pamela in no way uncivil, though she did not attempt to name the man with her. He, also risen from the flat of his back, had now manifestly put himself into an attitude preparatory for meeting strangers. Evidently he was familiar with Pamela's distaste for social convention of any kind, in any case well able to look after himself. After giving her a statutory moment or two to make his identity known, he announced himself without her help. The intonation, deep and pleasant was American.

'Louis Glober.'

He held out a large white hand, much manicured. The voice came back over the years, the tone just the same, quiet in pitch, masterful, friendly, full of hope. Otherwise hardly a trace remained of the smooth dominating young man who had interviewed Tokenhouse about the Cubist series, given the dinner-party for the John drawing, 'done' Mopsy Pontner on the dinner-table in the private suite of that defunct Mayfair hotel. He was still tall, of course, no less full of assurance, though that assurance took rather a different form. It was in one sense less flowing—less like, say, Sunny Farebrother's determination to charm—in another, tougher, more outwardly ruthless. What Glober had lost, physically speaking (a good deal, including, naturally enough, all essentially youthful adjuncts), was to a certain extent counterbalanced by transmutation into a different type of distinguished appearance. The young Byzantine emperor had become an old one; Herod the Tetrarch was perhaps nearer the mark than Byzantine emperor; anyway a ruler with a touch of exoticism in his behaviour and tastes. What was left of Glober's hair, scarcely more than a suggestion he once had owned some, was still black—possibly from treatment artificial as Pamela's—his handsome, sallow pouchy face become richly senatorial. Never particularly 'American' in aspect (not, at least, American as pictured by Europeans), now he might have come from Spain, Italy, any of the Slav countries. A certain glassiness about the eyes recalled Sir Magnus Donners, though Glober was, in general, quite another type of tycoon. Before I could reintroduce myself to him, Dr Brightman went into attack with Pamela.

'Tell me, do tell me, Lady Widmerpool, where did you get those quite delectable sandals?'

Pamela accepted the tribute. They went into the question together. I explained to Glober how we had met before.

'Do you remember—the Augustus John drawing?'

He thought for a moment, then began to laugh loudly. Putting a hand on my shoulder, he continued to laugh.

'This warms me like news from home. Is it really thirty years? I just don't believe you. The charming Mrs Pontner. It was a privilege to meet her. How is she?'

'No more with us, I'm afraid.'

'Passed on?'

'Yes.'

Glober shook his head in regret.

'Was that recently?'

'During the war. I hadn't seen her for ages, even by then. She'd married Lilienthal, the bookseller with the beard, who came to your party too. When Pontner died, Mopsy went to help in the bookshop. Then Xenia went off with an Indian doctor, and Mopsy married Lilienthal.'

'Mrs Lilienthal was the little redhead with the bad cold?'

Glober certainly possessed astonishing powers of recall. I could hardly bring his guests to mind myself, the facts just offered having come from Moreland a comparatively short time before. Otherwise, I should never have remembered (nor indeed known about) most of what I had just related. Whenever we met, which was not often, Moreland loved to talk of that period of his life, days before marriage, ill health, living with Mrs Maclintick, had all, if not overwhelmed him, made existence very different. On that particular meeting, he had dredged up the story of Mopsy Pontner's sad end; for sad it had been. Glober shook his head, and sighed.

'Mrs Pontner, too. I recall her so well.

> The forehead and the little ears
> Have gone where Saturn keeps the years.'

'You didn't produce that extempore?'

'Edwin Arlington Robinson.'

I was glad to hear a representative quotation from a poet named by Dr Brightman as contributing a small element to Gwinnett's makeup, and wondered how often, when obituary sentiments were owed in connexion with just that sort of personal reminiscence, Glober had found the tag apposite. Frequently, his promptness suggested. The possibility in no manner abated its felicity. We talked for a minute or two about other aspects of that long past London visit of his. I told him Tokenhouse now lived in Venice, but Glober did not rise to that, reasonably enough. The strange thing was how much he remembered. This conversation did not please Pamela. Abandoning an apparently amicable chat about footgear with Dr Brightman, she now pointed to the ceiling.

'You haven't explained yet what's happening up there.'

When she addressed Glober, the tone suggested proprietary rights. One of the paradoxes about Pamela was a sexuality, in one sense almost laughably ostentatious, the first thing you noticed about her; in another, something equally connected with sex that seemed reluctant, extorted, a possession she herself utterly refused to share with anyone.

'What's happening? That's what I want to know.'

She stood, legs thrust apart, staring upward. White trousers, thin as gauze, stretched skintight across elegantly compact small haunches, challengingly exhibited, yet neatly formed; hard, pointed breasts, no less contentious and smally compassed, under a shirt patterned in crimson and peacock blue, stuck out like delicately shaped bosses of a shield. These colours might have been expressly designed—by dissonance as much as harmony—for juxtaposition against those pouring down in brilliant rays of light from the Tiepolo; subtle yet penetrating pinks and greys, light blue turning almost to lavender, rich saffrons and cinnamons melting into bronze and gold. Pamela's own tints hinted that she herself, only a moment before, had floated down out of those cloudy vertical perspectives, perhaps compelled to do so by the artist himself, displeased that her crimson and peacock shades struck too extravagant a note, one that disturbed rather than enriched a composition, which, for all its splendour, remained somehow tenebrous too. If so, reminder of her own expulsion from the scene, as she contemplated it again, increasingly enraged her.

'Can't anybody say anything?'

Glober, half turning in her direction, and smiling tolerantly, parodied the speech of a tourist.

'Oh, boy, it sure is a marvellous picture, that Tee-ay-po-lo.'

All of us, even Dr Brightman, fixed attention once more on the ceiling, as if with the sole object of producing an answer to Pamela's urgent enquiry. There was plenty on view up there. Pamela's desire to have more exact information, even if ungraciously expressed, was reasonable enough once you considered the picture. Dr Brightman took up her former exposition, now delivered to a larger audience.

'The Council of Ten made trouble at the time. Objection was not, so many believe, to danger of corrupting morals in the private residence of a grandee, so much as to the fact that the subject itself was known to bear reference to the habits of one of the most Serene Republic's chief magistrates, another patrician, with whom the Bragadin who owned this palace had quarrelled. The artist has illustrated the highspot of the story's action.'

The scene above was enigmatic. A group of three main figures occupied respectively foreground, middle distance, background, all linked together by some intensely dramatic situation. These persons stood in a pillared room, spacious, though apparently no more than a bedchamber, which had unexpectedly managed to float out of whatever building it was normally part—some palace, one imagined—to remain suspended, a kind of celestial 'Mulberry' set for action in the upper reaches of the sky. The skill of the painter brought complete conviction to the phenomena round about. Only a sufficiently long ladder—expedient perhaps employed for banishing Pamela from on high—seemed required to reach the apartment's so trenchantly pictured dimension; to join the trio playing out whatever game had to be gambled between them by dire cast of the Fates. That verdict was manifestly just a question of time. Meanwhile, an attendant team of intermediate beings—cupids, tritons, sphinxes, chimaeras, the passing harpy, loitering gorgon—negligently assisted stratospheric support of the whole giddy structure and its occupants, a floating recess perceptibly cubist in conception, the view from its levels far outdoing anything to be glimpsed from the funicular; moreover, if so nebulous a setting could be assigned mundane location, a distant pinnacle, or campanile, three-quarters hidden by cloud, seemed Venetian rather than Neapolitan in feeling.

'Who's the naked man with the stand?' asked Pamela.

An unclothed hero, from his appurtenances a king, reclined on the divan or couch that was the focus of the picture. One single tenuous fold of gold-edged damask counterpane, elsewhere slipped away from his haughtily muscular body, undeniably emphasized (rather than concealed) the physical anticipation to which Pamela referred, of pleasure to be enjoyed in a few seconds time; for a lady, also naked, tall and fair haired, was moving across the room to join him where he lay. To guess what was in the mind of the King—if king he were—seemed at first sight easy enough, but closer examination revealed an unforeseen subtlety of expression. Proud, self-satisfied, thoughtful, more than a little amused, he seemed to be experiencing mixed emotions; feelings that went a long way beyond mere expectant sensuality. No doubt the King was ardent, not to say randy, in the mood for a romp; he was experiencing another relish too.

The lady—perhaps the Queen, perhaps a mistress—less intent on making love, anxious to augment pending pleasure by delicious delay, suddenly remembering her own neglect of some desirable adjunct, or necessary precaution, incident on what was about to take place, had paused. Her taut posture, arrested there in the middle of the bedchamber, immediately proposed to the mind these, and other possibilities; that she was utterly frigid, not at all looking forward to what lay ahead; that—like Pamela herself—she was frigid but wanted a lot of it all the same; that her excitement was no less than the King's, but her own attention had been suddenly deflected from the matter in hand by a disturbing sound or movement, heard, perceived, sensed, in the shadows of the room. She had scented danger. This last minute retardation in coming to bed had, at the same time, something of all women about it; the King's anticipatory complacence, something of all men.

The last possibility—that the lady had noticed an untoward happening in the background of the bedchamber—was the explanation. Her eyes were cast on the ground, while she seemed to contemplate looking back over her shoulder to scrutinize further whatever dismayed her. Had she glanced behind, she might, or might not, have been in time to mark down in the darkness the undoubted source of her uneasiness. A cloaked and helmeted personage was slipping swiftly, unostentatiously, away from the room towards a curtained doorway behind the pillars, presumably an emergency exit into the firmament beyond. At that end of the sky, an ominous storm was plainly blowing up, dark clouds already shot with coruscations of lightning and tongues of flame (as if an air-raid were in progress), their glare revealing, in the shadows of the bedchamber, an alcove, where this tall onlooker had undoubtedly lurked a moment beforehand. Whether or not the lady was categorically aware of an intruding presence threatening the privacy of sexual embrace, whether her suspicions had been only partially aroused, was undetermined. There was no doubt whatever some sort of apprehension had passed through her mind. That was all of which to be certain. The features of the cloaked man, now in retreat, were for the most part hidden by the jutting vizor of the plumed helmet he wore, so that his own emotions were invisible. The calmly classical treatment of the scene, breathtaking in opulence of shapes and colours, imposed at the same time a sense of awful tension, imminent tragedy not long to be delayed.

'I wonder whether the model was the painter's wife,' said Dr Brightman. 'She occurs so often in his pictures. I must look into that. If so, she was Guardi's sister. Gyges looks rather like the soldier in *The Agony in the Garden*, who so much resembles General Rommel.'

'I don't remember the story. Didn't Gyges possess a magic ring?'

'That was my strong conviction too,' said Glober.

Dr Brightman offered no apology for settling down to the comportment of a professional lecturer, one she fulfilled with distinction.

'Candaules was king of Lydia—capital, Sardis, of the

New Testament—Gyges his chief officer and personal friend. Candaules was always boasting to Gyges of the beauty of his wife. Finding him, as the King thought, insufficiently impressed, Candaules suggested that Gyges should conceal himself in their bedroom in such a manner that he had opportunity to see the Queen naked. Gyges made some demur at that, public nakedness being a state the Lydians considered particularly scandalous.'

'The Lydians sound just full of small-town prejudices,' said Glober.

'On the contrary,' said Dr Brightman.' The Greeks did not know what being rich meant until they came in contact with the Lydians, now thought to be ancestors of the Etruscans.'

I remembered the text, from the Book of Revelation, inscribed in gothic lettering on the walls of the chapel that had been the Company's barrack-room, when I first joined. Now it seemed particularly apt.

'Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments, and they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy.'

'Exactly,' said Dr Brightman. 'Gyges tried to be one of the worthy at first, but Candaules insisted, so he gave in, and was hidden in the royal bedchamber. Unfortunately for her husband, the Queen noticed the reluctant voyeur stealing away—we see her doing so above—and was understandably incensed. She sent for Gyges the following day, and presented him with two alternatives: either he could kill Candaules, and marry her *en secondes noces*, or—no doubt a simple undertaking in their respective circumstances at the Lydian court—she would arrange for Gyges himself to be done away with. In the latter event, familiarity with her unclothed beauty would die with him; in the former, become a perfectly proper aspect of a respectably married man's—or rather married king's—matrimonial relationship. Gyges chose the former course of action. His friend and sovereign, Candaules, was liquidated by him, he married the Queen, and ruled Lydia with credit for forty years.'

There was pause after Dr Brightman's terse recapitulation of the story. Everyone seemed to be thinking it over. Glober was the first to speak.

'Then the owner of the magic ring was another guy—another Gyges rather? Not the same Gyges that saw the lady nude?'

Dr Brightman gave the smile reserved for promising pupils.

'Versions vary in all such legends. According to Plato, Gyges descended into the earth, where he found a brazen horse, within which lay the body of a huge man wearing a brazen ring on his finger. Gyges took the ring, which had the property of rendering its wearer invisible. This attribute may well have facilitated the regicide. The Hollow Horse, you remember, is a widespread symbol of Death and Rebirth. You probably came across that in the works of Thomas Vaughan, the alchemist, Mr Jenkins, in the course of your Burton researches. The historical Gyges may well have excavated the remains of some Bronze Age chieftain, buried within a horse's skin or effigy. Think of the capture of Troy. I don't doubt they will find horses ritually buried round Sardis one of these days, where a pyramid tomb may still be seen, traditionally of Gyges—whose voyeurism brought him such good fortune.'

This was getting a long way from Tiepolo, but, seasoned in presentation of learning, Dr Brightman had dominated her audience. Even Pamela, who might have been expected to interrupt or walk away, had listened with attention. So far from becoming restless or rebellious, she too showed signs of being impressed, in her own way stimulated, by the many striking features of the Candaules/Gyges story.

Her cheeks had become less pale. Glober responded to the legend too, though in quite a different manner. He seemed almost cowed by its implications.

'That's a great tale,' he said. 'David and Uriah the other way round.'

'An excellent definition,' said Dr Brightman. 'You mean Candaules, by so to speak encouraging a Peeping Tom, put himself, without foreseeing that, in the forefront of the battle. One thinks of Vashti and Ahasuerus too, where much less was required. Nowadays such a treat would be in no way comparable. You need to go no further than the Lido to contemplate naked bodies—all but naked at least—but in Lydia, Judah too for that matter, the bikini would not have been tolerated.'

'There's a difference between a bikini, and nothing at all, Dr Brightman,' said Glober. 'You've got to grant that much.'

Pamela was full of contempt for such a comment. Now she showed herself getting back to her more normal form.

'What are you talking about? What the King wanted was to be watched screwing.'

If she supposed that observation likely to discompose Dr Brightman, Pamela made a big mistake, though she was herself by then likely to be beyond such primitive essays in shocking. She had always spoken out exactly as she felt on any given occasion; at least exactly as it suited her to give public expression to whatever she wished to pass as her own feelings. In this particular case, she seemed genuinely interested in the true aim of Candaules, the theory put forward, a matter of psychological accuracy, rather than lubricious humour. Dr Brightman did not hesitate to take up the challenge.

'Others, as well as yourself, have supposed mere nakedness an insufficient motif, Lady Widmerpool. Gautier, in his conte written round the legend, characteristically adumbrates a melancholy artist-king, intoxicated by the beauty of his artist-model queen, whom he displays secretly to his friend Gyges, drawn as a French lieutenant of cavalry. Gide, on the other hand, takes quite a different view, somewhat reorganizing the story. Gide's Gyges is a poor fisherman, who delivers to the King's table a fish, in which the ring of invisibility is found. Candaules, a liberal, forward-looking, benevolent monarch—no less melancholy than Gautier's prince, though not, like him, a mere Ivory Tower aesthete—decides as a matter of social conscience to bestow on his impoverished subject, the fisherman, some of the privilege a king enjoys. Among such treats is the sight of the Queen naked. To this end, Candaules lends Gyges the ring. Gyges, once invisible, is master of the situation. He spends a night with the wife of Candaules, who thinks her husband in unusually high spirits. Naturally, Gyges slays his benefactor in the end, taking over Queen and Kingdom.'

'That taught His Majesty to brag about his luck,' said Glober. 'He went that much too far.'

Dr Brightman allowed such a point of view.

'Gide's political undertones insinuate that Candaules represents a too tolerant ruling class, over anxious to share personal advantages, some of which are perhaps better left unshared, anyway that sharing, in the case of Candaules, led to disaster. You must remember the play was written nearly half a century ago. I need hardly add that both Gautier and Gide treat the theme in essentially French terms, as if the particular events described could have taken place only in France.'

Pamela remained unsatisfied.

'That wasn't what I meant. I didn't say having an affair. I said watching—looking on, or being looked at.'

She spoke the words emphatically, in a clearer tone than that she was accustomed to use. Her attention had undoubtedly been captured. Dr Brightman, not in the least denying that to 'watch' was quite another matter, nodded again to show she fully grasped the disparity.

'You mean one facet of the legend links up with kingship in another guise? I agree. Sacrifice is almost implied. Public manifestation of himself as source of fertility might be required too, to forestall a successor from snatching that attribute of regality. You have made a good point, Lady Widmerpool. To speak less seriously, one cannot help recalling a local example here in Venice—or rather the island seclusion of Murano—of the practice to which you refer. I mean Casanova's divertissement with the two nuns under the eye of Cardinal de Bernis.'

Pamela, perhaps from ignorance of the Memoirs, appeared out-manoeuvred for the moment, at least attempted no comeback. The subject could already have begun to pall on her, though for once she was looking thoughtful rather than impatient. Moreland, too, was fond of talking about Casanova's threesome with the nuns.

'I've never myself been more than one of a pair,' Moreland said. 'How inexperienced one is, even though the best things in life are free. For the more venturesome, the song is not *How happy could I be with either*, but *How happy could I be with two girls*.'

By now the rest of the Conference had begun to infiltrate the Longhi room, the vanguard of oncoming intellectuals substantiating Dr Brightman's comparison with the sages, abbés, punchinellos, pictured on the white-and-gold walls. Gwinnett was among this advance party, which also included two other British representatives, Ada Leintwardine and Quentin Shuckerly. Both of these accommodated at an hotel on the Lido, I had done no more than exchange a few words with them. They were taking the Conference with great seriousness, from time to time addressing sessions, an obligation for which Gwinnett and myself had substituted contribution to the organ devoted to its 'dialogues'. Ada, not least because she retained some of the girlish good-looks of her twenties, had been warmly received in her observations regarding the necessity of assimilating European culture to that of Asia and Africa, delivered in primitive but daring French. Shuckerly, too, won applause by the artlessness and modesty with which he emphasized the many previous occasions on which he had made his now quite famous speech about culture being the scene-shifter to ring up the Iron Curtain.

Shuckerly was a great crony of Ada's. Tall, urbane, smiling, businesslike, with a complexion so richly tanned by the sun that his enemies (friends, too) hinted at artifice, he had by now begun almost to rival Mark Members himself as a notable figure at international congresses. In earlier days, both as intimate friend and committed poet, he had been closely associated with Malcolm Crowding. Bernard Shernmaker, always irked by even comparative success in others, had designated Shuckerly 'the air-hostess of English Letters' at some literary party. 'Better than the ad-man of french ones,' had been Shuckerly's retort, a slanting gloss on Shernmaker's recently published piece about Ferrand-Sénéschal. Ada and Shuckerly sat on the same committees, signed the same protests, seemed to share much the same temperament, except that Ada, so far as was known, required no analogous counterpoise to Shuckerly's alleged taste (Shernmaker again the authority) for being intermittently beaten-up.

Shernmaker had been malicious about Ada, too, in days of her first appearance as a novelist, though latterly, having in general somewhat lost his critical nerve, allowing her from time to time temperate praise. Some explained this unfriendly tone by rejected advances, at the period when Ada was new to London, and certainly Shernmaker remained always insistent that, in spite of marriage, Ada's emotional interests lay chiefly with her own sex. There may have been some truth in this assertion. If so, that had not prevented her from giving birth to twins soon after marriage to Quiggin, their identical, almost laughable, resemblance to their father scotching another of Shernmaker's disobliging innuendos. Quiggin did not by now at all mind his wife being a better known figure than himself. The sales of her books may even have played some part in his own evolvement, after Clapham's death, as chairman of the firm. In the delicate rôle—compared by Evadne Clapham to a troika—of publisher, husband, critic, Quiggin had judged his wife's first book, *I Stopped at a Chemist* (a tolerable film as *Sally Goes Shopping*), too short commercially. In consequence of this advice, Ada had written two long novels about domestic life, which threatened literary doldrums. She had extracted herself with *Bedsores* and *The Bitch Pack Meets on Wednesday*, since these never looked back as a successful writer. Ada's personality—what Members called her 'petits soins'—played a considerable part, too, in the Quiggins' notorious literary dinner parties.

As they advanced into the Tiepolo room, Shuckerly made for Dr Brightman, Ada for Pamela. She seemed very surprised to find her old friend in the Bragadin palace. As Ada passed him, Glober shot out an appraising glance, reminiscent of those Peter Templer used to give ladies he did not know, Glober's all-inclusive survey suggesting recognition of Ada's valuable qualities, additional to her good looks. Always a shade on the plump side (even when she had worked for Sillery), she was no thinner, but carried herself well, retaining that air of bright, blonde, efficient, self-possessed secretary, who knows the whereabouts of everything required in a properly run office, much too sensible to allow more than just the right minimum of flirtatious behaviour to pervade business hours. No doubt Ada had learnt a lot from contact with Sillery. At the ninetieth birthday celebrations mentioned by Dr Brightman, the names of both the Quiggins had appeared as present, Quiggin himself reported as having delivered one of the many speeches.

Ada hurried up to Pamela, and embraced her warmly. It looked as if they had not met for some time. Pamela's reception of this greeting was less obviously approving of reunion, though her accustomed coldness of manner was not to be constructed as pointer in one direction more than another. Ten years ago they had been on good terms. Since then they might well have quarrelled, moved apart, made friends again, never ceased to be friends. It was impossible to judge from outward signs. Pamela allowed herself to be kissed. She made no attempt to return the ardent flow of words from Ada that followed. No such display of sentiment was to be expected, even if Ada could claim, in the past, to have been Pamela's sole female friend and confidante. No doubt mere acceptance of Ada's continued devotion confirmed no rift had taken place.

'Pam, what are you doing here? You're the last person I'd expected to see. You can't be a member of the Conference?'

Pamela made a face of disgust at the thought.

'What are you doing then?'

'I'm staying here.'

'In the Palazzo—with Mr Bragadin?'

'Of course.'

'Both of you?'

Ada allowed too much unconcealed curiosity to echo in that question for Pamela's taste. Her face hardened. She began to frown. As it turned out, that seemed more from contempt for Ada's crude inquisitiveness, than from displeasure at what she wanted to know. Whatever Pamela's feelings about her husband, she was not prepared to plunge into the heart-to-heart talk about him which Ada's question posed. Ada's tone sounded as if she too had heard Pamela's name connected with the Ferrand-Sénéschal affair. It was more than a conventional enquiry to a wife about her husband. The conventional assumption would in any case have been that Pamela was not accompanied by Widmerpool. Ada was no doubt dying to learn how he was taking this new scandal involving his wife's name; Pamela, perfectly grasping what her friend was after, not at all inclined, there and then, to make a present of the latest news. Instead, she gave Ada a look, hard, understanding, half-threatening, which declared for the present a policy of adjournment in relation to more exciting items.

'He's arriving today.'

'In Venice?'

'Yes.'

This manner of stating Widmerpool's movements recalled the habit of referring always to 'him', rather than using a name. Ada's question was at least answered.

'That awful night-flight? I was a wreck when I arrived at four in the morning.'

Pamela laughed derisively.

'He wasn't man enough to take the night-flight this time. He's on a plane as far as Milan, from there by train.'

Ada was persistent.

'Is he feeling worried then?'

'Why should he be?'

'I don't know. I just wondered. He always has such a lot on his plate, as he himself always says. I must congratulate him on becoming a lord—and you too, darling.'

'Oh, that?'

'Aren't you pleased?'

Pamela did not bother to answer.

'I'm longing for a talk.'

Pamela did not answer that either. She began to frown again. It did not look as if she herself were longing for a talk at all. Her bearing suggested quite the contrary. In spite of such discouragement, Ada rattled on. She was, after all, used to Pamela and her ways. An affection of simplicity was simply part of Ada's tactic. She judged, probably rightly, that even if Pamela's prevailing aspect did not at present show a good disposition towards old acquaintance, that could in due course be overcome.

'How long are you both staying in Venice?'

'I don't know.'

'I've a story I must tell you.'

Ada lowered her voice. Gwinnett, finished with the Longhis, had proceeded on to examination of the Tiepolo. He was moving steadily in our direction. At any moment now opportunity would be offered for putting him in touch with Pamela. Obligation to effect an introduction, so that he could relate her to his work on Trapnel, was not to be ignored. On the other hand, was this the right moment? From Gwinnett's point of view the risk was considerable. Head-on presentation might—almost certainly would—result in one of Pamela's sudden capricious antagonisms, possibly aversion so keen that all further enquiry in her direction woud be at an end. Nevertheless, in whatever manner Gwinnett were to approach her, that eventuality had to be faced. There was no way of guarding against their temperaments proving mutually antipathetic. This was as good a chance as likely to occur. In the case of flat refusal to cooperate, he would have to do the best he could. To bring them together in this neutral spot, even if Gwinnett did not, here and now, speak of Trapnel—an awkward subject to broach in the first few seconds after introduction—circumstances would at least allow him to absorb something of Pamela's personality, useful material for his book he might never secure again, if opportunity were missed. Before I could make up my mind how best to act, Glober, left on his own by Ada's monopoly of Pamela, Shuckerly's of Dr Brightman, began to speak of the ceiling again.

'The way the painter's contrived to illuminate those locations of dark pigmentation is just great. Dwell on that multi-coloured luminosity of cloud effect. To think I spent twenty-four hours in Jacky's Palazzo before stepping over to gaze.'

Continuous companionship, with the conversation that brought, was necessary to Glober all the time. His manner made one feel even momentary isolation of himself required ending instantly, if he were not to risk grave nervous strain. His words postponed need for decision about bringing together Gwinnett and Pamela. Gwinnett himself came up at that moment, and started off an enquiry of his own.

'Do you know the legend depicted up there? It's not familiar to me.'

Glober, recognizing another American, but taking charge probably more from instinct to speak authoritatively, than because a fellow-countryman had asked the question, stepped in with an answer.

'We've just been told the story by Dr Brightman. It's a great one.'

He proceeded to recapitulate, briefly and proficiently. Gwinnett listened with attention. I did not know whether he recognized Glober, nor, if so, whether he wanted to meet him. His own vague manner almost suggested unawareness that Glober and I had been talking together; that nothing was further from his mind than that Glober should reply to his question. At the same time, one never quite knew with Gwinnett; what he was thinking, how he would behave. That his action in approaching us at that moment was deliberate, premeditated, could not be entirely ruled out.

'Thanks a lot. That's an interesting story.'

Gwinnett evidently meant what he said. Although I was aware of hazards incident on introducing to each other nationals of the same country (Americans not least), without carefully reconnoitring the ground, no alternative was offered. I spoke their names, coupled with that of the college where Gwinnett taught English. He smiled faintly when this was done, but with an impassivity that gave nothing away, least of all any hint that he was already conversant with Glober's reputation. If interested in making this encounter, Gwinnett did not show it, holding his cards to his chest in a manner, to the popular European view, 'un-American'. Anyway, it was in contrast with Glober's exuberance, intact from younger days, tempered with that unnoisy manner which so well suited him. There was nothing in the least forced about Glober's friendliness, none of that sense of inadequacy sometimes noticeable after a gushing approach has lacked basic vitality to sustain its first impact. Glober possessed that inner strength. When he caught Gwinnett's two hands, the gesture managed to be warm, amusing, not at all reckless or overdone.

'One of the rarest signatures too,' he said.

Although he spoke in that quiet way, he might just as well have shouted, from the punch he put into this piece of banter, for, even if complimentary, banter was what it turned out to be. At the time, the bearing was obscure to me, unconnected with Dr Brightman's reference to the surname's link with a 'Signer' family; though I noted inwardly the odd coincidence of Gwinnett himself speaking ironically of Glober being 'able to sign his name'. The conjunction of phrase, a mere chance, made Gwinnett's reply seem the more enigmatic. Later, I wondered whether, in fact, he ever signed his own name without thinking of his ancestor. That was not impossible. At the moment he appeared a little put out, laughing in a deprecatory manner, as he tried to withdraw his fingers from Glober's grip.

'I take care my own signature's a rare one too,' he said. 'Anyway on cheques.'

There was a touch of reproof in this rather knockabout rejoinder. Gwinnett was probably flattered too. How much flattered was hard to assess, the incident not immediately explicable, its implications only subsequently revealed. Gwinnett was in any case, so it seemed to me, too good an American to persist, after all that, in his earlier, more distant air; to make absolutely unambiguous a preference for different, less overpowering, modes of address between strangers. There was no question of 'putting Glober in his place', an inclination that might easily have emerged in England from a personality of Gwinnett's type. At the same time, to the extent of showing the smallest spark of exuberance himself, he did not at all retreat from his own chosen position, just keeping a dead level of civility, to which exception could not possibly be taken.

In due course, Dr Brightman explained that, among endorsements of the Declaration of Independence, Button Gwinnett's signature happened to be much prized among collectors purposing to possess an example of each. In Gwinnett's light dismissal, as an individual, of Glober's commendatory teasing, in quite another form, something was reminiscent of Pamela's neutralization of Ada's affectionate embrace. Neutralization was the process Gwinnett's manner often called to mind. Pamela's exterior, to the uninformed observer, could have been interpreted as hostile. No hostility was present in Gwinnett's reply, just unspoken announcement of another way of life. If that were hostility, it was to be detected by only the most delicate instrument. Glober himself showed not the smallest awareness of even that antithesis. Constitutionally habituated, simply as a man, to being liked by people, he could have become insensitive to antipathy, unless explicit, alternatively, so intensely conscious of any attitude towards himself short of total surrender, that he was conditioned utterly to conceal any such awareness.

The dissimilarities of these two Americans seemed to put them into almost every direct opposition in relation to one another: Gwinnett, much the younger, a disturbed background, chancy fortunes, a small but appreciable stake in American history: Glober, of mature age, easy manner, worldly success, recent—not necessarily easy—family origins. One thought of the gladiator with the sword and shield; the one with the net and trident. No doubt gladiators too had in common the typical characteristics of their trade, and something bound Gwinnett and Glober together, perhaps merely their 'Americanness'. One struggled for a phrase to define this characteristic in common, if indeed it existed. An appropriate term warbled across the room from the lips of Quentin Shuckerly.

'So I told Bernard he was just like the lame boy in the Pied Piper, getting left behind as a critic, whenever a fashionable tune was played. I clinched my argument by using a word he didn't know—allotropic—a variation of properties that doesn't change the substance. My dear, the poor man was completely crushed.'

That seemed the term for Glober and Gwinnett, at least how they looked to one across the abyss of uncertainty that precluded definition, with any subtlety, of American types and ways. Meanwhile, the question of whether or not to introduce Gwinnett to Pamela, without saying some preliminary word first, was becoming more urgent than ever. Thinking about allotropy was no help. Then all at once, in a flash, the problem was solved, the Gordian Knot cut, possibly in interplay of that allotropic element. Personal responsibility was all at once removed. Glober, taking Gwinnett by the arm, broke in between Pamela and Ada.

'I want you to meet Professor Gwinnett, Pam. This is Lady Widmerpool, who's stopping in the Palazzo.'

Why Glober did that I could not guess at the time, have never since quite decided. The step may have been due to a compulsive, all-embracing need to arrange, in a manner satisfactory to himself, everyone within orbit—creating an instant court, as Dr Brightman might have said—the spirit in Glober that brought together the Mopsy Pontner dinner party. He may, on the other hand, having favourably marked down Ada, grasped that the simplest way to talk with her for a minute or two would be to occupy Pamela with Gwinnett. Alternatively, the consigning of Gwinnett to Pamela might have appealed to him as a delicate revenge for Gwinnett's latent superciliousness, at least refusal to fall in more amicably with Glober's own more effusive mood. To introduce Gwinnett to Pamela was as likely as not to cause a clash. That clash might be what Glober wished, not necessarily in a mood of retaliation, but with the object of bringing the two of them together for the spectacle, the sheer fun, mildly sadistic, of watching what was likely to be a 'scene'—any scene—in which Pamela was involved. What he certainly did not know was that Gwinnett's highest ambition at that moment was just what had taken place through Glober's own instrumentality.

If Glober sought drama, he was disappointed. At least he was disappointed if he wanted fireworks in the form of violent opposition or bad temper. In another sense—for anyone who knew the stakes for which Gwinnett was playing—the reception he received was intensely dramatic, more so than any brush-off could have been, however defiant. The mere fact that Gwinnett himself, not Pamela, took the offensive was in itself impressive.

'I'd hoped very much to meet you while I was in Venice, Lady Widmerpool. I didn't know I'd have this luck.'

He spoke very simply. Pamela gave him one of her blank stares. She did not speak. At that stage of their meeting it looked as if Gwinnett were going to get, if nothing worse, a characteristic rejection. She allowed him to take her hand, withdrawing it quickly.

'I'm writing a book on X. Trapnel,' Gwinnett said.

He paused. This frontal attack, taking over an active rôle, thrusting Pamela even momentarily into the passive, suggested something of Gwinnett's potential. He said the words quietly, quite a different quietness from Glober's, though suggesting something of the same muted strength. They were spoken almost casually, a statement just given for information, no more, before going on to speak of other things. There was no question of blurting out in an uncontrolled manner the nature of his 'project', what he wanted for it from her. To use such a tone was to tackle the approach in an effective, possibly the only effective, manner. It exhibited a fine appreciation of the fact that to gain Pamela's cooperation with regard to the biography was a matter of now or never. He must sink or swim. Gwinnett undoubtedly saw that. I admired him for attempting no compromise. There was again a parallel between Gwinnett's tone with Pamela, and the way he had replied to Glober, the one conveying only the merest atom of overt friendliness, just as the other conveyed possibly the reverse, difference between the two almost imperceptible. While this had been taking place, Glober had transferred his attention to Ada. They were chattering away together as if friends for years.

'I think you knew him,' said Gwinnett. 'Trapnel, I mean.'

Pamela, who had as usual registered no immediate outward reaction to his first statement, still remained silent. Gwinnett was silent too. In that, he showed his strength After making the initial announcement of his position, he made no effort to develop the situation. They stood looking at each other. There was a long pause during which one felt anything might happen: Pamela walk away: burst out laughing: overwhelm Gwinnett with abuse: strike him in the face. After what seemed several minutes, but could only have been a second or two, Pamela spoke. Her voice was low.

'Poor X,' she said.

She sounded deeply moved, not far from tears. Gwinnett inclined his head a little. That movement was no more than a quiver, quick, awkward, at the same time reverential in its way, wholly without affectation. He too seemed to feel strong emotion. Something had been achieved between them.

'Yes—Trapnel wasn't always a lucky guy it seems.'

Now, it had become Trapnel's turn to join the dynasty of Pamela's dead lovers. Emotional warmth in her was directed only towards the dead, men who had played some part in her life, but were no more there to do so. That was how it looked. The first time we had ever talked together, she had described herself as 'close' to her uncle, Charles Stringham, almost suggesting a sexual relationship. Stringham's circumstances made nothing more unlikely, in any physical form, although, in the last resort, close relationship of a sexual kind does not perhaps necessarily require such expression, something even undesired, except in infinitely sublimated shape. When, for example, Pamela had been racketing round during the war, with all sorts of lovers, from all sorts of nations, she had refused to give herself to Peter Templer (in his own words 'mad about her'); after he was killed calling him the 'nicest man I ever knew'.

Trapnel, whose rapid declension as a writer had been substantially accelerated by Pamela's own efforts, notably destruction of his manuscript, was now to be rehabilitated, memorialized, placed in historical perspective, among those loves with whom, but for unhappy chance, all might have been well. It was Death she liked. Mrs Erdleigh had hinted as much on the night of the flying-bombs. Would Gwinnett be able to offer her Death? At least, in managing to catch and hold the frail line cast to him, he had not made a bad beginning. There was hope for his book. Glober, after instigating the Gwinnett/Pamela conversation, must now have decided to put an end to it, having said all he wanted to say to Ada. Seeing out of the corner of his eye that Gwinnett's communion with Pamela produced no immediately lively incident, he may have judged it better to cut it short. Pamela herself anticipated anything he might be about to say.

'Why didn't you explain at first Professor Gwinnett was the man you need for the Trapnel film?'

Glober was not quite prepared for that question. It opened up a new subject. Pamela turned to Gwinnett again.

'Louis wants to make a last film. I've told him it's to be based on the Trapnel novel that got destroyed. X himself said there was a film there. I've been telling Louis the best parts of the book, which I remember absolutely. He's not very quick about taking facts in, but he's got round to this as a proposition.'

Glober smiled, but made no effort to elaborate the subject put forward.

'Naturally I never read the last novel,' said Gwinnett. 'Did it have close bearing on Trapnel's own life.'

'Of course.'

Circumstances came to Glober's aid at that moment, in the manner they do with persons of adventurous temperament put in momentary difficulty. He brought an abrupt end to the matter being discussed by jerking his head towards the far side of the room.

'Here's Baby—with your husband.'

Two persons, without much ceremony, were forcing a channel between the dense accumulation of intellectuals, pottering about or gazing upward. One of these new arrivals was Widmerpool, the other a smartly dressed woman of about the same age-group. Widmerpool was undoubtedly seeking his wife. Even at a distance, symptoms of that condition were easily recognizable. They were a little different, a little more agitated, than any of his other outward displays of personal disturbance. As he pushed his way through the crowd, he had the look of a man who had not slept for several nights. No doubt the journey, even by train, had been tiring, but hardly trying enough to cause such an expression of worried annoyance, irritation merging into fear.

Thinner than in his younger days, Widmerpool was less bald than Glober, even if such hair as remained was sparse and grizzled. Rather absurdly, I was a little taken aback by this elderly appearance, physical changes in persons known for a long time always causing a certain inner uneasiness—Umfraville's sense of being let down by the rapidity with which friends and acquaintances decay, once the process has begun. Widmerpool's air of discomfort was by no means decreased by the heavy texture, in spite of the hot weather, of the dark suit he wore. Built for him when more bulky, it hung about his body in loose folds, like clothes on a scarecrow. He seemed to have come straight from the City; having regard to recent elevation in rank, more probably the House of Lords.

The woman with him was Baby Wentworth—or whatever she was now called. When last heard of, she had been married to an Italian. I remembered her beauty, sly look, short curly hair, thirty years before, when, supposedly mistress of Sir Magnus Donners, she had also been pursued, at different levels, by both Prince Theodoric and Barnby. Now in her fifties, Baby had not at all lost her smart appearance—she too wore trousers—but, if she looked less than her age, her features also registered considerable ups and downs of fortune. She made towards Glober, abandoned again by Pamela who had resumed talk with Gwinnett. Widmerpool went straight for his wife, inserting himself without apology between her and Gwinnett, in order to reduce delay in speaking to a minimum.

'Pam—I want a word in private at once.'

Gwinnett took a step back to allow Widmerpool easier passage. No doubt he guessed the relationship. Pamela, on the other hand, showed not the least recognition of the fact that her husband had just arrived. She took no notice of him whatsoever. Instead of offering any facility for speech, she quickly moved sideways and forward, again decreasing distance between Gwinnett and herself, blocking Widmerpool's way, so that she could continue a conversation, which, so far as could be judged, was going relatively well.

'Pam . . .'

Pamela threw him a glance. Her manner suggested that a man—a very unprepossessing man at that—was trying to pick her up in a public place; some uncouth sightseer, not even a member of the Conference, having gained access to the Palazzo because the door was open, was now going round accosting ladies encountered there. Widmerpool persisted.

'You must come with me. It's urgent.'

She answered now without turning her head.

'Do go away. I heard you the first time. Can't you take a hint? I'm being shown round the house by Louis Glober. You knew he was going to be staying with Jacky. At the moment I'm talking about a rather important matter to Professor Gwinnett.'

Widmerpool's reaction to this treatment was complex. On the one hand, he was obviously not at all surprised by blank refusal to cooperate; on the other, he could not be said to have received that refusal with anything like indifference. He paused for a moment, apparently analysing means of forcing his wife to obey; then he must have decided against any such attempt. His expression suggested the existence of one or two tricks up his sleeve, to be played when they were alone together. He was about to move away, return from wherever he had come, but, catching sight of me, stopped and nodded. Recognition evidently suggested more to him than the fact that we had not met since the night of the Election party. He went straight to the point, his manner confirming existence of some problem on his mind desperate to solve.

'Nicholas, how are you? Staying with Jacky Bragadin? No—then you are almost certainly a member of this Conference going round? That is what I expected. Just the man I want to talk to.'

'Congratulations on the peerage.'

'Ah, yes. Thank you very much. Not very contemporary, such a designation sounds today, but it has its advantages. I didn't want to leave the Commons, no one less. 1955 may have been a moral victory—several of my constituents described my campaign as a greater *personal* triumph than the previous poll, when I was returned—but past efforts were forgotten in a fight that was not always a clean one. As I still have a lot of work in me, the Upper Chamber, so long as it hangs on, seemed as good a place to do that work as any other. As it happens, my normal activities are rather impeded at the moment by a number of irksome matters, indeed one domestic tragedy, since my mother passed away only a few days ago at her cottage in Kirkcudbrightshire, which she always spoke of as an ideal home for her declining years. She had reached a ripe age, so that the end was not unexpected. Unfortunately, it was quite impossible for me to make a journey as far as Scotland at this particular moment. I could not attempt it. At the same time, it was painful to leave a matter like my mother's burial in the hands of a secretary, competent as my own secretary happens to be. Something a little over and above routine competence is required at such a moment. None the less, that was what had to be done. I couldn't be in Kirkcudbrightshire and Venice at the same time, and, little as I like the place, I had to come to Venice.'

He stopped, overwhelmed by his troubles. I did not know why I was being told all this. Widmerpool's jaws worked up and down. He gave the impression of hesitation in asking some question. I enquired if he were in Venice on business, since he did not care for the city in other respects.

'Yes—no—not really. A slight rest. Pamela wanted a short rest. To be quiet, out of things, just for a little. You may be able to help me, as a matter of fact, in something I want to know. Your Conference has been going on for a day or two?'

'Yes.'

'You meet and mix with the other members—the foreign ones, I mean?'

'Some of them.'

'I was hoping to kill two birds with one stone. Pamela was given an open invitation to stay in this imposing residence. The owner—Bragadin—is one of the smart international set, I understand, what the papers call café society, I'm told. All that sort of thing is a mystery to me. Distasteful too, in the highest degree. At the same time, it was convenient for Pamela to take a rest, even if in a style I myself cannot approve. But to get back to the Conference, am I right in supposing all these people round about are its members? I am. There chances to be one of them I am particularly anxious to meet, if here. It is a most lucky opportunity the two things coincided.'

'The Conference, and your visit?'

'Yes, yes. That is what I mean. Have you run across Dr Belkin? He is familiar to me only by name, through certain cultural societies to which I belong. By an unhappy mischance, we have never set eyes on each other, though we have corresponded—on cultural matters, of course. He was, incidentally, a mutual friend of poor Ferrand-Sénéschal.

How sad that too. I am, of course, not sure that Dr Belkin will have been able to put in an appearance. He could have become too much occupied in the cultural affairs of his own country, in which he plays a central part. They may not have been able to spare him at the last moment. He is a busy man. Belkin? Dr Belkin? Have you heard anything of him, or seen him?'

I was about to answer that the name was unknown to me, when Pamela, overhearing Widmerpool's strained, eager tone, got her word in first. She turned from where she stood with Gwinnett, looked straight at her husband, and laughed outright. It was not a friendly laugh.

'You won't find your friend Belkin here.'

She spoke under her breath, almost in a hiss, still laughing. Widmerpool's face altered. He swallowed uneasily. When he replied he was quite calm.

'What do you mean?'

'What I say.'

'You only know about Belkin because you've heard me refer to him.'

'That's sufficient.'

'What information have you got regarding him then?'

'Just what you've told me. And a few small items I've picked up elsewhere.'

'But I haven't told you anything—I—that was what I wanted to talk to you about.'

'You don't have to.'

'Why should you think he won't be here? You don't know him personally any more than I do. Nothing I've said gave you any reason to draw that conclusion. Only quite a recent development makes me want to meet him rather urgently.'

'It wasn't what *you* said. It was what Léon-Joseph said.'

Considering the circumstances, Widmerpool took that comment stoically, though he was showing signs of strain.

He seemed to want most to get to the bottom of Pamela's insinuation.

'He told you this before he . . .'

Widmerpool put the question composedly, as if what had happened to Ferrand-Sénéschal did not matter much, only out of respect he did not name it.

'No,' said Pamela, also speaking quietly. 'He told me after he'd died, of course—Léon-Joseph appeared to me as a ghost last night, and gave the information. He was gliding down the Grand Canal, walking on the water like Jesus, except that he was carrying his head under his arm like Mary Queen of Scots. I recognized the head by those blubber lips and rimless spectacles. The blubber lips spoke the words: "A cause de ses sentiments stalinistes, Belkin est foutu." '

Widmerpool appeared more disconcerted by the implications of Pamela's words than resentful of their ironic intonation. She said no more for the moment, returning to Gwinnett, who had politely moved a little to one side, when she broke off to take part in this last interchange. He must by then know for certain she was engaged with her husband. Opportunity was now more available than earlier to estimate Pamela's potentialities. This readiness of Gwinnett's to withdraw into the background showed comprehension. Widmerpool again thought things over for a moment. Then he made a step in his wife's direction. Once more Gwinnett moved away. Widmerpool was fairly angry now. Anger and fright seemed to make up his combined emotions.

'If this is true—Léon-Joseph really told you something of the kind before he died—why on earth didn't you pass it on?'

'Why should I?'

'*Why should you?*'

'Yes?'

Widmerpool, almost shaking now, was just able to control himself.

'You know its importance—if true . . . which I doubt . . . the whole point of making this contact . . . the consequences . . . you know perfectly well what I mean . . .'

It looked as if the consequences, whatever they were likely to be, remained too awesome to put into words. Pamela turned her head away, and upward. Resting lightly the tips of her fingers on her hips, she leant slowly back on her heels, revealing to advantage the slimness of her still immensely graceful neck. She tipped her head slightly to one side, apparently lost once more in fascination by the legend of Candaules and Gyges. Widmerpool could stand this treatment no longer. He burst out.

'What are you looking at? Answer my question. This is a serious matter, I tell you.'

Pamela did not reply at once. When she did so, she spoke in the absent strain of someone who has just made an absorbing discovery.

'There's a picture up there of a man exhibiting his naked wife to a friend. Have you inspected it yet?'

Widmerpool did not reply this time. His face was yellow. The look he gave her suggested that, of all things living, she was the most abhorrent to him. Pamela continued her soft, almost cooing commentary, a voice in complete contrast with her earlier sullenness.

'I know you can't tell one picture from another, haven't the slightest idea what those square, flat, brightly coloured surfaces are, which people put in frames, and hang on their walls, or why they hang them there. You probably think they conceal safes with money in them, or compromising documents, possibly dirty books and postcards. The favourite things you think it better to keep hidden away. All the same, the subject of this particular picture might catch your attention—for instance remind you of those photographs shut up in the secret drawer of that desk you sometimes forget to lock. I didn't know about them till the other day.

I didn't even know you'd taken them. Wasn't that innocent of me? How Léon-Joseph laughed, when I told him. You were careless to forget about turning the key.'

Widmerpool had gone a pasty yellowish colour when his wife quoted Ferrand-Sénéschal's alleged conjecture about Dr Belkin's reasons for absenting himself from the Conference. Now the blood came back into his face, turning it brick red. He was furious. Even so, he must have grasped that whatever had to be said must wait for privacy. He made a powerful effort at self-control, which could not be concealed. Then he spoke quite soberly.

'You don't know how things stand, why it was necessary for me to come here. When you do, you will see you are being rather silly. There have been unfortunate developments certainly, absurd ones. Even if Belkin does not turn up, there will be a way out, but, if he is here, that will be easier. We'll have a talk later about the best way of handling matters. This may concern you as much as me, so please do not be frivolous about it.'

Pamela was uninterested.

'I haven't the least idea what matters need handling. Oh, yes—the picture on the ceiling? You mean that? You want more explanation? Well, the wife there, whose husband arranged for his chum to have a peep at her in that charming manner, handled things by getting the chum who'd enjoyed the eyeful to do the husband in.'

She looked about for Gwinnett again. He was on the other side of the room, in front of a highly coloured piece of Venetian eighteenth-century sculpture, torso of a Turk. Gwinnett was examining the elaborate folds of the marble turban. Pamela went to join him. There could be no doubt she was interested in Gwinnett. What had taken place between the Widmerpools had attracted no attention from surrounding members of the Conference, nor Bragadin guests. Gwinnett himself could hardly have failed to notice its earlier pungency, but may not have caught the drift. Pamela might well be on her way to give him an account of that. Perhaps his Trapnel studies had prepared him for something of the sort; perhaps he supposed this the manner English married couples normally behaved. Considering the things said, both Widmerpools could have appeared outwardly unruffled, the colour of Widmerpool's face reasonably attributable to the heat of the day, and texture of his clothes. He still seemed uncertain whether or not his wife had spoken with authority on the subject of Belkin. He looked at her questioningly for a second. When he turned to me again, his thoughts were far away.

'I wonder what's the best course to take about Belkin. The first thing to do is to make sure whether or not he's here. How can I find that out?'

'Ask one of the Executive Committee. Dr Brightman, over there, would know whom to tackle. She's talking to our host.'

Jacky Bragadin, not paying much attention to whatever Dr Brightman was saying to him, was casting anxious glances round the room. A few members of the Conference had begun to drift into the farther gallery, by far the larger majority continuing to contemplate the Tiepolo. Jacky Bragadin seemed to fear the story of Candaules and Gyges had hypnotized them, caused an aesthetic catalepsy to descend. Their state threatened to turn his home into a sort of Sleeping Beauty's Palace, rows of inert vertical figures of intellectuals, for ever straining sightless eyes upward towards the ceiling, impossible to eject from where they stood. He waved his hands.

'This way,' he cried. 'This way.'

He may have been merely regretful that his guests should exhaust so much appreciation on this single aspect, even if a highly prized one, of his treasures, anxious that should not be done to detriment of other splendid items. Most likely of all, he wanted to get us out of the place, hoped our sightseeing would be undertaken with all possible dispatch, leaving him and his guests in peace; or whatever passed for peace in such a house-party. One wondered how he could ever have been foolhardy enough to have presented Pamela with an open invitation to stay any time she liked. The cause, in his case, would not have been love. Possibly he had never done so. She had forced herself on him. It was waste of time to speculate how the Widmerpools had managed to install themselves in the Palazzo. Jacky Bragadin, like most rich people, was well able to attend to his own interests. He must have had his reasons.

'This way,' he repeated. 'This way.'

He tried to encourage the more obdurate loiterers with smiles and beckonings. They would not be persuaded. He gave it up for a moment. Dr Brightman pinned him down again. Glober reappeared beside Widmerpool and myself.

'Mr Jenkins, I want you and Signora Clarini to meet. Signora Clarini is stopping in the Palazzo too. Her husband's name you'll know, the celebrated Italian director.'

I explained Baby and I had already met, though contacts had been slight, ages before. In those days, soon after her own association with Sir Magnus Donners, the Italian husband had then been spoken of as satisfactory to herself, even if of dubious occupation. Now he was no longer dubious, he must also have become less satisfactory, because Baby seemed displeased at his name being dragged in. Glober, on hearing she and I had met, struck an amused pose, as always personal to himself, if to some extent drawn from that deep fund of American schematized humour, of which, in a more sparing and austere technique, Colonel Cobb had been something of a master. Glober was not at all displeased to find earlier knowledge of Baby would unequivocally demonstrate the sort of woman prepared to run after him; an undertaking on which she certainly seemed engaged.

'Baby, I believe you've met every man in the Eastern Hemisphere, and quite a few in the Western too.'

Possibly a small touch of malice was voiced. Baby may have thought that. She looked sulky. I remembered Barnby's passion for her, his comment how Sir Magnus never minded his girls having other commitments. That was hardly a subject to bridge our once slender acquaintance. Her manner, not outstandingly friendly, minimally accepted former meetings had taken place.

'Aren't you fed up with this heat?' she said. 'Everybody's dripping. Look at Louis. Isn't he a disgusting sight?'

Glober murmured consciously good-natured protests. 'Am I, Baby? But not everyone. Look at Lord Widmerpool, he's fresh as a daisy. I believe he's right to take that Milan route. I'll do the same myself next time.'

Drawing attention in this manner to Widmerpool's appearance was indication that Glober made no pretence of liking him. Baby did not even smile. Her demeanour wafted through the Tiepolo room a breath of the Nineteen-Twenties. Like one who hands on the torch of a past era of folk culture, she had somehow preserved intact, from ballroom and plage, golf course and hunting field, a social technique fashionable then, even considered alluring. This rather unblissful breeze blowing across the years recalled a little Widmerpool's former fiancée, Mrs Haycock (Baby's distant cousin), though Baby herself had always been far the better-looking. She stopped a long way short of displaying the stigmata a lifetime of late parties and casual love affairs had bestowed on Mrs Haycock. Nevertheless, she had developed some of the same masculine hardening of the features, voice rising to a bark, elements veering in the direction of sex-change, threatened by too constant adjustment of husbands and lovers; comparable with the feminine characteristics acquired from too pertinacious womanizing.

'Are you hopping over to the Lido for a dip this evening, Louis? A bathe will do you good. Freshen you up. Then I'm going to visit Mrs Erdleigh, the famous clairvoyante, who's in Venice. Why don't you come there too? She'll tell your fortune.'

Glober shook his head glumly at the thought of looking into the future. He showed no great keenness to bathe either.

'I'll have to think about the Lido. Get my priorities straight.'

Widmerpool was becoming impatient again.

'Your Dr Brightman is talking for a very long time,' he said. 'Who is she?'

'A very distinguished scholar.'

'Oh.'

Jacky Bragadin was as eager to get away from Dr Brightman as Widmerpool to be put in contact with her. In Jacky Bragadin's efforts to escape, the two of them arrived beside us. Dr Brightman swept everyone in.

'I've been talking to our host about his Foundation. I thought something might be done for Russell Gwinnett. Where's he gone?'

'It must be on paper,' said Jacky Bragadin. 'Always on paper. The name sent to the Board. They look into such matters.'

He sounded desperate. Dr Brightman, pausing to explain that I wrote novels, ignored his misery. The information made Jacky Bragadin horribly uneasy, but at least resulted in a let-out from further discussion of his Foundation. I told Dr Brightman that Widmerpool wanted to meet one of the Executive Committee. At that she began to question Widmerpool too. Without great originality of subject matter, I spoke to Jacky Bragadin of the beauty of the ceiling.

'Nice colour,' he said, his heart not in the words.

'We were discussing the story—'

Jacky Bragadin's despair began rapidly to increase again at that. He laid his hand on my sleeve beseechingly.

'You must see the other rooms . . . They all must . . .'

He peered, without much hope, at Baby, still trying to persuade Glober to bathe. Widmerpool and Dr Brightman went off together, presumably to try and find a member of the Executive Committee. Most of the other members of the Conference, including Ada and Shuckerly, had begun to filter into the next room, a small backwash of Tiepolo enthusiasts from time to time borne back on an incoming current to take another look. Among these last was Gwinnett. Pamela was no longer to be seen. Gwinnett seemed by then rather dazed.

'How was it? You seemed to be making good going?'

'Lady Widmerpool's agreed to talk about Trapnel.'

'She has?'

'That's as I understand it.'

'Fine.'

'If she sticks to that. She's said some amazing things already.'

'You brought off quite a quick bit of work.'

'Do you think so?'

He appeared uncertain.

'At least we're going to meet again,' he said.

'What could be better than that?'

'Where do you think she's arranged to meet?'

'I can't guess.'

'Try.'

'Harry's Bar?'

Gwinnett shook his head.

'St Mark's.'

'In the Piazza?'

'In the Basilica.'

'Any particular place in the church?'

'She just said she'd be there at a certain time.'

'On, on . . .' pleaded Jacky Bragadin. 'On, on . . .'

3

Daniel Tokenhouse rang up the following morning to acknowledge my notification of arrival in Venice. I was still in bed when he telephoned, though breakfast had been ordered. In keeping with an instinctive determination to hold the moral advantage, he made a point of ascertaining that I was not yet up. On the line, he sounded in tolerably good form, brisk, peremptory, as always. I had not expected him to be in the least senile, but the sharpness of his manner may have been amplified by some apprehension, shared by myself, that changes must have taken place in both of us during the last twenty years, which could prove mutually disenchanting.

'How are you, Dan?'

'In rude health. Working hard, as ever. Been up painting since half-past six this morning. Hate staying in bed. You'll find developments in my style. I shall be interested to hear what you think of them.'

Complete absorption in himself, and his own doings, always characterized Tokenhouse, a temperament that had served him pretty well in getting through what must have been, on the whole, rather a solitary life, especially of late years. He had in no way relaxed this solipsistic standpoint.

'When can your works be seen?'

'I've been thinking about that. Sunday morning would suit me best. You will not be in conference then, I trust, with your fellow intellectuals? I hope they are proving themselves worthy of their proud designation. Come about twelve o'clock midday—half-past eleven, if you prefer. That will give us more time. Do not fear. I shall not be attending matins.'

He gave his high, unamused laugh.

'How do I reach you, Dan?'

'I live, I am thankful to say, in a spot quite off the beaten track of that horrible fellow, the tourist. Among the people of Venice. The real people. I could not remain here an hour otherwise. My flat is in the quarter of the Arsenal, if you know where that is, a calle off the Via Garibaldi. You take an accelerato, then a short walk along the Riva Ca Di Dio and Riva Biagio. Let me explain the exact whereabouts, for it is not at all easy to find.'

He gave minute instructions, forcibly bringing back the years when I had worked under him, something establishing a relationship which can never wholly fade.

'Afterwards, I thought, we might walk as far as the Biennale together. I have not seen the latest Exhibition yet. I should like you to lunch with me at the restaurant in the Giardini.'

'I'll be with you, Dan, between half-past eleven and twelve on Sunday.'

'You may not care for the sort of work I am doing now. I warn you of that. Are you sure you know how to get here? Let me repeat my instructions.'

He went over the directions with that pedantic attention to detail natural to him, dilated by army training.

'Have you got it? Remember, an accelerato. When you disembark, turn to the right, walk straight on, then bear left, left again, then right—not left, remember—then right again. It's over a greengrocer's. Walk straight up.'

When Sunday morning came, the place turned out quite easy to find. It was a characteristic Tokenhouse abode, which, freedom from sound of traffic apart, might have been situated in an alley-way of some down-at-heel district of London, or anywhere else, all architectural and local emphasis as negative as possible; exceptional only insomuch as to discover—elect to inhabit—so featureless a location in Venice was in itself a shade impressive. I climbed the stairs and knocked. The door opened immediately, as if Tokenhouse had been already gripping the handle, impatiently awaiting someone to arrive.

'Hullo, Dan.'

'Come in, come in. Through here. This is the room where I paint.'

The windows faced on to a blank wall. Except for a pile of canvases, none of great size, stacked in one corner, the room showed no sign of being an artist's studio. It was scrupulously neat, suggesting for some perverse reason—possibly actual by-product of its owner's intense anti-clericalism—sense of arrival in the study of an urban vicarage or rectory, including an indefinably churchly smell.

'Did it take you long to get here? No? Not after my detailed instructions, I expect. They were necessary. How are you? What is your hotel like? I know it by name. I can't bear that fashionable end of the Canal. It gets worse every year. I continue to live in Venice only because I am used to the place by now. At my age it would be a great business to move. Besides, there are advantages. One can make oneself useful.'

He rapped his knuckles together several times, and nodded. In spite of the parsonic overtones of the sitting-room-studio, Tokenhouse himself did not look at all like a clergyman; nor even the very reasonably successful publisher of art books he had been in his time. Acquired erudition, heterodox opinions, expatriate domicile, none had done anything to alter deep dyed marks of the military profession, an appearance, one imagined, Tokenhouse would not have chosen. At the same time, if aware of looking like a retired soldier, even heartily disliking that, he would have considered dishonest any effort at diminishment brought about by artificial means, such as wearing relatively unconformist clothes. His clothes, in one sense, certainly were unconformist, but not at all with that object in view. Spare, wiry, very upright, he could be thought dried up, wizened, ascetic; considering his years, not particularly old. His body seemed made up of gristle, rather than flesh; grey hair, trimmed severely, almost *en brosse*, remaining thick. He peered alertly, rather peevishly, through gold-rimmed spectacles set well forward on a long thin reddish nose. An all-enveloping chilliness of manner hung about him, sense of being utterly cut off from the rest of the world, a personality, even physique, no sun could warm. Unlike Widmerpool, sweltering in his House of Lords suit, the ancient jacket Tokenhouse wore, good thick serviceable tweed, designed to keep out damp wind on the moors, his even older flannel trousers punctiliously pressed, seemed between them garments scarcely substantial enough to prevent him looking blue with cold, in spite of blazing Venetian sunlight outside.

'How are your family? You have children of your own almost grown up now, I believe? Is that not so?'

He spoke as if procreation of children were an extraordinary fate to overtake anyone, consequence of imprudence, if not worse. We talked for a time of things that had happened since our last meeting.

'Your father and I parted on bad terms. There was no other way. He could never see reason. An entirely unphilosophic mind. Childish view of politics. Now he is dead. Most of the people I used to know are dead. I don't find that makes much difference to me. I have learnt to be self-supporting. It is the only way. No good thinking about the past. The future is what matters. But you said you would like to see some of my work. Then we'll go to the Exhibition. The Gardens are within walking distance. The pictures aren't much good this year, I'm told, but let's look at my work first, if that is what you would like.'

Moving jerkily across the room, he returned once more with some of the unframed canvases, chosen from the pile that lay in the corner. He spread out several of these, propping them up against chairs.

'You've certainly changed your style, Dan.'

'True, O King.'

That had always been a favourite expression of Tokenhouse's, especially when not best pleased. I tried to think of something to say. The Camden Town Group had been wholly superseded, utterly swept away, so far as the art of Daniel Tokenhouse was concerned. What had taken its place was less easy to define; a sort of neo-primitivism. The light was bad for forming a judgment. So revolutionary was the transformation that a happy phrase to cover just what had happened did not come easily to mind. The new Tokenhouse style, in one of its expressions, suggested frescoes, frescoes on a very small scale; not at all in the manner of, say, Barnby's murals once decorating the entrance to the Donners-Brebner Building. After some minutes, Tokenhouse himself making no comment, I felt compelled to pronounce a judgment, however insipid.

'The garage scene has considerable force. Its colour emotive too, limiting yourself in that way to an almost regular monochrome, picked out with passages of flat heavy black.'

'You mean this study?'

'Both of those. Aren't they the same group from another angle?'

'Yes, this is another shot. Three in all. The subject is *Four priests rigging a miracle*. The rather larger version here, and its fellow, are less successful, I think. At the same time both have merit of a sort.'

'You always make several studies of the same subject nowadays?'

'I find that produces the best results. I work slowly. That comes from lack of early training. My difficulty is usually to get the values correctly.'

'The browns, greys and blacks seem to create an effective recession.'

'Ah, you have misunderstood me. Having, so to speak, forged ahead politically myself, it is easy to forget other people remain content with old notions of painting, formalistic ones. I meant, of course, that it is not always plain sailing so far as political values are concerned. I am no longer interested in such purely technical achievements as correct recession, so called, or making a kind of pattern.'

'Still, incorrect recession can surely play havoc—unless, of course, deliberate distortion is in question. Was your change of technique gradual?'

Tokenhouse gave a restive intake of breath to show how wildly he had been misunderstood.

'One forgets, one forgets. Let me explain. I had begun to feel very impatient with Formalism, the sort of painting that derived from Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, not to mention their successors, such as the Surrealists—as I prefer to call them, Pseudo-Realists. I thought about it all a lot. I long pondered the phrase read somewhere: "A picture is an act of Socialism." I don't expect you're familiar with that approach. You may not agree anyway. Your dissent is immaterial to me. I made up my mind to embark on a fresh start. I began by taking a bus over the bridge to Mestre, and attempting some *plein air* studies. I set about one of those large installations there—hydro-electric, or whatever they are—a suitably functional conception. Absurd as that may seem, I created the impression of being engaged on some sort of industrial espionage. Nothing serious happened, but it was all rather tedious and discouraging. Much more important than the interfering attitude of the authorities was my own fear that Impressionist errors were creeping back, just as fallaciously as if I was one of the old ladies sitting on a camp-stool in front of the Salute. In short, I comprehended I was still hopelessly aesthetic.'

'I'd never call you an aesthete, Dan.'

Tokenhouse laughed shortly.

'Certainly not in the nineteenth-century use of the word. All the same, you have to watch yourself. We all have to. That was specially true of my next phase, when I thought I would try Political Symbolism. The effect was very mixed. I've painted-over quite a lot of them, wiped them out completely. This is one of the rather better efforts I preserved. It was completed quite soon after my breach with retrospection—accepting the past, I mean, simply as a point of departure. The important thing was I had learnt by then that Naturalism was not enough.'

'Like patriotism?'

Tokenhouse paid no attention, either because he never cared for flippancy, or, more likely, had passed beyond paying attention to most remarks made by other people. He had begun to speak quickly, excitedly, almost gabbling this account of his own development as a painter, reciting his painting creed like a lesson learnt by heart.

'I suddenly saw in a flash, a revelation, that I could not retain any remnant of self-respect, if I gave way to Formalism again in the slightest degree. I *must* satisfy my own conviction that a new ideological content had to be infused into painting, one free of all taint of neutrality. That was just as important for an amateur like myself, as for a professional painter of long standing and successful attainment.'

Like an onlooker dexterously exposing an attempt to deceive in manipulation of the Three-Card Trick, Tokenhouse seized the three studies of miracle-rigging priests, two in his right hand, one in his left, with incredible speed setting in their place a single example of his interim period. It was larger in size than earlier exhibits, brighter in colour. Most of his pictures, Formalist or Reformed, were apt to end up a superfluity of brownish-carmine tones. This latest canvas, vermilion and light cobalt, showed the origins of the fresco technique in representation of what were evidently factory workers, stripped to the waist, pushing over a precipice a disordered group of kings and bishops, easily recognizable by their crowns and mitres. Perhaps deliberately, treatment of posture and movement was a trifle wooden, but the painter had clearly taken a certain pleasure in depicting irresolute terror in the features of monarchs and ecclesiastics toppling into the abyss. The subject suggested, not for the first time in the character of Tokenhouse, a touch of muted sadism, revealed occasionally in conversation, otherwise kept, so far as one knew, in check.

'I found Politico-Symbolism, for a person of my limited imaginative faculties, a *cul de sac*. My aim latterly has been to depict social injustice in as straightforward a manner as possible, compatible with avoiding that too passive Realism of which I have spoken. My own constricted skill has prevented me from attempting some of the more ambitious subjects I have in mind, though I like to think there are signs of improvement. Ah-ha, you do too? I am glad. It is simply a question of documentation in the last resort. You meditate along the correct political lines, the picture almost paints itself. Look at this—and this.'

We inspected a representative collection of Tokenhouse's more recent work.

'I don't want to bore you with my efforts. Shall we set out for the Biennale? If you want to see more, we could look in again after lunch, but I expect you've had enough by now.'

He found an ashplant walking-stick, placed on his head a battered grey hat with a greenish-black ribbon, turned down the brim all round, opened the door of the flat. We set off for the Giardini, Tokenhouse at his habitual short rapid stride, a military quickstep, suggesting chronic fear of unpunctuality. He hurried along, hobnailed shoes grinding the cobbles.

'I'm feeling rather pleased about a letter received this morning. I've been revising my will, terms that may surprise some people, among others making the lawyers agree to insert a clause for no religious ceremony at the funeral. They didn't like it. Don't like that sort of thing, even these days. I had my way. No nonsense of that sort. Well, tell me about your Conference. What do you all discuss? Plenty of nonsense talked there, I'll be bound.'

'The Philosophy of Engagement—Obligations of the Writer—the Arts in relation to World Government—all that sort of thing.'

'Ah-ha, yes. There can be serious sides to such questions, but they are rarely tackled. Now those attending your Conference, do any emigré writers from the USSR, or Balkan countries, turn up there? One would be interested to hear what such people are saying and thinking, especially the Russians. For example how they react to the "thaw", as people call it. I've been looking through a novel called *Dr Zhivago*. I expect you've heard of it. It's been given a good deal of publicity. I suppose that sort of book, purporting as it does to present the point of view of certain members of a generation very much on their way out, might give a certain amount of satisfaction to expatriate Russians? Those who've chosen to dissociate themselves from the great developments taking place in their country. It would gratify them, a book like that, by stilling their self-reproach. Have you come across instances of that? One would be interested to hear.'

'I haven't met any emigré Russians at the Conference. I couldn't swear none are there.'

'Which again reminds me. There's a certain Dr Belkin who might have turned up. He visits Venice from time to time. Usually lets me know at the last moment.'

'Not an emigré?'

'No, no. Far from it. A man of the soundest views in his own country. He informed me some little while ago he might be looking in on this congress, or one about this time. He enjoys coming to Venice, because he's devoted to painting. He's even kind enough to be interested in my own humble brush. Of course my sort of painting is practised comparatively little in Western Europe. Nice of him to include a novice like myself in his survey. He's been to visit me several times. Naturally we see eye to eye politically.'

'Somebody else was asking about him.'

'Belkin has many friends. I do what I can to keep him up to date about books and things. Hold them for him sometimes, if he's afraid they'll go astray in the post. That avoids delay in the long run. He admits his own impatience with some of the bureaucracy unavoidable in getting an entirely new system of government working, a revolutionary one. We all have to face that. There's quite a lot of stuff he prefers to collect personally when he turns up here.'

'Somebody said they thought he wouldn't be able to come to the Conference.'

'Very possibly not. It's of no great importance. I can hold his stuff for him. I always like to see Belkin. Such a cheerful fellow. Full of ideas. Where does this Conference of yours meet?'

'Over there on San Giorgio.'

A mist of heat hung over the dome and white campanile, beyond the glittering greenish stretch of water, across the surface of which needles of light perpetually flashed. It was so calm the halcyon's fabled nest seemed just to have floated by, subduing the faintest tremor of wind and wave. We reached the Gardens, and entered the cool of the lime trees. Tokenhouse made for the enclosure permanently consecrated to the cluster of strange little pavilions, which, every two years, house pictures and sculpture by which each country of the world chooses to be known to an international public.

'We'll look at everything. Just to get an idea how low the art of painting has fallen in these latter days of capitalism. You were speaking of the obligations of the artist. I hope someone has pointed out that art has been in the hands of snobs and speculators too long. Indeed, I can guarantee that the only sanctuary from subjectless bric-à-brac here will be in the national pavilions of what you no doubt term the Iron Curtain countries. We will visit the USSR first.'

The white pinnacled kiosk-like architecture of a small building, no doubt dating from pre-Revolutionary times, seemed by its outwardly church-like style to renew the ecclesiological atmosphere that pursued Tokenhouse throughout life. Within, total embargo on aesthetic abstraction proved his forecast correct. We loitered for a while over Black Sea mutineers and tractor-driving peasants. Never able wholly to control a taste for antagonism, even against his own recently voiced opinions, Tokenhouse shook his head more than once over these images of a way of life he approved, here found wanting in executive ability.

'Don't think I'm lapsing into aestheticism in complaining that some of these scenes from the Heroic Epoch seem a little lacking in inspiration. Not all of this expresses with conviction the Unity of the Masses. I shall return for a further assessment. Now we will marvel at the subjective inanities you probably much prefer.'

Tokenhouse showed no ill will in exploring the other national selections on view, my own presence giving excuse to examine what, alone, might have caused him to suffer guilt at inspecting at all.

'Absurd,' he kept muttering. 'Preposterous.'

In the French pavilion we came upon Ada Leintwardine and Louis Glober. They were standing before a massive work, seven or eight foot high, chiefly constructed from tin or zinc, horsehair, patent leather and cardboard. Ada was holding forth on its points, good and bad, Glober listening with a tolerant smile. Glober saw us first.

'Hi.'

As neither of them seemed attached to a party, it was to be supposed they had become sufficiently friendly at the Bragadin palace to arrange a visit to the Biennale together. There was the possibility, a remote one, that both had decided to spend Sunday morning at the Exhibition, run across each other by chance. Ada wore a skirt and carried a guidebook, outer marks of serious sightseeing, but the idea of Glober setting out on his own for such a trip was scarcely credible. Ada's immediate assumption of the exaggeratedly welcoming manner of one caught in compromising circumstances was not very convincing either. The Biennale was hardly the place for a secret assignation.

'Why, hullo,' she said. 'Everyone seems to have decided to come here today. What fun. We're having such an argument about the things on show, especially this one. Mr Glober sees African overtones, influenced by Ernst. To me the work's much more redolent of Samurai armour designed by Schwitters.'

To recognize a potential pivot of Conference gossip, a touch of piquancy, in detection of the pair of them together, was reasonable enough on Ada's part. Glober's greeting too, his serenely hearty manner always retaining a certain degree of irony, was seasoned this time with a small injection of deliberately roguish culpability. Nevertheless, their combined acceptance of giving cause for interesting speculation could not be taken at absolute face value. Pretence to an exciting vulnerability was more likely to be demanded by sexual prestige, an implied proposition that something was 'on', no more than mutual tribute to each other's status as 'attractive people'. That was to take a cool commonsense-inspired view. At the same time, the significance of so rapid a move towards association together was not to be altogether ignored, even if Glober, as playboy-tycoon, was no longer in his first youth; Ada, near-bestseller, mother of twins, alleged to prefer her own sex.

Ada's pronouncements on the subject of the artefact in front of us, extensive and well informed, continued for some minutes, so there was no immediate opportunity to introduce Tokenhouse. He was contemplating the metal-and-leather framework with unconcealed dislike, dissatisfied, too, at prospect of meeting strangers, particularly an American, representing by his nationality all sorts of political and social attitudes to be disapproved. A pause in Ada's talk giving opportunity to tell him she was a well-known novelist, also active force in a publisher's office, so to speak, on the other side of the counter, he showed no awareness of her writing, but grudgingly muttered something about having heard of her husband. When, on the other hand, Glober's name was announced, Tokenhouse displayed an altogether unexpected remembrance of him. He seemed positively glad to meet Glober again after thirty years.

'You're the man who put up the idea of the Cubist series. Of course you are. I'm not in the least interested in Cubists now, with their ridiculous aesthetic ideas, but I thought them a good proposition at the time, and I haven't changed my mind about that. It was a good proposition then. I was quite right.'

This looked, at first, an altogether remarkable example of

Glober's mastery of those attributes which impose their owner's personality for life; even after so trivial a business contact as that which had brought Tokenhouse and himself together. Then there turned out to exist a more tangible cause than Glober's charm, in itself, to stimulate Tokenhouse's memory. He began to chatter away in his rapid, assertive, disconnected manner, which, once under way, was impossible to check, however ill-adapted, or unintelligible, to his listeners.

'We made the blocks for the Cubist illustrations. They were never used. Your firm went out of business, but it wasn't due to that. Several American publishers went bust about that time. Some of the most active, as regards what were then new ideas. The whole thing was called off for quite other reasons. It was a great pity. I always held we could have made a success of things. I had a row with my board about it. They accused me of behaving in a high-handed manner. Very well, I said, if you think that, I'll pay for the blocks myself. I'll buy them at cost price. I'll stand the damage. They'll be my property. They could make no objection to that. So long as publishing remains in private hands, it might just as well be for my profit, as for that of any other speculator. I'd use them in my own good time. That was what happened. They've been in store ever since. I own them to this day. I stick to it that they would have made a good series in the light of what was being thought at the time.'

Tokenhouse was quite breathless by the end of his speech, excitement similar to that displayed by him when expatiating on what painting should be. Glober took in the situation at once. He grasped that he was dealing with an eccentric, one in a high class of his category, and roared with laughter. Glober may not have remembered much about Tokenhouse personally (he had shown no sign when I spoke of him earlier), but he appreciated that he was in the presence of an oddity, from whom amusement might, for the moment, be derived. Perhaps the notion of Tokenhouse buying the Cubists blocks appealed to Glober as, on however infinitesimal a scale, a touch of his own method, an element of playboy-tycoonery. That was in spite of Tokenhouse being, on the surface, about as far from a playboy as you could get, while his former status of tycoon, if ever to be so called, was an inconceivably modest one. Perhaps that was a misjudgment, however diluted, the characteristics being present in Tokenhouse too. The important fact was that, reunited with Glober, he was pleased to see him.

'Maybe we were men before our time, Mr Tokenhouse. Too ready to experiment with new ideas too early. I'm sorry it all ended that way. Not long after we met in London, I abandoned publishing for motion pictures. When I came back to publishing for a while, things had greatly changed. That was why I returned to the Coast.'

'Yes, yes.'

Tokenhouse spoke inattentively, still thinking about the blocks, certainly unapprised of 'the Coast', or why Glober should return there. This talk of publishing must have struck Ada as a useful opening. She had accepted without the least umbrage lack of acquaintance with herself as a novelist. The blocks offered as good, if not better, opportunity for impressing Glober with her own abilities.

'I should like to hear more about the Cubist blocks, Mr Tokenhouse. My husband's firm would certainly be glad to consider the question of taking them over from you, should you be interested in an advantageous price. In these days of steeply mounted production charges, they might find a place in our list.'

Tokenhouse, never much at ease with women, especially good-looking ones, approached this proposition with caution, but without open hostility. The incomparable training of having worked as Sillery's secretary behind her, Ada had made rather a speciality of handling the older generation of Quiggin & Craggs authors, becoming so accomplished in that respect that she might now be indulging in mere display of that dexterity for its own sake. Whether or not she wanted the blocks, Tokenhouse accepted the principle of a tender. He began to discuss a lot of not specially interesting technical particulars. Retirement from publishing, changed taste in art, revised ideological opinions, had none of them blunted a keen business sense. Ada showed no less briskness about the potential deal. Glober looked at his watch.

'Have you and Mr Tokenhouse any plans for luncheon? Mrs Quiggin and I—should I say Miss Leintwardine?—were going to the restaurant here. Why don't you both join us?'

Ada looked for a moment as if she might have preferred to keep Glober to herself, a natural enough instinct, then changed her mind, welcoming the suggestion.

'Do let's all lunch together—and call me Ada.'

Tokenhouse also hesitated for a moment at thus entangling himself with forms of social life against which he had openly declared war, but he had by no means finished what he had to say about the blocks. Having in any case planned to eat at the restaurant, refusal was difficult. Even if his reluctance, and Ada's, had been more determined, Glober's pressure to enlarge the party might have surmounted that too. To deny him would have required a lot of energy. If he had an ulterior motive, long or short term, nothing of the sort was apparent. As before in the Palazzo, he seemed to hope for no more than to collect round him as many persons as available. That was simply because collecting people round him (creating one of those rudimentary courts adumbrated by Dr Brightman) brought a sense of confidence in himself. Finally, everyone had by that time seen as much of the Exhibition as desired, whether to praise or blame. Art was abandoned. It was agreed the party should lunch together. We strolled across to the restaurant, finding a table to allow a good view of the water. Glober enquired about drinks.

'A nerone,' said Ada. 'With an urgent request for plenty of gin.'

Tokenhouse declared that he never took more than a single glass of wine in the middle of the day. Glober would not hear of that. So gently importunate was he about everyone having an aperitif that in the end Tokenhouse, obstinate in his habits as a rule, surprisingly gave way, agreeing to begin with a 'punt è mes'. That was more of a triumph than Glober knew. He went on to make suggestions about what we should eat, judicious so far as that went, even if originating in a wish to impose the will. They were not acceptable to Ada. When Quiggin had married her, he had still taken pride in being an austere man—like most persons of that pretension, imposing frugality on his acquaintances, while making a lot of fuss himself, if food happened not to be absolutely to his own taste. Ada put an end to all that. Under her sway, Quiggin would now discuss bad wine, salad dressings, regional dishes, with the best. Such gastronomic ascendancy behind her, Ada was not likely to accept dictation from Glober.

Tokenhouse did not join in this chatter about food. He ordered spaghetti for himself, and sat back in silence. He would probably have liked to continue talking about blocks, but Ada must have decided nothing more could be settled about the matter until put before Quiggin. The fact was, Tokenhouse had lost the habit of this sort of party. In his publishing days he had gone out a good deal, possessing the reputation of an aggressive talker when the evening was well advanced, and he had taken a fair amount to drink. Even dead sober, he was usually prepared to shout down the rest of the party, if there were disagreements. Now he gave the impression of once more beginning to disapprove, earlier distrust of such company rearoused in him. He was rather cross when Glober nodded for a repetition of the drinks, but swallowed the second glass of vermouth, also took several deep gulps of wine when it arrived. Ada switched her attention to him, now offering a clue to her own easy acceptance of breaking up a tête-à-tête with Glober.

'You never published any of St John Clarke's novels, Mr Tokenhouse, did you?'

Tokenhouse, who had been particularly irritated when St John Clarke failed to produce the promised Introduction to *The Art of Horace Isbister*, made some non-commital answer about his firm not dealing in fiction, which Ada must have known already. She pressed the subject, not, so it appeared, because Tokenhouse was likely to throw light on St John Clarke, as from some wish of her own to emphasize the almost forgotten novelist's unrecognized merits. Then her aim became clearer.

'Louis—I shall call you Louis, Mr Glober—has come to Europe to look for a story to film. Of course, I hoped he would want one of my own novels—in default of one of yours, Nick—but we've been talking together, and he was saying the moment must have arrived for something nostalgic, something Edwardian. Then I had the brilliant idea that St John Clarke was the answer.'

This was rather a different story from Pamela's statement that Glober was going to film something by Trapnel. What subject Glober should choose struck me at the time as a perfectly endurable topic, during luncheon in these fairly idyllic surroundings, not one to take for a moment seriously. The same applied to Pamela's earlier words on the matter, in that case easing the way for Gwinnett. Commercial deals like selling stories to film companies are more likely to emerge from tedious negotiation undertaken by agents in prosaic offices. Such was one's melancholy conclusion. Glober, if not a producer in the top class, had been quite a figure in Hollywood; he was therefore tough. No doubt his mood accorded with this sort of chit-chat. To conclude any true buyer's interest had been aroused would be to misconstrue the ways of film tycoons. All the same, to be too matter-of-fact about such possibilities could be wide of the mark, as to be too susceptive to pleasing possibilities. With businessmen, you can never tell; least of all when movies are in question. On Ada's part, this looked like declaration of war on Pamela. She sounded very sure of herself.

'Perhaps you don't know, Nick, that we control the St John Clarke rights now. Clapham got the lot before he died. Just for the sake of tidiness—but I forgot, you probably do know, because St John Clarke left the royalties to your Warminster brother-in-law, and of course they came back to Quiggin & Craggs in the Warminster Trust. JG secured our own interest before Craggs died.'

What Ada stated made sense. I had not known about the St John Clarke rights; at least never thought out that aspect. She was undoubtedly going to do her best to sell a St John Clarke novel to Glober.

'A strange man I used to know in the army was devoted to *Match Me Such Marvel*. He'd worked in a provincial theatre or cinema, so he might be the right pointer for popular success.'

Bithel's view, twenty years later, could represent the winning number. Ada was enthusiastic.

'*Match Me Such Marvel* is the one I suggested. There's a homosexual undercurrent. Of course, you Americans are so jumpy about homosexuality. It would be a great pity to leave that sequence out.'

'Who says we're going to leave it out?' said Glober lazily. 'We Americans are getting round to hearing about all sorts of things of that kind these days. You don't do us justice. When were you last in the States, Ada?'

They were a well matched couple when it came to that sort of teasing, as cover for business negotiation. Tokenhouse, likely to disapprove of such levity, was ruminating on some matter of his own. Suddenly he joined in.

'St John Clarke was a vain fellow. I never cared for such novels of his as I read. He behaved in a most unsatisfactory manner dealing with my firm. It was only quite by chance I came across a pamphlet he had written in the latter part of his life dealing with an interest of my own, that is to say Socialist Realism in painting. That pamphlet was not without merit.'

Ada showed herself more than equal to this comment too. Her policy was, I think, to ventilate in a general way the claims of St John Clarke; get his name thoroughly into Glober's head, without bothering too much whether the impression was good or bad. When St John Clarke had sunk in as a personality, she would plug the book she wanted to be filmed. She showed warm appreciation of this new aspect of the novelist.

'Exactly, Mr Tokenhouse. St John Clarke is no back-number. His style may seem a little old-fashioned today, but there is nothing old-fashioned about his thought. He is full of compassion—compassion of his own sort, sometimes a little crudely expressed to the modern ear. I am most interested in what you say about his art criticism. I had missed that. Of course I know about Socialist Realism. I expect you used to read a magazine called *Fission*, which ran for a couple of years just after the war, and remember the instructive analysis Len Pugsley wrote there, called *Integral Foundations of a Fresh Approach to Art for the Masses*.'

Tokenhouse got out his pencil. Making Ada repeat the title of Pugsley's article, he wrote it on a paper table napkin. I recalled Bagshaw's editorial irritation at having to publish the piece.

'If we've got to print everything written by whoever's rogering Gypsy, we'll have to get a new paper allocation. Even our Commy subscribers don't want to read that stuff.'

Bagshaw's comment, partially disproved by Tokenhouse's interest, was borne out to the extent that Gypsy (retaining her name and style) had gone to live with Pugsley, when she became a widow. Tokenhouse now found himself assailed by Ada with an absolute barrage of expertise on his own subject. She began to reel off the names of what were evidently Socialist Realist painters.

'Svatogh? Gaponenko? Toidze? I can only remember a few of the ones Len mentioned. Of course you'll be familiar with all their pictures, and lots more. There is so much in art of which one remains so dreadfully ignorant. I must look into all that side of painting again, when I have a moment to spare.'

Tokenhouse, who had certainly begun luncheon in a mood of refusal to truckle to undue demands on making himself agreeable, could not fail to be impressed. I was impressed myself. In her days as employee at Quiggin & Craggs, the Left Wing bias of the firm had naturally demanded a smattering of Marxist vocabulary, but to retain enough political small talk of that period to meet Tokenhouse on his own Socialist Realist ground was no small achievement; not less because Quiggin himself, anyway commercially, had so far abrogated his own principles as to have lately scored a publishing bull's eye with the Memoirs of a Tory 'elder statesman'. Glober laughed quietly to himself.

'You two take me back to the Film Writers' Guild. Give me two minutes notice to beat it, before you throw the bomb.'

Seen closer, over a longer period, he was observable as a little tired, a little melancholy, amusing himself with mild jaunts such as this one, which made small demand on valuable reserves. He was husbanding his forces. To suppose that, in no way implied a state of total exhaustion. You felt there was quite a lot left for future effort, even if requirement for everything to be played out in public, in a manner at once striking and elegant, increased need for exceptional energy. What did not happen in public had no reality for Glober at all. In spite of the quiet manner, there was no great suggestion of interior life. What was going on inside remained there only until it could be materially expressed as soon as possible. The tress of hair had to record the sexual conquest.

To unAmerican eyes, probing the mysteries of American comportment and observance, this seemed the antithesis of Gwinnett. Much going on in Gwinnett was never likely to find outward expression. That was how it looked. No doubt a European unfamiliarity heightened, rather than diminished, the contrast; even caricatured its salient features. That did not remove all substance, the core seeming to be the ease with which Glober manipulated the American way; Gwinnett's awkwardness in its employment. That was to put things crudely, possibly even wrongly, just consequence of meeting both in Europe. Glober, only recently sprung from the Continent, had about him something of the old fashioned Jamesian American, seeking new worlds to conquer. Gwinnett was not at all like that. With Gwinnett, everything was within himself. He had, so it seemed, come to Europe simply because he was passionately interested in Trapnel, obsessed by him, personally identified with him; again, one felt, inwardly, rather than outwardly.

Dr Brightman had called Gwinnett a 'gothic' American. What, in contrast, would she call Glober? She had invoked Classicism and Romanticism. Here again it was hard to apportion epithets. In one sense, Glober, the practical man, was also the 'romantic'—as often happens—Gwinnett, working on his own interior lines, the 'classical'. Gwinnett wanted to see things without their illusory trimmings; Glober forced things into his own picturesque mould. In doing that, Glober retained some humour. Could the same be said of Gwinnett? Would Gwinnett, for example, be capable of taking pleasure in Tokenhouse as a medium for amusement? Was the analogy to be found in quite other terms of reference: Don Juan for Glober, Gwinnett in Faust?

The wine, passing round rather rapidly, may have played some part in these reflections. Tokenhouse was by now a little tight. Age, or abstinence, must have weakened his head. Perhaps solitude, sheer lack of opportunity to air his views, caused a few glasses to release the urgent need to hold forth again at a crowded table. He now proceeded to reproduce, in greatly extended form, the lecture he had given me earlier on the necessity for rejecting Formalism. In doing this, Tokenhouse passed all reasonable bounds of dialectical prosiness. Glober, showing American tolerance for persons outlining a favourite theme with searching thoroughness, did not interrupt him, but, when coffee came, Tokenhouse had gone too far in presuming on national forbearance in indicating to a compulsive talker that he has become a bore. By that time Tokenhouse had admitted he painted himself. Glober leant across the table.

'Now see here, Mr Tokenhouse. We're going to drink a glass of strega, then we're all coming back to your studio to admire your work.'

That took Tokenhouse so much by surprise that he scarcely demurred at the strega, protesting only briefly, as a matter of form. It was hard for an amateur painter—he kept on making a point of this status—to be other than flattered. It was agreed the party should make their way to the flat after leaving the restaurant. When the bill arrived, Glober insisted on paying. He swept aside energetic, if rambling, efforts on the part of Tokenhouse to prevent this on grounds that I was his guest. They argued for a time, Tokenhouse producing a ten-thousand-lire note, Glober thrusting it aside. We set off at last, Tokenhouse still talking hard. He was not drunk in any derogatory sense, had merely taken a little more than accustomed, which had transformed a prickly detachment into discursiveness not to be checked. He hurried along, the old grey hat jammed down on his head, swinging his stick, Glober taking long strides to keep up. Ada and I followed a short way behind.

'How on earth did you know the names of those painters, Ada? Are they Russian?'

Ada smiled, justifiably pleased with herself.

'Len Pugsley's at our Lido hotel. He'd brought the article with him, as basis of a speech he's going to make at the Conference. Getting something published in *Fission* was his first real step in life.'

'His last one too. Why hasn't he appeared?'

'Len's got a stomach upset. He's in bed. He wanted to rehearse his speech. He read it all to me. I say, I hear from Glober the Widmerpools have had a terrible row.'

'Isn't that a permanent state?'

'This one's worse than usual.'

Ada could offer no more at that moment, because Glober, fearing dispersal of his court, or that its courtiers were plotting against him, turned back to make sure we were included in whatever he was discussing with Tokenhouse. A few minutes later we entered the narrow calle in which the flat was situated. Tokenhouse led the way up the stairs. He opened the door, pointing ahead.

'Seat yourselves. I'm afraid there is nothing luxurious about my way of life. You must excuse that, take me as you find me, a humble amateur painter.'

He stumped off in the direction of the canvases in the corner.

Glober looked round the room.

'Mr Tokenhouse, you ought to advertise your studio as Annex to the Biennale Exposition.'

'I should, I should. I shall have to wait another two years now.'

Tokenhouse laughed excitedly, shuffling about arranging pictures at every angle. Glober's interest must have encouraged him to widen the scope of what he was prepared to display. In addition to those shown in the morning were others stacked in two cupboards.

'Do I detect the influence of Diego Rivera, Mr Tokenhouse?'

'Ah-ha, you may, you may.'

'Or is it José Clemente Orozco, who did those frescoes at Dartmouth? There is something of that artist too.'

Tokenhouse was in ecstasies, if such a word could be used of him at all.

'I would not deny influence of the former. I am less familiar with the work of the latter. I flatter myself in these experiments in style, now wholly abandoned, I have caught a small touch of Rivera's gift for speaking in a popular language. This, for instance—now who the devil can that be?'

A heavy knock had been given on the outside door. Tokenhouse set down the two pictures he was holding. He did not go to the door at once. Instead, he took a small diary from his pocket, and studied it. The knock came again. Tokenhouse, put out by this interruption, went into the passageway. The sound came of the door being opened, followed by muffled conversation. The caller's enquiry had not been audible. Tokenhouse's answer was testy, almost shrill.

'Yes, yes. Of course he mentioned your name to me. More than once in the past. I had no idea you were attending the Conference. You're not? Ah-ha, I see. Well, come in then. It's not very convenient, but now you're here, you'd better stay. I have some people looking at my pictures. Yes, my pictures, I said—but you can wait till they're gone. Then we can have a talk.'

He returned to the studio-room accompanied by Widmerpool.

'This is—did you say *Lord*—yes, Lord Widmerpool. Ah-ha, you know everybody. That makes things easier.'

Tokenhouse spoke the word 'Lord' with great contempt. Neither he, nor Widmerpool himself, looked in the least as if they believed the fact of 'knowing everyone' made things easier. Tokenhouse had spoken the words bitterly, ironically. In his own eyes nothing much worse could happen, now that his Private View had been interrupted, the chance of a lifetime mucked up; Widmerpool, armed with an introduction, arriving at this particular moment. Tokenhouse seemed to know instinctively that Widmerpool felt no interest whatever in pictures, good or bad.

'Take a seat.'

Widmerpool looked round. There was no very obvious place to do so. He was undoubtedly surprised at finding Glober, Ada, myself, here; not more so than I, that he should suppose it advantageous to visit Tokenhouse. The connexion could hardly be publishing. By the time Widmerpool, in an advisory capacity, had been on the Quiggin & Craggs board, Tokenhouse's days as a publisher were over. Possibly some link went back to Widmerpool's time in a solicitor's office; his former firm perhaps that recording the ban on religious rites at the Tokenhouse obsequies. Widmerpool had plainly not been warned that painting was Tokenhouse's hobby. He stared rather wildly at the pictures propped up all over the room, then nodded to each of us in turn.

'Yes—we all know each other. How are you, Ada? We haven't met since *Fission*. I expect you're at the Conference, or come for the Film Festival?'

The last suggestion seemed to have struck him on the spur of the moment, probably on account of Glober's film connexions. Ada pretended to be piqued.

'Didn't you notice me at the Bragadin palace, Kenneth? I saw you. Pam and I talked away. I should have thought she'd have mentioned that to you.'

Widmerpool, discerning a probe for information, rather than expression of wounded feelings, gave nothing away. He smiled.

'Pam often forgets to tell me things. We think it best not to live in each other's pockets. It makes married life easier. You would agree, wouldn't you, Louis?'

'I sure would.'

Glober laughed in his usual quiet friendly way, which did not at all conceal dislike. He also took the opportunity of stating his own situation.

'Mrs Quiggin and I were discussing the Biennale the time her Conference was looking over Jacky's place. We thought we'd take a look at the Biennale pictures together too. Who should we meet but Mr Jenkins and Mr Tokenhouse. Now we're admiring Mr Tokenhouse's pictures instead of those at the Biennale.'

That was brief, exact description of just what had happened. If Glober had designs on Pamela—it was hard to think otherwise—he might welcome opportunity of emphasizing to Widmerpool that he had 'picked up' Ada, accordingly was not to be taken as too serious a competitor for Pamela. Such was just a notion that occurred. If it displayed Glober's intention, Widmerpool showed no sign of appreciating the point.

'I see.'

He spoke flatly, staring round again at the rows of small canvases that cluttered the studio. Obviously they conveyed nothing to him. He appeared more than ever worried, but made an effort.

'Have you collected these over the years, Mr Tokenhouse?'

Tokenhouse looked furious.

'I painted them.'

He snapped out the answer.

'Yourself. I see. How clever.'

Widmerpool said that without the smallest irony.

'Merely a hobby. Not at all clever. The last thing they are—or I should wish them to be—is clever.'

Tokenhouse did not conceal his annoyance. Widmerpool had ruined the afternoon. Here were all his pictures spread out, a relatively sympathetic audience, to whom he could preach his own theories of art, a unique occasion, in short, wrecked by the arrival of a self-important stranger—a 'lord' at that—with an introduction, presumably about some business matter. Again, it was hard to see what business interests Widmerpool and Tokenhouse could share, yet the connexion was clearly not a friendly one, some common acquaintance's suggestion that the two of them would get on well together. Although nettled, Tokenhouse did not seem exactly taken aback. Widmerpool, after whatever had been said at the door, must represent some burden liable to be shouldered sooner or later. The botheration was for such responsibility to have descended at this moment. Tokenhouse, accepting the party was over, like a child putting away its toys, began gloomily replacing the canvases in the nearer cupboard. Then one of Glober's gestures went some way towards saving the situation.

'Just a moment, Mr Tokenhouse. Don't be in such a hurry with those pictures of yours. Would you consider a sale? If you would—and don't tell me to hell with it—I'd like to know your price for the shipwreck scene.'

He pointed to one of the illustrations of social injustice, such it must be, seemingly enacted on the crowded deck of a boat, where several persons were in trouble. Tokenhouse paused in his tidying up. He visibly responded to the enquiry.

'Sell a picture?'

'That's what I hoped.'

Tokenhouse considered.

'I've only been asked that once before, apart from an occasion years ago—in my Formalist days—when requested to present a picture of mine to be raffled for a charity. It was one of those typical feckless efforts to bolster up the capitalist system—some parson at the bottom of it, of course—attempting to launch that sort of ameliorating endeavour, which I now recognize as worse, more deliberately harmful, than brutal indifference, and should now naturally refuse to have anything to do with.'

Tokenhouse turned to Widmerpool. He spoke rather spitefully.

'The only other occasion when I sold one of my pictures was to our mutual friend. The friend who sent you here. He very kindly bought one of my efforts.'

Widmerpool seemed further embarrassed. He started slightly. Then he made a movement of the hand to express appreciation.'

'Oh, yes. Did he, indeed? I didn't know he liked painting.'

'Of course he does. He bought one of the army incidents. I called it *Any Complaints?* A typical mess-room injustice about rations. To buy it was a charming return for a small service I had been able to perform for him. I had, of course, expected no such return, having acted entirely from principle.'

'I'm sorry I didn't know you were an artist,' said Widmerpool.

There was silence. Tokenhouse blew his nose. Glober returned to the question of buying a picture himself.

'Then I take it you will sell one, Mr Tokenhouse?'

'I see no reason why not, no reason at all.'

'The emigrant ship?'

'They are a poor family found travelling without a ticket on the vaporetto.'

'Better still. A souvenir of Venice. That's fine.'

Glober, certainly aware of Widmerpool's impatience to speak with Tokenhouse alone, was determined not to be hurried. Tokenhouse, equally recognizing Widmerpool's claim on him, whatever that was, also showed no scruple about keeping him waiting. He seemed almost to enjoy doing so. Glober enquired about terms. Widmerpool was getting increasingly restive. He fidgeted about. Glober began to argue that the sum Tokenhouse had named as price for his picture was altogether inadequate. A discussion now developed similar to that about paying the restaurant bill. At last Widmerpool could bear it no longer. He interrupted them.

'I expect you know our mutual friend was unable to come?'

He addressed himself to Tokenhouse, who took no notice of this comment.

'Our friend is not here,' Widmerpool repeated.

Although clear we should have to go soon, the strain of waiting for that moment was telling on him. Tokenhouse merely nodded, as much as to say he accepted that as regrettable, though of no great importance.

'He mentioned when I last saw him he might not be able to undertake the trip this time . . . Now, about wrappings. It will have to be newspaper. You must not mind it being a not very pro-American journal.'

Tokenhouse laughed quite heartily at his own joke. The all but unprecedented sale of a picture had for the moment quite altered him. He could not be bothered with Widmerpool's problems, however grave, until the negotiation was completed.

'It's all—well—a bit unfortunate,' said Widmerpool.

'Ah-ha, it is? I'm sorry . . . Now, string? Here we are. We'll have to unknot this. I think it good to have to make use of your hands from time to time. A bourgeois upbringing has given me no aptitude in that direction. I always tie granny knots. There we are. Not a very neat parcel, I fear, but people don't fuss about that sort of thing in this quarter of Venice. There we are. There we are.'

He handed Glober the picture, enclosed now in several sheets of *Unità*. Glober took it. Tokenhouse stood back.

'Luckily my pictures are a manageable size. Patrons of Veronese or Tiepolo would need more than the painter's morning paper to bring their purchases home wrapped up.'

The name of Tiepolo seemed to cause a moment's faint embarrassment, not only to Widmerpool, but also, for some reason, to Ada and Glober. In any case, if we did not leave, Widmerpool was soon going to request our withdrawal in so many words. I could recognize the signs. Glober, too, seeing a showdown imminent, and deciding against a head-on clash at that moment, brought matters to a close, shaking hands with Tokenhouse. Tokenhouse saw us to the top of the stairs.

'I may get in touch with you again. Nick, before you leave Venice. There might be a small package I should like you to post for me in England. The mails are very uncertain here. Ah-ha, yes. Goodbye to you then, goodbye. I'm glad we had opportunity to meet again, Mr Glober. Yes, yes. I do my poor best. Ah-ha, ah-ha. I hope I may at least have acted as a signpost away from Formalism. Yes, do let me know about the blocks, Mrs Quiggin. I quite see your position. Goodbye, goodbye.'

We left him to Widmerpool, whatever dialogues lay ahead of them. After reaching the street, nothing was said for a minute or two. Then Glober spoke.

'That was a most interesting experience—and a superb addition to my collection of twentieth-century primitives.'

'I adored Mr Tokenhouse,' said Ada. 'Those blocks could be quite a snip, if he's prepared to consider a reasonable price. I remember JG talking of him now. I'm not sure JG didn't know the psychiatrist—a Party member—who treated Tokenhouse for his breakdown, anyway treated some ex-publisher for a breakdown. He used to treat a friend of Howard Craggs, an old girl called Milly Andriadis, who died in Paris last year.'

'I once went to a party given by Mrs Andriadis,' said Glober. 'That shows how old I am.'

Neither he nor Ada spoke of Widmerpool. There seemed something almost deliberate about their avoidance of his name. Then Glober stopped suddenly.

'Oh, hell.'

'What's happened?'

'I'd forgotten that contact man I was due to see at the Gritti.'

He looked at his watch.

'I'm going to be late. What's to be done in a town without taxis, and not a gondola in sight?'

Ada pointed.

'If you run, you'll catch the circolare. It's coming up. You could just about make it.'

Glober, with a shout that we must meet again soon, seemed delighted to show his mettle as a short-distance sprinter. Taking Tokenhouse's picture from under his arm, he bounded off. We saw him catch the boat, just as the rope was thrown across the rails. He turned and waved in our direction. We waved back.

'What energy.'

'All quite unnecessary too. He's surrounded by secretaries and hangers-on of one kind or another, who are only there to give an impression big business is being transacted. I'm going to make for the Lido. Have a rest, before going out this evening with Emily Brightman.'

We walked on towards the stazione.

'Who's this American called Gwinnett that Pam's taken a fancy to?'

'Has she taken a fancy to him? He's writing a book about our old friend X. Trapnel. If you don't deflect Glober's film interests to St John Clarke, Gwinnett might help in making a Trapnel film. Did she tell you she liked him?'

Ada laughed at such an idea.

'I was hearing about Gwinnett from Glober. Can you keep a secret? Glober wants to marry Pam, not just have an affair with her. Don't breathe a word to anyone. You won't, will you? He revealed that to me when he found I was her old friend. Only in the strictest confidence.'

'What does her husband think about that? He must have had plenty of opportunities to divorce her, if he wanted. Anyway, why should she herself decide to marry Glober?'

'I doubt if Kenneth knows yet. He just thinks Glober's one of her usuals. So far as Pam is concerned, the bait Glober holds out is the lead in this great film he's going to make.'

'Pamela? But she's never acted in her life, has she?'

Ada thought that a naive reaction.

'What does that matter? Besides, Pam's no fool. If she wants a thing, she'll force herself to do it. What Glober's worried about is this young American turning up, who's a Trapnel fan. He doesn't want Gwinnett sticking round, if he does a Trapnel film. That's why he's begun to look about for another book to make his picture from. There's a character just like Pam in *Match Me Such Marvel*. Of course, St John Clarke didn't know anything about women, but a competent script-writer could alter all that.'

'Why should she want to act at all?'

'Because Pam longs for fame.'

'You mean publicity?'

'Anything you like to call it. Nobody's ever heard of her. She doesn't care for that. For one thing, she isn't keen on nobody having heard of her, and quite a lot of people having heard of me.'

'Where did Glober meet her?'

'At her father's place in Montana. Cosmo Flitton married an American, and they run a dude ranch together. Wouldn't you adore to meet some dudes? Anyway, Pam went up there to stay, when she was in the States with Kenneth, and Louis Glober fell.'

'So Cosmo Flitton's still going?'

'Not only still going, but a highly regarded figure out there, with his one arm and reputation of an old hero. Everybody's mad about him. About Pam too, Glober says. He also described a scene that took place last night at Jacky Bragadin's, which went rather far even for Pam. It all arose from the Tiepolo ceiling. That was why Kenneth Widmerpool winced when Tiepolo was mentioned by Mr Tokenhouse, just before we left. Do you know the subject of the picture? I was brought up on significant form, colour values, all that sort of thing, so I hadn't particularly noticed what was being illustrated. Unlike Mr Tokenhouse, and Len Pugsley, my family always rather looked down on people who thought a picture told a story. I know about Socialist Realism, but this is an Old Master. I just saw a classical subject, and left it at that. Apparently it's a man showing his naked wife to a friend.'

Ada spoke with clinical objectivity.

'Perfectly right.'

'For some reason Pam was determined to talk about that picture all through dinner. There were a lot of people there, Glober said. She was between a monsignore and a maharaja. You know how silent she is as a rule. That night she chattered incessantly. Went on and on. Nothing would stop her. She seemed to be doing this partly to get under the skin of a lady Glober knows, called Signora Clarini, the English wife of the Italian film director, but living apart. Apparently Signora Clarini was a girl-friend of Sir Magnus Donners years ago, and now wants to marry Glober. He conveyed that in his quiet way. Pam may decide not to marry him herself, she was going to make sure Signora Clarini didn't either. She kept on talking about Donners, implying he was a voyeur.'

'Pamela's hardly in a position to take a high moral line, if only after some of the things being said about her at the more sensational end of the French press.'

Ada had not heard about the Ferrand–Sénéschal revelations. She brushed them aside. Borrit, a War Office colleague, who had served in Africa, once spoke of the Masai tribe holding, as a tenet of faith, that all cows in the world belong to them. Ada, in similar manner, arrogated to herself all the world's gossip, sources other than her own a presumption.

'Pam didn't take a high moral line. Quite the reverse. She spoke as if she and Signora Clarini were sister whores. That, according to Glober, was what made Signora Clarini so cross.'

'This was all in front of Widmerpool?'

'That's what Glober found so fascinating. Kenneth didn't attempt to shut her up. Of course he knows by now that's impossible, but Glober thought he was not only afraid of her—almost physically afraid—but got a kind of kick from what she was saying.'

'How did their host enjoy this small talk at his table?'

'Jacky Bragadin wasn't feeling well that evening, thought he was going to have one of his attacks, so wasn't bothering much. The monsignore was one of those worldly priests, who take anything in their stride, but the maharaja didn't know where to look. Louis Glober, to relieve the tension, persuaded the maharaja to teach him cricket. Jacky Bragadin found a Renaissance mace that belonged to some famous condottiere, and they used that for a bat. The maharaja bowled a peach, Glober hit it so hard he caught Kenneth on the jaw. That made further trouble.'

'Somebody once did that with a banana at school. His face must have a radar-like attraction for fruit. Glober still wants to marry Pamela in spite of all this?'

'I think so. He's quite tough. He says all his contemporaries have drunk themselves crazy, undergone major surgery, discharged both barrels with their big toe, dropped down dead on the set, and he's not going to fall for any of that. All the same, he's disturbed about Gwinnett. Pam asked Louis if Gwinnett was queer. That's what worried him. Her interest. Is he?'

'Homosexual?'

'Of course.'

'I don't think so. I don't think he's very normal either.'

'Will Gwinnett's book about Trapnel be good? Ought we to publish it? We'll talk about that later. Here's my vaporetto. See you at the *Men of Letters/Men of Science* session. I must polish up my speech. Don't breathe a word about anything I've said, will you?'

She boarded a vessel bound for the Lido. I waited for the next boat heading towards the Grand Canal. To present Sir Magnus Donners as Candaules at the Bragadin dinner party showed imagination on Pamela's part. Bob Duport had offered much the same solution as to what Sir Magnus 'liked'.

'Donners never minded people getting off with his girls. I've heard he's a voyeur.'

Barnby, without arriving at that logical conclusion, had expressed the same mild surprise at Sir Magnus's lack of jealousy. The subject, reduced to the crude medium of the peep-hole, recalled the visit to Stourwater, when, without warning, its owner had suddenly appeared through a concealed door, decorated with the spines of dummy books, just as if he had been waiting at an observation post. The principle could clearly be extended from a mere social occasion to one with intimate overtones. The power element in both uses was obvious enough.

'Peter may have developed special tastes too,' Duport said. 'Very intensive womanizing sometimes leads to that, and no one can say Peter hasn't been intensive.'

In days when Peter Templer had been pursuing Pamela, he might easily have talked to her about Sir Magnus, even taken her to see him, but not at Stourwater, the castle by then converted to wartime uses. The fact that his former home was now a girls' school, rather a fashionable one, could hardly be unpleasing to the shade of Sir Magnus, if it walked there. The practices attributed to him, justly or not, had to be admitted as inescapably grotesque, humour never more patently the enemy of sex. Perhaps Gyges, too, had felt that; as king, living his next forty years in an atmosphere of meticulous sexual normality. I should have liked to discuss the whole matter with Moreland, but, although he was no longer married to Matilda, the habits of Sir Magnus and his mistresses remained a delicate one to broach. He was like that. Moreland was not well. In fact, things looked pretty bad. He would work for a time with energy, then fall into a lethargic condition. There had been financial strains too. One of his recordings becoming in a small way a popular hit, made that side easier lately. We rarely met. He and Audrey Maclintick—whom he had never married—lived, together with a black cat, Hardicanute, an obscure, secluded life.

At the hotel desk they handed out a letter from Isobel. I took it upstairs to read. Across the top of the page, an afterthought from personal things, that amorphous yet intense substance of which family life is made up, she had scribbled a casual postscript.

'Have you seen about Ferrand-Sénéschal? Probably not as you never read the papers abroad. Fascinating rumours about Pamela Widmerpool.'

I lay on the bed and dozed. It would have been wiser to have drunk less at lunch. I felt Glober was to blame. Quite a long time later the telephone buzzed, waking me.

'Hullo?'

'Is that Mr Jenkins?'

It was a man's voice, an American's.

'Speaking.'

'It's Russell Gwinnett.'

'Why, hullo?'

There was a pause at the other end of the line. I was not sure we had not been cut off. Then Gwinnett cleared his throat.

'Can we have a talk?'

'Of course. When?'

He seemed undecided. While he was thinking, I looked to see the time. It was well after six.

'Now, if you like. We could have a drink somewhere.'

'I can't manage right now.'

There was another long pause. He seemed to regret having called. At least he sounded as if he required help in making up his mind whether or not to ring off. It seemed as if he would do that, unless I could suggest an alternative. I had no plans for the evening. Dinner with Gwinnett would solve that problem. In an odd way, prospect of his company gave a sense of adventure.

'How about dining together?'

Gwinnett considered the proposal for some seconds. The idea seemed not greatly to appeal, but in the end he concurred.

'OK.'

He made it sound a concession.

'Where shall that be?'

'Not in the hotel, I guess.'

'I agree.'

Talk took place about restaurants. Gwinnett showed himself unexpectedly knowledgeable. In this, as in other matters, he was a dark horse. We fixed on one at last, arranging to meet at the table. He showed no immediate sign of getting off the line, but did not speak, nor appear, at that juncture, to have more to say.

'Eight o'clock then?'

'OK.'

'I'll be there.'

'OK.'

I hung up. He was not an easy man. All the same, I liked him. Later, at the restaurant, he turned up punctually. The fact that I liked him was just as well, otherwise dinner, anyway at the start, would have been tedious. I had supposed, rather complacently, that Gwinnett wanted to talk about his assignation with Pamela; report on it, ask an opinion, perhaps discuss future tactics. As the meal progressed, he showed no sign of approaching that subject. The appointment might well have foundered. Nothing was more probable. The more one thought about it, the less likely seemed any possibility of Pamela having turned up. Gwinnett had almost certainly waited, perhaps for an hour or two, in the porch of the Basilica, then trudged back to the hotel. That was the picture. In any case, now we were together, he had to be allowed to approach the matter on his own terms. To force an issue would be fatal. Without going into details about Tokenhouse, I mentioned meeting Glober at the Biennale, lunching in his company. Gwinnett showed no interest. He talked of Conference matters. He was preparing a report for his College. The College, so it appeared, had arranged his attendance with that in view, the Venetian visit combined with London, for Trapnel research. He asked if I had known Dr Brightman for long.

'I met her for the first time here. I'd read some of her books.'

Gwinnett spoke highly of Dr Brightman, the good impression she had made on the Faculty, when exchange professor, her influence on his own way of looking at things. He said all that quite simply, in the manner Americans achieve, without self-consciousness or affectation, serious comment that, in English terms, would require—at least almost certainly receive—less direct unvarnished treatment. He let fall that his family had moved to New England after the Civil War. The impression was of an unusual, rather lonely young man, who had sustained a kind of intellectual nourishment from an older woman, with whom no sort of cross-currents of gender, not the slightest, were in question. I still wondered what was his trouble, the wound that had somehow maimed him. Dr Brightman must have been understanding about whatever that might be. Dinner was nearly at an end, when, quite suddenly, he turned to the subject of Pamela. This employment of two personalities in himself was possibly deliberate; voluntary or involuntary, characteristic of him.

'She showed up at San Marco.'

'She did?'

'Yes.'

Gwinnett's follow-up took so long to arrive that there were moments when it looked as if these words were all the information he proposed to give about the meeting.

'Is she likely to produce any usable Trapnel material?'

His silence extorted that. Gwinnett did not answer the question. Instead, he suggested we should leave the restaurant, drink more coffee elsewhere.

'All right.'

'Where shall we go?'

'Florian's?'

'OK.'

As soon as we were outside he began about Pamela. What he had to say may have seemed easier to express in comparative darkness of the street, rather than across the table at an over brightly lighted restaurant. Now he sounded thoroughly excited, not at all inert.

'I'm going to meet her in London.'

'That sounds all right.'

'I don't know so much.'

'Did she suggest that?'

'Yes—when she saw me in San Marco.'

'The interview there went off well?'

'She turned up on time.'

'That in itself must have been a surprise.'

Gwinnett laughed uneasily. He was evidently making a great effort, no doubt for the sake of his book, to be clear, uncomplicated, unlike how he usually felt, how at least he behaved.

'You know how dark it is in the Basilica? I was standing by the doors. I didn't recognize her for a moment, although I was thinking I must be careful not to miss her. She had dressed up all in black, a skirt, dark glasses, a kind of mantilla. She looked—I just don't know how to put it. I was almost scared. She didn't say a word. She took me by the hand, down one of those side aisles. It was the darkest part of the church. She stopped behind a pillar, a place she seemed to know already.'

Gwinnett was momentarily prevented from continuing his story by thickening of the crowd, as we approached the Piazza along a narrow street, necessitating our own advance in single file. Two nuns passed. Gwinnett turned back, indicating them.

'Do you know the first thing Lady Widmerpool said?

She asked if the place we were in didn't make me want to turn to the religious life?'

'How did you answer that one?'

'I said it might be a good experience for some people. It wasn't one I felt drawn to myself. I asked if she herself was thinking of taking the veil.'

'Good for you.'

'I said her clothes looked more religious than in the Palazzo.'

'How did she take that?'

'She laughed. She said she often felt that way. I wasn't all that surprised. It fits in.'

The comment showed Gwinnett no beginner in female psychology. He and Pamela might be well matched. This was the first outward indication of a mystic side to her. Gwinnett for the moment had shaken off his own constraint.

'I began to speak of Trapnel. She listened, but didn't give much away. The next thing did startle me.'

He gave an embarrassed laugh.

'She grabbed hold of me,' he said.

'You mean—'

'Just that.'

'By the balls?'

'Yeah.'

'Literally?'

'Quite literally. Then she hinted the story about Ferrand-Sénéschal was true.'

Coming out from under the pillars, we entered the Piazza. The square was packed with people. They trailed rhythmically backwards and forwards like the huge chorus of an opera. One of the caffè orchestras was playing selections from *The Merry Widow*, Widmerpool's favourite waltz, he had said, just before Barbara Goring poured sugar over his head. The termination of the Pamela story had to be left in Gwinnett's discretion. It was not to be crudely probed.

'That was when she told me to call her up when I got to London. I just said I'd do that.'

'By that time she'd let go—or was she still holding on?'

He laughed. He seemed past embarrassment now.

'I'd disengaged her—told her to lay off.'

'How did she take that?'

'OK. She laughed the way she does. Then she took off.'

'To contemplate the religious life elsewhere?'

Gwinnett did not offer an opinion on that point.

'You heard no more from her about Trapnel?'

'Not a word.'

Most of the tables at Florian's seemed occupied. People from the Conference were scattered about among multitudes of tourists. Gwinnett and I moved this way or that through the crowded caffè, trying to find somewhere to sit. Then two chairs were vacated near the band. Making for them, we were about to settle down, when someone from the next table called out. They were a party of four, revealed to be Rosie Manasch—Rosie Stevens now for some years—her husband, Odo Stevens, and an American couple.

'Switch the chairs round and join us,' said Stevens. 'We've just finished a Greek cruise, staying in Venice a day or two to get our breath.'

Rosie introduced the Americans, middle-aged to elderly, immensely presentable. I played Gwinnett in return. It was more characteristic of Stevens than his wife that Gwinnett and I should not be allowed to sit by ourselves. Like Glober, he had a taste for forming courts. He was a little piqued, or pretended to be, at hearing about the Conference.

'Why do I never get asked to these international affairs? Not a grand enough writer, I suppose. Who's turned up? Mark Members? Quentin Shuckerly? The usual crowd?'

Now in his early forties, Odo Stevens, less unchanged than Rosie, had salvaged a fair amount of the bounce associated with his earlier days; Rosie, for her part, entirely retaining an intrinsic air of plump little queen of the harem. Having decided, possibly on sight, to marry Stevens, she seemed perfectly satisfied now the step was taken. So far as that went, so did Stevens. They had two or three children. There had been ups and downs during the years preceding marriage, but these had been survived, the chief discord when Matilda Donners had shown signs of wanting to capture Stevens for herself. Owing either to Matilda's tactical inferiority, or loss of interest in the prize, nothing had come of that, Rosie carrying Stevens off in the end. His temporary seizure by Matilda may have been planned more as a foray into her rival's territory—war considered as a mere extension of foreign policy—a sortie into the enemy's country, not intended as permanent advance beyond foremost defended localities, already recognized as such. At the time, Rosie took the aggression calmly, in that spirit preparing for withdrawal just as far as necessary, never losing her head. Matilda's punitive raid was, so to speak, driven off in due course, after admittedly inflicting a certain measure of casualty; both sides afterwards possessing some claim to have achieved their objective. During this little campaign, explosive while it lasted, Stevens was rumoured to have gone with Matilda to Ischia.

The battle over Stevens could claim a certain continuity from the past, Matilda and Rosie not only rivals at giving parties, but Rosie's first husband, Jock Udall, having belonged to a newspaper-owning family, traditionally opposed to Sir Magnus Donners and all his works. Some thought the pivot of the Ischia incident Stevens himself, bringing pressure on Rosie to force marriage. If so, the manoeuvre was successful. When his body was finally recovered from the battlefield, marriage took place, although only after a decent interval, to purge his contempt. The story that

Stevens had given Rosie a black eye during these troubled times was never corroborated. After marriage, a greater docility was, on the contrary, evident in Stevens. He hovered about on the outskirts of the literary world, writing an occasional article, reviewing an occasional book. It was generally supposed he might have liked some regular occupation, but Rosie would not allow that, imposing idleness on her husband as a kind of eternal punishment for the brief scamper with Matilda. Stevens had never repeated the success of *Sad Majors*, a work distinguished, in its way, among examples of what its author called 'that dicey art-form, the war reminiscence'. The often promised book of verse—'verse, not poetry', Stevens always insisted—had never appeared. I had heard it suggested that Stevens worked part-time for the Secret Service. War record, general abilities, way of life, none of them controverted that possibility, though equally the suggestion may have been quite groundless. When Rosie, and the two Americans, began to talk to Gwinnett, Stevens swivelled his chair round in my direction.

'Do you know who's in this town, Nick?'

'Who?'

'My old girl friend Pam Flitton. I saw her wandering across the Piazzetta soon after we arrived. She didn't see me.'

He spoke in a dramatically low voice. There was no doubt a touch of facetiousness in pretending his wartime affair with Pamela was a desperate secret from his wife, even if true he was more than a little in awe of Rosie.

'She's staying with someone called Jacky Bragadin. Both the Widmerpools are.'

'Somebody called Jacky Bragadin? Don't be so snobbish, old cock. I know Jack Bragadin. Rosie's known him for years. He was a friend of her father's. He once came to a party of ours in London. Don't try and play down your smart friends, as if I was too dim to have heard of them.

We were actually thinking of ringing Jacky up tomorrow, asking if we could come and see him.'

'Keep calm, Odo. He's not a friend of mine. I never met him before the Conference went over his Palazzo. That was how I knew the Widmerpools were staying with Jacky Bragadin.'

Rosie caught the name. She left the Americans to chat together with Gwinnett, who had assumed, with his compatriots, a blunt, matter-of-fact, all-purposes air.

'Did you mention Jacky Bragadin? How is he? His heart wasn't too good when I last saw him, also that trouble with his chest. We thought of getting into touch. Do you know who's staying there?'

'I was telling Odo—the Widmerpools, among others.'

'Good heavens, the Frog Footman, and that *ghastly* wife of his. What can Jacky be thinking of? Thank goodness you warned me. Who are the other unfortunates?'

'An American film tycoon called Louis Glober. Baby Clarini, who used to be Baby Wentworth. Those are the only ones I know about, in addition to the Widmerpools.'

Rosie made a face at the name of Baby Wentworth.

'Jacky certainly can take it on the chin, Baby and Pamela Widmerpool under the same roof. What about Louis Glober? I seem to know the name. Is he up to the weight of the others? I hope so.'

One of the Americans enquired about Glober.

'What's he up to now? Louis Glober hasn't made a picture in years. The last I heard of him was automobile racing, in fact saw him at the Indianapolis Speedway.'

They talked of Glober and his past exploits. Gwinnett remained silent. I had not caught the name of the Americans, indeed never found that out. The husband began to enlarge on the Glober legend.

'Did you ever hear of Glober's Montana caper?'

That looked a possibility as the story of Glober's meeting with Pamela, but turned out to have bearings of interest chiefly on Glober's many-sidedness. It explained, too, a Montana connexion.

'One time Glober was in Hollywood, he went north with a cowboy actor—I'll think of the name—who was starring in a picture of Glober's. The Indians were bestowing some sort of a tribal honoür on this actor, who'd invited Glober to accompany him, and watch the ceremony. Montana, it seems, went to Glober's head. That's how he is. He talked of starting life again up there, buying a defunct cattle business, refinancing Indian leases, that sort of stuff. He was crazy about it all.'

'Wouldn't mind that kind of life myself,' said Stevens. 'In the open all day.'

'Oh, darling?' said Rosie. 'Do you think so?'

'Glober stayed up there quite a while, talking of becoming a cattleman. All sorts of yarns came back to the Coast about his doings. There was supposed to have been a gun fight. A rancher found Glober in compromising circumstances with his wife. He pulled a gun, took a shot at Glober, and missed. Glober must have been prepared for trouble, because he had his own gun by him, blazed back, and missed too. They ran out of shells, or the lady herself intervened, so they settled to cut the cards for her. Glober lost, and returned to Hollywood.'

'His luck was in,' said Stevens.

The story suggested the *monde* in which Cosmo Flitton had come to rest. I caught Gwinnett's eye.

'That's all pure Trapnel—the sort of thing X would have loved, but never managed to bring off.'

Gwinnett nodded, without giving any indication whether or not he agreed.

'When the tale got back to Beverly Hills, Dorothy Parker said Glober planned to take the lead in his next picture himself. It was to be called *The Western of the Playboy World.*'

The American lady broke in.

'Louis Glober's got a fine side too. All that money he gave for the mental health research project, that institution for schizophrenics. It was all done on the quiet. Not a soul knew it was Glober, until—'

Stevens kicked me under the table. I lost track of the precise history of Glober's generous act, but caught enough to gather it had been brought about in deliberate secrecy, the teller of the story having happened quite by chance on the magnanimous part Glober had played. I could not at once understand whatever Stevens was signalling. His eyes stared fixedly in front of him. Glancing round in the direction towards which they were set, I was now able to observe Pamela Widmerpool moving between the closely packed tables and chairs. As usual she gave the impression almost of floating through the air. She was apparently looking for someone thought likely to be sitting at Florian's. At least that was the impression given. Possibly she was merely taking an evening walk, choosing to wander through the crowded caffè to give spice to a stroll, cause a little inconvenience, draw attention to herself. The people at the tables stared at her. As she wove her way amongst them, she paused from time to time to stare haughtily back. Stevens was rather rattled.

'She's bloody well making in our direction,' he muttered.

Pamela had hit him in the face the last time I had seen them together, but no doubt he feared her unhappy moral impact on his wife, rather than physical violence. The others had not noticed Pamela's onset. Rosie, always a great talker, had a conspicuous rival in the American lady. Gwinnett seemed resigned to the position in which he found himself. Pamela had marked down our table. She was steering for it, without the least hurry. The course unquestionably was intentional. She was still wearing her white trousers, carrying from her shoulder a bag hung from a gold chain. Stevens was surprisingly disturbed.

'Has this got to happen?'

Pamela halted behind the chair of the male American. He was unaware of her presence there.

'Have you seen Louis?'

'Glober?'

'No, Louis the Fourteenth.'

'I haven't seen either since lunch.'

'Did you lunch with Louis?'

'Yes, Glober—not the Roi Soleil.'

'I thought he was giving lunch to that old cow Ada. Do you know she put round a story that I left a picador in Spain because I found a basket-ball player twice his size?'

'Ada was there too.'

'Where?'

'The restaurant in the Giardini.'

'Did he take Ada back to screw her—if he can still manage that, or can't she face a man any longer?'

'So far as I know Glober left for the Gritti Palace to meet a business acquaintance, and Ada returned to the Lido to work on a speech she's going to make at the Conference.'

'Louis's been seen at Cipriani's since he was at the Gritti.'

'Then I can't help.'

'I want some dope from him.'

Although the word might be reasonably used for any entity too much trouble to particularize, Pamela spoke as if she meant a drug, rather than, say, schedule of airflights to London, programme of tomorrow's sightseeing, name of a recommended restaurant. She sounded as if she felt a capricious desire for a narcotic Glober could supply, no breathless despairing longing, just what she wished at the moment. The possibility was not to be wholly dismissed as an aspect of Glober's courtship. The men of the party had risen, standing awkwardly beside their chairs, while this conversation proceded, waiting for her to move on.

'How are you, Pam?' asked Stevens.

He still sounded nervous. She glanced at him, but gave no sign of having seen him before. Stevens himself may have hoped matters would rest there, that Pamela, failing to obtain the information she sought, would continue on her way without further acknowledgment. She remained, not speaking, looking coldly round, regarding Gwinnett with as chilly an eye as the rest. There was no suggestion they had met, far less touched on the religious life, shared some sort of physically sexual brush. Gwinnett himself was hardly more forthcoming. Absolutely poker-faced, his expression was that of a man determined not to fall below the standard of politeness required by convention towards an unknown woman pausing by the table at which he had been sitting, at the same time not unwilling that she should move on as quickly as possible to enable him to resume his seat. Pamela had no intention of moving on.

'I'm not going to drag the canals for Glober. I'll get the stuff from him tomorrow.'

She stepped forward to occupy the chair temporarily vacated by the American husband, thereby putting an end to any hope that she was not going to stay. The American managed to find another chair, then good-naturedly asked what she wanted to drink.

'A cappuccino.'

Stevens was forced into mumbling some sort of general introduction. Rosie, of course, knew perfectly well who Pamela was, but either the two of them, by some chance, had never met, or it suited the mood of both to pretend that. Gwinnett, without emphasis, allowed recognition of previous acquaintanceship of some sort by making a backward jerk of the head. Rosie, undoubtedly angry at

Pamela imposing herself in this manner, was at the same time, unlike Stevens, quite unruffled in outward appearance.

'We heard you and your husband were staying with Jacky,' she said. 'How is he? Free from that catarrh of his, I hope?'

She expertly eyed Pamela's turn-out, letting the assessment pause for a second on what appeared to be a wine-stain, at closer range revealed, on the white trousers, which Pamela, in spite of other signs of grubbiness, had not bothered to change. Rosie also contemplated for a moment the crocodile-skin bag. Its heavy chain of gold looked rather an expensive item. This was all very cool on both sides, the sense of tension—though neither glanced at the other—between Pamela and Gwinnett, rather than Pamela and Rosie. When the cappuccino arrived, Pamela did not touch it. She sat there quietly, taking no notice of anyone. Then she seemed to decide to answer Rosie's question.

'Jacky's no worse than usual. Only worried about having a couple like us staying with him.'

'You and your husband?'

'Yes.'

Rosie laughed lightly.

'Why should he be worried by that?'

'One accused of murder, the other of spying.'

'Oh, really. Which of you did which?'

Still smiling, Rosie spoke quite evenly. Pamela allowed herself a faint smile too.

'The French papers are hinting I murdered Ferrand-Sénéschal.'

'The French writer?'

Rosie's tone suggested that to have murdered Ferrand-Sénéschal was an act, however thoughtless, anyone might easily have committed.

'They haven't said in so many words I did it yet.'

'Oh, good—and the spying?'

Pamela laughed.

'Only those in the know, like Jacky, are fussing about that at present.'

'I see.'

'Jacky thinks he'll get in wrong with one lot, or the other, through us. Jacky's got quite a lot of Communist chums, movie people, publishers, other rich people like himself. Some of them are Stalinists, and quarrelling with the new crowd. Jacky doesn't want a stink. It looks as if a stink's just what he's going to get. He didn't bargain for that when he said we could come and stay, though he wasn't too keen in the first place. I had to turn the heat on. He thought I'd keep an American called Louis Glober quiet, and we might both be useful in other ways. Now he wants to get rid of us. That may not be so easy.'

She laughed again. The joke had to be admitted as rather a good one, even if grimmish for Jacky Bragadin. Rosie smiled tolerantly. She did not pursue further inflexions of the story by asking more questions. She picked up the bag resting on the table, its long chain still looped round Pamela's shoulder.

'How pretty.'

'Do you think so? I hate the thing. This man Glober gave it me. He keeps saying he'll change it. He'll only get something worse, and I can't be bothered to spend hours in a shop with him.'

'Is Mr Glober over for the Film Festival?' asked one of the Americans.

'That's what he's put out. He probably wants to pick up some hints from the German film about the blackmailing whore.'

'I rather wish we were staying for the Film Festival,' said Rosie. 'I'd like to see Polly Duport in the Hardy picture.

We know her. She's so nice, as well as being such a good actress.'

There was a lull in conversation. Stevens remarked that his new interest was in vintage cars. The Americans said they would have to be thinking of returning to their hotel soon. Rosie confirmed the view that it had been a tiring day. Stevens looked as if he might have liked to linger at Florian's, but any such intractability would clearly be inadvisable, if matrimonial routines were to operate harmoniously. He did not openly dissent. Within the limits of making no pretence she found the presence of Pamela welcome, Rosie had been perfectly polite. Stevens could count himself lucky the situation had not hardened into open discord. Retirement from the scene had something to offer. Pamela appeared indifferent to whether they stayed or went. Good-byes were said. She nodded an almost imperceptible farewell and dismissal. The Stevens party withdrew. They were enclosed almost immediately by the shadows of the Piazza. We sat for a minute or two in silence. The orchestra sawed away at *Tales of Hoffmann*.

'What a shit Odo is,' said Pamela.

'Rosie is nice.'

It seemed best to make that statement right away, declare one's views on the subject, rather than wait for attack. That would be preferable to a follow-up defending Rosie, as a friend. Rather surprisingly, Pamela agreed.

'Yes, she's all right. I suppose she gets a kick out of keeping that little ponce.'

'You must admit his war record was good.'

'What's that to me?'

To stay longer at the table would be not only to prejudice Gwinnett's opportunity for further pursuit of Trapnel investigations, but also, if Pamela had taken a fancy to him, risk being told in uncompromising terms to leave them *à deux*.

'I'm off too.'

Pamela herself rose at that.

'I've had enough of this place,' she said.

That remark had all the appearance of being Gwinnett's cue, a chance not to be missed to take her elsewhere, get out of her whatever he wanted. Florian's could reasonably be regarded as a distracting spot for serious discussion. Gwinnett himself stood up, but without putting forward any alternative proposal. There was a pause. As a matter of form, I offered to see Pamela back to the Bragadin palace. If Gwinnett did not want to settle immediately on another port of call, he could easily suggest the duty of taking her home should fall to him. He said nothing. Pamela herself categorically refused escort.

'Where's your hotel?'

I named it.

'Both of you?'

'Yes.'

She turned to Gwinnett.

'Are you going back too?'

'That was my intention.'

Pamela fully accepted the implication that he did not propose to take her on at that moment. She showed no resentment.

'I'll walk as far as your hotel, then decide what I want to do. I like wandering about Venice at night.'

Gwinnett was certainly showing himself capable of handling Pamela in his own manner. He seemed, at worst, to have accomplished a transformation of rôles, in which she stalked him, rather than he her. That might produce equally hazardous consequences, not least because Pamela herself showed positive taste for the readjustment. The hunter's pursuit was no doubt familiar to her from past experience, only exceptional, in this case, to the extent that Gwinnett was already in her power from need to acquire Trapnel material.

'OK,' he said.

The three of us set off together. Nothing much was said until we were quite close to the hotel. Then, on a little humped bridge crossing a narrow waterway, Pamela stopped. She went to the parapet of the bridge, leant over it, looking down towards the canal. Gwinnett and I stopped too. She stared at the water for some time without saying anything. Then she spoke in her low unaccentuated manner.

'I've thought of nothing but X since I've been in Venice. I see that manuscript of his floating away on every canal. You know Louis Glober wants to do it as a film, with just that ending. It might have happened here. This place just below.'

Gwinnett seemed almost to have been waiting for her to make that speech.

'Why did you do it?'

He asked that quite bluntly.

'You think it was just to be bitchy.'

'I never said so.'

'But you think it.'

He did not answer. Pamela left the parapet of the bridge. She moved slowly towards him.

'I threw the book away because it wasn't worthy of X.'

'Then why do you want Glober to make a picture of something not worthy?'

'Because the best parts can be preserved in a film.'

I supposed by that she meant her own part, in whatever Trapnel had written, could be recorded that way; at least her version of it. Then Gwinnett played a trump. Considering contacts already made, he had shown characteristic self-control in withholding the information until now.

'Trapnel preserved the outline himself in his *Commonplace Book*.'

'What's that?'

'Something you don't know about.'

'Where is it?'

'I've got it.'

'He says there what he said in *Profiles in String*?'

'Some of it.'

'I'll destroy that too—if it isn't worthy of him.'

Gwinnett did not answer.

'You don't believe me?'

'I entirely believe you, Lady Widmerpool, but you don't have the *Commonplace Book*.'

In another mood she would certainly have shown contemptuous amusement for Gwinnett's prim formality of manner. Now she was working herself up into one of her rages.

'You won't take my word—that I threw the manuscript into the Canal because it wasn't good enough?'

'I take your word unreservedly, Lady Widmerpool.'

Gwinnett himself might have been quite angry by then. It was impossible to tell. As usual he spoke, like Pamela herself, in a low unemphatic tone.

'X himself knew it was a necessary sacrifice. He said so after. He liked to talk about that sort of thing. It was one side of him.'

What she stated about Trapnel was not at all untrue, if strange she had appreciated that aspect of him. She was an ideal instance of Barnby's pronouncement that for a woman being in love with a man does not necessarily imply behaving well to him. Some comment of Trapnel's about the destruction of the manuscript must have come to her ears later.

'That was why he threw away his swordstick too.'

This settled the fact of someone having given her an account of the incident. Not myself, unlikely to have been Bagshaw, the story had just travelled round.

'You knew that?'

She was insistent.

'I'd been told,' Gwinnett admitted.

He was stonewalling obstinately.

'You don't know what sacrifice is.'

Gwinnett gave an odd smile at that.

'What makes you think so?'

If Pamela were an uncomfortable person, so was he. The way he asked that question was dreadfully tortured. If she noticed that fact—as time went on one suspected she did not miss much—she gave no sign.

'I'll show you.'

She slipped from off her shoulder the bag Glober had given her, wound the chain quickly about it, forming a rough knot. Then, holding the shortened links of gold, whirled round the bundle in the air, like a sort of prayer-wheel, and tossed it over the side of the bridge. There was the gentlest of splashes. The crocodile-skin (returned to its natural element) bobbed about for a second or two on the surface of the water, the moonlight glinting on metal clasps, a moment later, weighed down by the weight of its chain, sinking into the dark currents of the little canal. Gwinnett still did not speak. Pamela returned from the parapet from which she had watched the bag disappear.

'That shows you what X did with something he valued.'

She had evidently intended to play out for Gwinnett's benefit a figurative representation of the offering up of both manuscript and swordstick. Gwinnett did not propose to allow that. He showed himself prepared for a tussle.

'You said just a short while back you didn't think all that of the purse.'

He stood there openly unimpressed. For the moment it looked as if Pamela were going to hit him in the face, register one of those backhand swings she had dealt Stevens in the past. She may have contemplated doing so, thought better of it. Instead, she took hold of his right arm with her left hand, and hammered on his chest with her fist. She must have hit him quite hard. He retreated a step or two from the force of the onset, laughing a little, still not speaking. Pamela ceasing to pound Gwinnett at last, stood back. She gave him a long searching look. Then she turned, and walked quickly away in the direction from which we had come. Gwinnett did nothing for a minute or two. Either a lot of breath had been knocked out of him, and he was recovering, or he remained lost in contemplation of the whole strange incident; probably both. Then at last he shook his head.

'I'd best go see what she's after.'

He too set off into the night. He did that at a more moderate speed than Pamela's. I left them to make whatever mutual coordination between them, physical or intellectual, seemed best in the light of whatever each required from the other. Even in the interests of getting a biography written about Trapnel, it was not for a third party to intervene further. Gwinnett had certainly entered the true Trapnel world in a manner no aspiring biographer could discount. It was like a supernatural story, a myth. If he wanted to avoid becoming the victim of sorcery, being himself turned into a toad, or something of that kind—in moral terms his dissertation follow *Profile in String* into the waters of the Styx—he would have to find the magic talisman, and do that pretty quickly. It might already be too late.

Dr Brightman was in the hall of the hotel. She too had just come in. The evening with Ada had been a great success.

'What a nice girl she is. I hear you both met at the Biennale. Russell Gwinnett suggested we should go there together. I must speak to him about it.'

'Russell Gwinnett's just been beaten up by Lady Widmerpool.'

Dr Brightman showed keen interest in the story of what had been happening. At the end she gave her verdict.

'Lady Widmerpool may be what Russell is looking for.'

'At least she could hardly be called a mother-substitute.'

'Mothers vary.'

'You called him gothic?'

'To avoid the word decadent, so dear to the American heart, especially when European failings are in question. It is rarely used with precision here either. Of course there were the *Décadents*, so designated by themselves, but think of the habits of Alexander the Great, or Julius Ceasar, neither of whom can be regarded as exactly decadent personalities.'

'Are you implying sexual ambivalence in Gwinnett?'

'I think not. His life might have been easier had that been so. Of course he remains essentially American in believing all questions have answers, that there is an ideal life against which everyday life can be measured—but measured only in everyday terms, so that the ideal life would be another sort of everyday life. It is somewhere at that point Russell's difficulties lie.'

We said goodnight. I slept badly. Tokenhouse rang up early again the following morning. He brushed aside reference to the visit to his studio. He was, in his own terms, back to normal, comparative gaieties of the Glober luncheon obliterated entirely.

'I think you said you were going to be in Venice another day or two?'

I told him when the Conference broke up.

'In that case we shall not be able to meet again—and I shall not require the package, of which I spoke, posted in England. I find I am falling seriously behind in my work. Got to buckle down, not waste any more time with visitors, if the job is to be properly done. Of course I was glad to see you after so many years, hear your news. Painting is like everything else, it must be taken seriously. No good otherwise. That does not mean I was not pleased we fell in with each other. Let me know if you come to Venice again on a similar peregrination with your intellectual friends.'

'Did you clear up Widmerpool's problem?'

'Widmerpool?'

'The man who came in while we were looking at your pictures.'

'Widmerpool? Ah, yes, Lord Widmerpool. For the moment I could not place the name. Yes, yes. I did my best for him. Only a small matter. I don't know why he seemed so concerned about it. He simply wanted to ascertain the whereabouts of a friend we have in common. By the way, keep it to yourself, will you, that you met Lord Widmerpool at my studio. He asked me to say that. I have no idea why. He rather gave me to understand that he had offered some excuse, other than that he was coming to see me, to avoid some social engagement—I can sympathize with that—and did not want so flimsy a motive to be revealed. Well, I mustn't waste the whole morning coffee-housing on this vile instrument. Has your Conference settled anything by its coming together? No? I thought not. Goodbye to you, goodbye.'

He rang off. When I saw Gwinnett later in the morning, before one of the sessions, I asked if he had caught up with Pamela. He replied so vaguely that it remained uncertain whether he had managed to find her; or found her, and been sent about his business. He said he was not packing up with the Conference, having decided to stay on for the Film Festival. Then he spoke as an afterthought.

'There's something I'd be glad for you to do for me when you get back to England—tell Trapnel's friend, Mr Bagshaw, whom you mentioned, I'll be calling him up. Just so he doesn't think I'm some crazy American dissertation-writer, and give me the brush-off.'

'He won't do that. Where are you staying in London?'

Gwinnett named an hotel in Bloomsbury, a former haunt of Trapnel's.

'That will be fairly spartan.'

'I'll get the atmosphere there. Later I might try some of the more rundown locations too.'

'You're going to do it in style.'

'Sure.'

I saw Gwinnett only once again, the day the Conference closed. He appeared carrying a small parcel, which looked like a paper-wrapped book. This he handed to me.

'It's Trapnel's *Commonplace Book*. You'll like to see it, though there isn't all that there.'

'Won't you need it? When will I be able to return it to you, and where?'

'You keep it for the next few weeks. I'd rather it wasn't in my own hands for the time being. I'll get in touch when I want it back.'

That was all he would say, except also implying a preference not to be called up, otherwise contacted, at the hotel. Apart from the loan of the *Commonplace Book*, a generous one, our parting was as stiff as our meeting had been. Thinking over the unsolicited lending of the *Commonplace Book*, I could only surmise he felt the Trapnel notes, after what she had said, safer right away from Pamela. Did he not trust himself, or was it that he thought her capable of anything? Dr Brightman, not remaining for the Film Festival, was also delaying immediate return to England.

'It seemed a pity to be in this part of Italy, and not idle away a few days with the Ostrogoths and Lombards. The Venetian air overcomes one with dilettantism. That nice little Ada Leintwardine says she will join me for a night or two, when the Film Festival is over, at whatever place I have reached by then. Such an adventure to have met Lady Widmerpool. My colleagues will be green with envy.'

At that period, when one travelled to and from Venice direct by air (the route avoided by Widmerpool), a bus picked up, or set down, airport passengers in the Piazzale Roma. By night this happened at an uncomfortable hour. You waited in a caffè, the bus arriving about one o'clock in the morning. Ennui and dejection were to be associated with the small hours spent in that place. Even in daytime the Piazzale Roma, flanked by two garages of megalomaniac dimension, overspread with parked charabancs and trucks, crowded throughout the twenty-four hours with touts and loiterers, is a gloomy, dusty, untidy, rather sinister spot. These backblocks, raw underside of the incredible inviolate aqueous city, were no doubt regarded by Tokenhouse as the 'real Venice'—though one lot of human beings and their habitations cannot be less or more 'real' than another—purlieus that, in Cassanova's day, would have teemed with swindlers, thieves, whores, pimps, police spies, flavours probably not wholly absent today.

Waiting for the airport bus, I watched gangs of young men circling the huge square again and again. They seemed to wander about there all night. As one of these clusters of itinerant corner-boys prowled past the caffè, a straggler from the group turned aside for a moment to utter the hissing accolade owed to any female passer-by not absolutely monstrous of feature.

'Bella! Bellissima!'

A confrère ahead of him looked round too, and the wolf-whistler, forgetting his own impassioned salutation of a moment before, entered into argument with his friend, quite evidently about another subject. They all trudged on, chattering together. Through the shadows, recurrently dispersed by flashing headlights of cars passing and repassing, a slim trousered figure receded through murky byways, slinking between shifting loafers and parked vehicles. It certainly looked like Pamela Widmerpool. She was alone, roving slowly, abstractedly, through the Venetian midnight.

4

BAGSHAW WAS AT ONCE ATTENTIVE to the idea of an American biographer of X. Trapnel seeking an interview with himself. In fact he pressed for a meeting to hear a fuller account of Gwinnett's needs. Television had made him more prolix than ever on the line. One was also increasingly aware that he was no longer Books-do-furnish-a-room Bagshaw of ancient days, but Lindsay Bagshaw, the Television 'personality', no towering magnate of that order, but, if only a minor scion, fully conscious of inspired status. He suggested a visit to his own house, something never before put forward. In the past, a pub would always have been proposed. Bagshaw himself was a little sheepish about the change. Complacent, he was also a trifle cowed. He attempted explanation.

'I like to get back as early as possible after work. May prefers that. There's always a lot to do at home.'

The idea of Bagshaw deferring, in this manner, to domesticity, owning, even renting, a house was an altogether unfamiliar one. In early life, married or single, his quarters had been kept secret. They were in a sense his only secret, everyone always knowing about his love affairs, political standpoint, prospects of changing his job, ups and downs of health. Where he lived was another matter. That was not revealed. One pictured him domiciled less vagrantly than Trapnel, all the same never in connexion with anything so portentous as a house. There was no reason why Bagshaw should not possess a house, nor in general be taken less seriously than other people. No doubt, for his own purposes, he had done a good deal to encourage a view of himself as a grotesque figure, moving through a world of farce. Come to rest in relatively prosperous circumstances, he had now modified the rôle for which he had formerly typecast himself. Dynamic styles of life required one 'image'; static, another. How deep these changes went could not be judged. Bagshaw remained devious.

'We're a bit north of Primrose Hill. I got the lease on quite favourable terms during the property slump some years after the war, when I left *Fission*. I shall look forward to hearing all about Professor Gwinnett, when I see you.'

Bagshaw's house, larger than surmised, was of fairly dilapidated exterior. Waiting on the doorstep, I wondered whether the upper storeys were let off. Children's voices were to be heard above, one of them making rather a fuss. Children had never played a part in the Bagshaw field of operation. They seemed out of place there. I rang a couple of times, then knocked. The door was opened by a girl of about sixteen or seventeen. Rather vacant in expression, reasonably good-looking, she was not on sight identifiable as member of the family or hired retainer. The point could not be settled, because she turned away without speaking, and set off up some stairs. At first I supposed her a foreign 'au pair', speaking no English, possibly seeking an interpreter, but, as she disappeared, she could be heard complaining.

'All right, I'm coming. Don't make such a bloody row.'

The protest was a little hysterical as uttered. There was an impression, possibly due to a naturally tuberous figure, that she might be pregnant. That could easily have been a mistaken conclusion. I waited. Several doors could be explored, if no one appeared. I was about to experiment with one of these, when an elderly man, wearing a woollen dressing-gown, came slowly down the stairs up which the girl had departed. It was evident that he did not expect to find me in the hall. His arrival there would pose action of some sort, but, suddenly aware of my presence, he muttered some sort of apology, retreating up the stairs again. Even if Bagshaw's way of life had in certain respects altered, become more solid, a fundamental pattern of unconventionality remained. The problem of what to do next was solved by the appearance, from a door leading apparently to the basement, of Bagshaw himself.

'Ah, Nicholas. When did you arrive? How did you get in? Avril opened the door, I suppose. Where is she now? Gone off to quieten the kids, I expect. You haven't been here long, have you?'

'No, but a white-haired gentleman came down the stairs just now, apparently seeking help.'

Bagshaw dismissed that.

'Only my father. May didn't appear, did she? The gas-cooker's blown. Come in here, shall we?'

He had changed a good deal since last seen. At that period we did not have a television set, so I had never watched a Bagshaw programme. He looked not only much older, also much more untidy, which once would have seemed hard to achieve. The room we entered was even untidier than Bagshaw himself. The mess there was epic. It seemed half-study, half-nursery, in one corner a bookcase full of works on political theory, in another a large dolls' house, lacking its façade. The tables and floor were covered with typescripts, income-tax forms, newspapers, weeklies, mini-cars, children's bricks. Bagshaw made a space on the sofa, at the far end from that where the stuffing was bursting out.

'Now—a drink?'

'Who is Avril?'

'One of my stepdaughters.'

'I didn't know—'

'Three of them. Avril's not a bad girl. Not very bright. A bit sub, to tell the truth. She's in rather a jam at the moment. Can't be helped.'

Bagshaw made a despairing, consciously theatrical gesture, no doubt developed from his professional life.

'Are the other stepchildren upstairs?'

He looked surprised. Certainly the ages seemed wrong, if anything were to be inferred from the noises being made.

'No, no. The ones upstairs are my own. The stepchildren are more or less grown-up. Getting into tangles with boyfriends all the time. You see I'm quite a family man now.'

Bagshaw said that in a whimsical, rather faraway voice, probably another echo of his programme. His whole demeanour had become more histrionic, at least histrionic in a different manner from formerly. He sat down without pouring himself out a drink, something not entirely without precedent, though unlikely to be linked now with curative abstinences of the past.

'Aren't you having anything?'

'I hardly drink anything these days. Find I feel better. Get through more work. Here's May. How's your migraine, dear? Have a drink, it may make you feel better. No? Too busy?'

Mrs Bagshaw, in her forties, with traces of the same blonde good-looks as her daughter, had the air of being dreadfully harassed. She was also rather lame. Evidently used to people coming to see her husband about matters connected with his work, perfectly polite, she obviously hoped to get out of the room as soon as possible, after giving some sort of a progress report about the cooking-stove crisis. This problem solved, or postponed, she excused herself and retired again. Bagshaw, who had listened gravely, replied with apparent good sense to his wife's statements and questions, clearly accepted this new incarnation of himself. In any case, it was no longer new to him. When Mrs Bagshaw had gone, he settled down again to his professionally avuncular manner.

'Where will this American friend of yours stay in London, Nicholas?'

'In one of those bleak hotels X used to frequent. He hopes to get the atmosphere first-hand. He really is very keen on doing the book well.'

'Which one?'

Bagshaw groaned at the name, and shook his head. To judge from the exterior of the place, that reaction was justified.

'I spent a night there myself once years ago—rather a sordid story I won't bore you with—in fact recommended the place to Trappy in the first instance. The bathroom accommodation doesn't exactly measure up to the highest mod. con. standards. You know how strongly Americans feel about these things.'

'Gwinnett wants the Trapnel ethos, not the best place in London to take a bath.'

'I see.'

That fact impressed Bagshaw. He thought about it for a moment.

'Look here, this idea occurred to me as soon as you mentioned your American. Why doesn't Professor Gwinnett —I mean only when he's completed his stint of Trapnel ports of call, not before—come and PG with us? The spare room's free at the moment. Our Japanese statistician went back to Osaka. I think we made him comfortable during his stay. At least he never complained. That may have been Zen, of course, overcoming of illusory dualisms. I got quite interested in Zen while he was with us.'

The idea of lodging with Bagshaw, a guest paying or non-paying, would once have seemed almost as extraordinary as the fact of his possessing a house. Even in the reformed state of his ménage there were disrecommendations. If anyone were to be 'lodger', Bagshaw himself had always appeared prototype of the kind, one of Nature's lodgers; coaxing the landlady, when behind with the rent, seducing her daughter, storing (in his revolutionary days) subversive pamphlets under the bed. He was imaginable in all such stylized circumstances; even meeting his death as a lodger—the Passing of the Third Floor Back, with Bagshaw as the body. Although that picture had to be revised, the thought of paying to live with Bagshaw was still to be accepted with some demur. That was what I felt as Bagshaw himself digressed on the subject.

'The Icelander, an economist, was rather a turgid fellow, the Eng. Lit. New Zealander, a charming boy. We're looking for a replacement just like your friend—and what could be better from his point of view, if he's writing a book about poor old Trappy? I'll tell you what, Nicholas, I'll send a line to Professor Gwinnett to await arrival, so that he can arrange to see me whenever it suits his purpose. We'll have a talk. If all goes well, I'll suggest he comes and beds down here. I'll put it this way, that he doesn't dream of doing any such thing until he's made an exhaustive study, in depth, of Trapnel haunts, thoroughly absorbed the Trapnel *Weltanschauung*. That should not take long. The essentials are not difficult to grasp.'

Gwinnett was, after all, well able to look after himself. He needed no surveillance, would resent anything of the sort. Besides, from Gwinnett's point of view, there was something to be said for hearing about Trapnel, while living side by side with Bagshaw. If he decided that to stay with the Bagshaws was convenient to his purpose, he would do so; if not, either refuse, or after brief trial withdraw. That was the situation. In any case, Gwinnett was not concerned with living a life of ease, but—something very different—living the life of Trapnel. To lodge with the Bagshaws would in no way run counter to that ambition, in spite of Trapnel himself never having undergone the experience. He must have done similar things. At that moment a girl, recognizable as sister of Avril, probably a year or so older, came into the room. She took no notice of us, but knelt down, and began hunting about in the bookcase. She, too, was fairly good-looking.

'What do you want, Felicity?'

'A book.'

'This is Mr Jenkins.'

'Hullo,' she said, without turning round.

'Where's Stella?' asked Bagshaw.

'God knows.'

She found her book, and went away, slamming the door after her. Bagshaw grimaced at the noise.

'That one's rather a worry too. Young people are nowadays. It's either Regan or Goneril. Look here, have you seen this? Only one paper reported the item.'

He searched about among the assortment of journals lying on the floor, indicating a short paragraph on the foreign news page, when he found the special one he wanted. Its subject was a recent state trial in one of the countries of Eastern Europe, action somewhat unexpected in an atmosphere, in general, of relaxed international tension. Representatives of an outgoing Government had been expelled from the Party, and a former police minister, with one or two others, imprisoned by the new administration taking over. No great prominence was being given by the London press to these proceedings, which appeared to be of a fairly stereotyped order in the People's Republic concerned. That morning a modest headline in my own paper had drawn attention to allegations that some of the accused had been in the pay of the British Secret Service. The three or four persons named as having set out to corrupt members of the fallen Government (together with certain officials and 'intellectuals') were all British Communists of some public standing, or at least prominent fellow-travellers, making little or no concealment of their political affiliations; in short, as little likely to be connected with the British Secret Service, as the accused of being in touch with that organization. An additional name, unintelligibly translated, had been put within inverted commas in Bagshaw's newspaper paragraph.

'Who is . . .?'

The row of consonants, unlinked by vowels, was not to be spoken aloud. Bagshaw was quite excited. He was no longer an oppressed family man, nor even a television 'personality'.

'Is it one of their own people?'

'You don't recognize the name?'

'Not at all.'

'Try speaking it.'

On the tongue the syllables were no more significant.

'An old friend.'

'Of yours?'

'Both of us.'

'A hanger-on of Gypsy's?'

That was just a shot at possibles.

'Once, I believe. A *Fission* connexion.'

'A foreigner?'

'Not at all.'

'You're not suggesting the name's "Widmerpool"?'

'What else could it be?'

'Denounced as—what amounts to being denounced as a Stalinist?'

'In fact, a Revisionist, I think.'

'But—'

'I always said he was at the game.'

'Does a certain Dr Belkin mean anything to you?'

Among the scores of such names proverbial to Bagshaw, Dr Belkin's did not figure. That did not alter the conviction Bagshaw had already reached about Widmerpool.

'There have been some odd stories going round about both the Widmerpools since Ferrand-Sénéschal died.'

Bagshaw was not greatly interested in whatever part Pamela had played. It was the political angle he liked.

'That woman may have invented the whole tale about herself and Ferrand-Sénéschal. A sexual fantasy. It wouldn't surprise me at all. The denunciations at the trial are another matter. It's become a routine process. Nagy in Hungary, earlier in the year. Slansky in Czechoslovakia. I'd like to know just what happened about Widmerpool. He probably didn't move quite quick enough. Might be a double bluff. You can't tell. He himself could have felt he needed a little of that sort of attention to build up his reputation as an anti-Communist of the extreme Left. Make people think he's a safe man, because he's attacked from the Communist end. Pretend he's an enemy, when he's really a close friend.'

Bagshaw rambled on. Time came to leave. I was rather glad to go. The Bagshaw house was on the whole lowering to the spirit. Its other members did not appear again, but, when Bagshaw opened the front door, discordant sounds were still audible from the higher floors, together with the noise of loud hammering in the basement. Bagshaw came down the steps.

'Well, goodbye. I expect you're hard at work. I've been thinking a lot about Widmerpool. He's a very interesting political specimen.'

The Venetian trip, contrary to the promises of Mark Members, had not renewed energies for writing. All the same, established priorities, personal continuities, the confused scheme of things making up everyday life, all revived, routines proceeding much as before. The Conference settled down in the mind as a kind of dream, one of those dreams laden with the stuff of real life, stopping just the right side of nightmare, yet leaving disturbing undercurrents to haunt the daytime, clogging sources of imagination—whatever those may be—causing their enigmatic flow to ooze more sluggishly than ever, periodically cease entirely.

Gwinnett showed no sign of arrival in England. In the light of his general behaviour, changing moods, estrangement from social life, distaste for doing things in a humdrum fashion, that was not at all surprising. If still engaged in the unenviable labour of sampling first-hand former Trapnel anchorages, he might well judge that enterprise liable to prejudice from outside contacts. Some writers require complete segregation for getting down to a book. Gwinnett could be one of them. He was, in any case, under no obligation to keep me, or anyone else, informed of his movements. He might quite easily have decided that, so far as I was concerned, any crop of Trapnel memories had been sufficiently harvested by him in Venice. When it comes to recapitulation of what is known of a dead friend, for the benefit of a third party (whether or not writing a biography), remnants transmissible in a form at once lucid, unimpeded by subjective considerations, are astonishingly meagre.

I felt a little concerned by being left with the *Commonplace Book* on my hands, and would have liked opportunity to return it to Gwinnett. Scrappy, much abbreviated, lacking the usual neatness of Trapnel's holographs, its contents were not without interest to a professional writer, who had also known Trapnel. The notes gave an idea, quite a good idea, of what the novel destroyed by Pamela might have been like, had it ever been finished. Certain jottings, not always complimentary, had obvious reference to herself. Clearly obsessive, they were not always possible to interpret. If Pamela had her way, a film based on *Profiles in String*

—more likely on Trapnel's own life—made by Glober, the *Commonplace Book* could be of assistance.

If Gwinnett wanted to 'understand' Trapnel, two aspects emerged, one general, the other peculiar to Trapnel himself. There was the larger question, why writers, with apparent reserves of energy and ideas, after making a good start, collapse, or fizzle out in inferior work. In Trapnel's case, that might have been inevitable. On the other hand, its consideration as an isolated instance unavoidably led to Pamela. Gwinnett's approach, not uncommon among biographers, seemed to be to see himself, at greater or lesser range, as projection of his subject. He aimed, anyway to some extent, at reconstructing in himself Trapnel's life, getting into Trapnel's skin, 'becoming' Trapnel. Accordingly, if, in the profoundest sense, he were to attempt to discover why Trapnel broke down, failed to surmount troubles, after all, not greatly worse than many other writers had borne—and mastered—the inference could not be dodged that Gwinnett himself must have some sort of a love affair with Pamela. So far as he had revealed his plans, Gwinnett appeared to aim at getting into Trapnel's skin, but not to that extent. In fact everything about Gwinnett suggested that he did not at all intend to have a love affair with Pamela. If he accepted the possibility, he was playing his cards with subtlety, holding them close to his chest. It was, of course, possible something of the sort had already taken place. Instinctively, one felt that had not happened.

This conjecture was endorsed—anyway in one sense—in an odd manner. To express how things fell out is to lean heavily on hearsay. That is unavoidable. Trapnel himself, speaking as a critic, used to insist that every novel must be told from a given point of view. An extension of that fact is that every story one hears has to be adjusted, in the mind of the listener, to prejudices of the teller; in practice, most listeners increasing, reducing, discarding, much of what they have been told. In this case, the events have to be seen through the eyes of Bagshaw's father. What Bagshaw himself later related was not necessarily untrue. Bagshaw was in a position to get the first and best account. He must also have been the main channel to release details, even if other members of the household added to the story's volume. Nevertheless, Bagshaw's father, in his son's phrase 'the man on the spot', was the only human being who really knew the facts, he himself only some of them.

The first indication that Gwinnett had accepted Bagshaw's offer, gone to live in the house, was a story purporting to explain why he had left. This was towards Christmas. It looks as if the alleged happenings were broadcast to the world almost immediately after taking place, but only a long time later did I hear them from Bagshaw's own lips. Dating is possible, because, on that occasion, Bagshaw made a great point of the Christmas decorations being up, imparting a jovial grotesqueness to the scene. Knowledge of the Christmas decorations did certainly add something. Through thick and thin, Bagshaw always retained vestiges of a view of life suggesting a thwarted artist, no doubt the side that finally brought him where he was.

'My father enacted the whole extraordinary incident under a sprig of mistletoe. In the middle of it all, some of the holly came down, with that extraordinary scratchy noise holly makes.'

Although I had not expected Bagshaw's father to be descending the stairs in his dressing-gown, when I called at the house, I had, in the distant past, more than once heard Bagshaw speak of him. They were on good terms. Even in those days, that had seemed a matter of interest in the light of the manner Bagshaw himself used to go on. Bagshaw senior had been in the insurance business, not a notable success in his profession, being neither energetic nor ambitious, but with the valuable quality that he was prepared to put up in a good-natured spirit with his son's irregularities of conduct. On this account there was a certain justice in Bagshaw apparently more or less supporting his father in retirement.

Mr Bagshaw had risen in the night to relieve himself. He was making his way to a bathroom in, or on the way down to, the basement. This fact at once raises questions as to the recesses of the Bagshaws' house, its interior architectural complications. An upper lavatory may not have existed, been out of order, possibly occupied, in view of what took place later. On the other hand, some preference or quirk may have brought him downstairs. He could have been making a similar journey, when I had seen him. Perhaps sleeping pills, digestive mixtures, medicaments of some sort, were deposited at this lower level. The essential thing was that Mr Bagshaw had to pass through the hall.

It seems to have been a mild night for the time of year. That did not prevent Mr Bagshaw from being surprised, even for a moment startled, when, turning on one of the lights, he saw a naked woman standing in the passage or hall. Here again the narrative lacks absolute positiveness. In a sense, the truth of its essential features is almost strengthened by the comparative unimportance adjudged to exact locality. Bagshaw's insistence on the mistletoe suggests the hall; other circumstances, a half-landing, or alcove, on the first-floor; not uncommon in a house of that date, possibly also offering a suitable nook or niche for mistletoe.

Bagshaw's father, short-sighted, had not brought his spectacles with him. His immediate assumption was that the dimly outlined female shape was one of his son's stepchildren, who, having taken a bath at a relatively unorthodox hour, had considered dressing not worth while for making the short transit required to her bedroom. Bagshaw, telling the story, admitted the girls behaved in a sufficiently unmethodical, not to say disordered manner, to make that possibility by no means out of the question. What seemed to have caused his father most surprise was not so much lack of clothing, but extinction of all movement. The naked lady was lost in thought, standing as if in silent vigil.

Mr Bagshaw made a conventional remark to the effect that she 'must not catch cold'. Then, probably owing to receiving no reply, grasped that he was not speaking to one of the family. He may also, in spite of his poor sight, have observed the lady's hair was grey, even if scarcely seeing well enough to appreciate threads of strawberry-pink caught by artificial light. Whatever he did or did not take in, one must concur in Bagshaw's praise of his father for showing good sense, in no manner panicking at this unforeseen eventuality. At one time or another, he had undoubtedly experienced testing incidents in the course of existence with Bagshaw as a son, but by then he was a man of a certain age, and, however happy-go-lucky the atmosphere of the household, this was exceptional. Speculation as to what Mr Bagshaw thought is really beside the point. What happened was that (as when I myself saw him) he muttered an apology, and moved on; his comportment model of what every elderly gentleman might hope to display in similar circumstances.

Whether or not he associated in his mind the midnight nymph with Gwinnett is another matter. Gwinnett by then had lived in the house some little time, probably a couple of months. Equally unknown is how Pamela, in the first instance, effected entry into the Bagshaw house. Even Bagshaw himself never claimed to be positive about that. His theory was she had somehow ascertained the whereabouts of Gwinnett's bedroom, then more or less broken in. That seems over-dramatic, if not infeasible. A more probable explanation, that one of the stepdaughters, the rather dotty, possibly pregnant one likeliest, had admitted her earlier in the evening, then denied doing so during subsequent investigations; Pamela finding Gwinnett in his room, or waiting there for his return. If the former, the two of them, Pamela and Gwinnett, had spent quite a long time, several hours, in the bedroom together, before Bagshaw's father encountered her, wherever he did, in an unclothed state.

She was no longer in the hall, or on the half-landing, when Mr Bagshaw reappeared on his return journey. He seems to have taken this as philosophically as he had earlier sight of her, simply retiring to bed again. If he hoped after that for a good night's rest, that hope was nullified by a further complication, a more ominous one. This development had taken place while he was himself down in the basement incommunicado. Bagshaw's other stepdaughter, Felicity, now played a part. Woken by the interchange, slight as that had been, between Pamela and Bagshaw's father, or (another possibility) herself cause of Mr Bagshaw's descent to the basement by excluding him from an upstairs retreat, perhaps noticing the light on, came down to see what was afoot. She was faced with the same spectacle, a slim grey-haired lady wearing no clothes. Bagshaw, when he spoke of the matter, added a gloss to the circumstances.

'The truth seems to be—I'd noticed it myself—Felicity had taken a fancy to Gwinnett. That was why she drew the obvious conclusions, and kicked up the hell of a row. So far as I know, Gwinnett hadn't made any sort of a pass at her. Perhaps that was what made her so keen on him. Before you could quote Proudhon's phrase about equilibrium of competition, her sister Stella heard the talking, and came down too. The whole lot were quarrelling like wild cats.'

Just what happened at this stage is not at all clear; nor at what moment were spoken the words to put in some sort of perspective subsequent events. Gwinnett, of course, himself appeared. He dealt as well as he could with Bagshaw's stepdaughters, while Pamela dressed and slipped away. Probably she retired on Gwinnett's arrival, leaving him to cope. She was not present by the time Bagshaw, made aware by the noise that something exceptional was taking place, joined the party. Mrs Bagshaw, like her father-in-law, assuming some comparatively minor domestic contingency in progress, still suffering from migraine, did not leave her bed. Avril, incurious or occupied with her own problems, also remained in her room. Bagshaw said that, insofar as it were possible to behave with dignity throughout the whole affair, Gwinnett contrived to do so.

'He didn't say much. Just offered some apologies. Of course, it was obviously Pamela Widmerpool's fault, not his. He didn't attempt to excuse himself on that account.'

The night's disturbances appear to have died down in a fairly banal family quarrel, nothing to do with Pamela or Gwinnett. In fact, the following day, Bagshaw—so far as I know, May Bagshaw too—was prepared for all to be forgiven and forgotten. On this point Bagshaw's father and stepdaughters do not seem to have been consulted. Gwinnett himself was firm that he must leave. He moved to an hotel (another of Trapnel's haunts) the same afternoon. Bagshaw said he was uncertain what he felt after Gwinnett had gone.

'I was sorry to lose him. At the same time I saw, from his own point of view, it would be difficult to stay on. The whole thing might happen again, if that woman knew he was still living with us. Of course, I thought they were having an affair, that she had come to the house to sleep with him. If so, I couldn't see why either of them needed to make all that to-do. Couldn't he have done whatever her other lovers do? That was how it looked at the moment.'

By the time Bagshaw told the story himself, a good deal had happened to give opportunity for improving its framework, accentuating highspots of the narrative. One could not be quite sure he had not seen things differently during the embroilment. For example, he spoke of words, possibly apocryphal, murmured by Pamela, as she withdrew (however that had happened) from the house. Bagshaw put this scarcely coherent sentence forward as key to what took place later, explanation, too, of the night's doings, or lack of them; for that matter, general relationship with Gwinnett.

Bagshaw could not swear to the exact phrase. It had something to do with 'dead woman' or 'death wish'. He also asserted that Gwinnett, while staying in the house, had spoken more than once of Pamela's conjunction with Ferrand-Sénéschal, bearing out Dr Brightman's theory that Gwinnett himself was more than a little taken up with mortality. Bagshaw gave other instances. At the time, naturally, emphasis immediately afterwards was laid on the question why Pamela had been wandering about without any clothes. Reflecting on similar instances in my own experience, there was the time (actually not witnessed) when the parlourmaid, Billson, had walked naked into the drawing-room at Stonehurst; more tangibly, when the front door of her flat had been opened to myself by Jean Duport in the same condition. Unlike Candaules's queen, these two had deliberately chosen to appear in that state, not, as the Queen—anyway vis-à-vis Gyges—involuntarily nude. Perhaps the Tiepolo picture had done something to disturb the balance of Pamela's mind, in the light of her reported behaviour at the Bragadin dinner party. The situation—just what had really caused the doings at the Bagshaws'—remained, at the end of that year, still obscure. Most people who took any interest in the matter simply assumed Pamela and Gwinnett had been 'having an affair', some row taken place, notable only for Pamela's incalculable manner of handling things.

About January or February, Gwinnett himself sent a line saying he would like to meet. He wished the *Commonplace*

Book returned to him, unless I particularly needed to keep it longer. We arranged to lunch together on a day I was coming to London. Gwinnett had not remained unaffected by the months spent in England. Whether the change was due to odd experiences undergone, or simply because he felt a sense of release in making a start on his book, was impossible to say. The transformation itself was not easy to define. Not exactly loosened up, he gave at the same time an impression of being on better terms with himself. Here in London he looked more 'American' than in Venice. He still wore his light blue lenses, only just observably tinted against the sun. It was not the effect of these. The spectacles, thin filament of moustache, secretive manner, implied quite other origins. One thought, for some reason, of the Near East, though he was not in the least oriental. Perhaps his air was Mexican. The Americanism had something to do with the intense whiteness of his shirt, cut low in the neck, the light shade of the heavily welted rubber-soled shoes, almost yellow in colour. The shoes were the first thing you noticed about him. Ignorant still of just what had happened at the Bagshaws', I had no way of rationalizing to myself the slight, but apparent alteration. The *Commonplace Book* was handed over. Gwinnett mentioned that he had stayed with the Bagshaws, then decided he would work more easily in another of Trapnel's hotels.

'How much of the book have you done?'

'I might have roughed out the first quarter.'

He spoke of some of his discoveries. From various sources, he had unearthed material about Trapnel's early life in Egypt. Perhaps concentrating on Egypt had given Gwinnett the Near East look. He could list, among other things, racehorses Trapnel's father had ridden, and their owners. There were striking facts about the schools Trapnel had attended, which were many and various. Gwinnett had worked hard.

'Have you traced any of the girls?'

'I have.'

Tessa, who had immediately preceded Pamela as object of Trapnel's love, was doing extremely well. She was secretary, evidently a high-powered one, to the chairman of a noted firm of merchant bankers. Tessa had been helpful to Gwinnett in a straightforward way, giving him a clear, unvarnished account of Trapnel's daily life, its interior economy, seen from the point of view of an intelligent, capable mistress, who wanted her lover to become a success as a writer. Although retaining affectionate memories of Trapnel, she decided in due course, she said, that he lacked the necessary stamina. That was an interesting first-hand view. Gwinnett had appreciated its good points.

'Then there was Pat.'

Pat, now married to a don, Professor of Social Science, had been less willing to have her past dredged up. She had replied with a tactful letter saying she preferred not to see Gwinnett.

Sally was dead. That was all he had been able to find out about her.

'I'd have liked to know more—how and why she died.'

Jacqueline had married a journalist, and was living abroad, where her husband was foreign correspondent to a daily paper. Linda could not be traced.

'Did you know Pauline?'

'I never met her. I've heard Trapnel speak of her. He thought her depraved. Those were his words. They remained on good terms after parting.

'I ran Pauline to earth.'

'What's she doing?'

'She's become a call-girl.'

'Trapnel said that was where Pauline would end.'

'Well, not much short of that, I'd say.'

Gwinnett seemed uncertain whether or not to qualify the description. He thought for a moment, then decided against amendment.

'I went to see her. She told me some facts.'

'Such as?'

'What some of her clients like.'

'Anything out of the usual run?'

'Not much, I guess.'

'I'd have thought Trapnel pretty normal.'

'She said he was.'

Gwinnett changed the subject. I thought he had abandoned it. I was wrong. He was choosing another conversational angle, one of his habits, at times effected in a manner a little disconcerting.

'Did Lindsay Bagshaw say there'd been some trouble at his place?'

'I haven't seen him, but I heard something of the sort. I knew you'd left.'

'You heard Lady Widmerpool kicked up a racket there?'

'Her name was mentioned.'

'As raising hell?'

'Well, yes.'

'If you run across Lady Widmerpool, do you mind not telling her my address?'

'OK.'

'You heard about Lord Widmerpool being denounced on the radio as a British agent? Lindsay Bagshaw talked his head off about it. I'm not that interested in politics, though I couldn't but be interested in such a thing happening. Just because of all the Trapnel tie-up with her. What do you think?'

'He might be in deep water. Hard to say, at this stage.'

Gwinnett hesitated, seeming, as he sometimes did, uncertain of the exact ground he wanted to occupy.

'Lady Widmerpool—Pamela—I wouldn't be in her husband's shoes, if she's left to decide his fate.'

'She's got it in for him?'

'That's how it looks.'

'You're avoiding her for the time being?'

That was a reasonable question in the circumstances. Gwinnett did not answer it. At the same time he accepted its inferences.

'Just to duck back to Pauline for a spell—she had dealings with Lord Widmerpool.'

'Professional ones, you mean?'

'Sure.'

'He picked her up somewhere? Answered an ad?'

'When his wife was living with Trapnel, Widmerpool had her shadowed. As a former girl friend of Trapnel's, whom he saw once in a while, Pauline's name was given to Widmerpool.'

'And he went to see her?'

'They met somehow.'

'Continued to meet?'

'It seems arrangements were made satisfactory to both sides. Pauline later figured at several parties attended by Widmerpool—and the Frenchman, too, who died all that sudden, when Pamela was around.'

'Pauline told you that?'

Gwinnett nodded. He had a way with him when he sought information. At least information was what he acquired.

'Was Pamela herself included in these Pauline jaunts?'

'I don't know for certain. I don't believe so.'

Thought of Pamela seemed to depress Gwinnett. He fell into one of his glooms. Their relationship was an enigma. Perhaps he was in love with her, in spite of everything. We parted on good terms, the best. Gwinnett spoke as if we were likely to talk together again as a matter of course, do that quite soon. At the same time he parried any suggestion of coming to see us; even arranging another meeting in London. This determination that initiative should remain in his hands was a reminder of Trapnel methods. Possibly it was one of the ways in which Gwinnett was growing to resemble Trapnel.

During the next month or so, Gwinnett's problems receded in my mind as a matter of immediate interest, Widmerpool's too. Fresh information about the second of these came from two rather unexpected sources. These followed each other in quick succession, although quite unconnected.

For several years after the war, I had attended reunion dinners of one of the branches of the army in which I had served, usually deciding to do so at the last moment, even then never quite knowing what brought me there. Friends made in a military connexion were, on the whole, to be seen more conveniently, infinitely more agreeably, in settings of a less deliberate character, where former brother officers, now restored to civilian life in multitudinous shapes, had often passed into spheres with which it was hard to make conversational contact. Intermittent transaction in the past of forgotten military business provided only a frail link. All the same, when something momentous like a war has taken place, all existence turned upside down, personal life discarded, every relationship reorganized, there is a temptation, after all is over, to return to what remains of the machine, examine such paraphernalia as came one's way, pick about among the bent and rusting composite parts, assess merits and defects. Reunion dinners, to the point of morbidity, gave the chance of indulging in such reminiscent scrutinies. Not far from a vice, like most vices they began sooner or later to pall. Even the first revealed the gap, instantaneously come into being on demobilization, between what was; what, only a moment before, had been. On each subsequent occasion that hiatus widened perceptibly, moving in the direction of an all but impassable abyss.

There were, of course, windfalls. One evening, at such an assemblage, my former Divisional Commander, General Liddament (by then promoted to the Army Council) turned up as guest of honour, making a lively speech about the country's military commitments 'round the map', ending with a recommendation that everyone present should read Trollope. That was an exceptional piece of luck. In the same way, an old colleague would sometimes appear; Hewetson, who had looked after the Belgians, now senior partner in a firm of solicitors: Slade, Pennistone's second-string with the Poles, headmaster of a school in the Midlands: Dempster, retired from selling timber, settled in Norway, still telling his aunt's anecdotes about Ibsen. Finn, Commanding Officer of the Section, was dead. At the end of the war he had gone back briefly to his cosmetic business in Paris, soon after left, to end his days in contemplation of his past life and his VC, near Perpignan. Pennistone (married to a French girl, said to have taken an energetic part in the Resistance) had stepped into Finn's place in the firm. His letters reported good sales. He rarely came to England, spare time from the office taken up with writing a book on the philosophical ideas of Cyrano de Bergerac.

Usually there was less on offer, fewer, still fewer, even known by sight. That was especially true when the thinned ranks of branches, originally designed to be reunited on this particular occasion, were augmented by other elements. These, if remotely related in duties, had once been regarded with a certain professional suspicion, but their attendance too dwindled through death and inanition, requiring, as we did, bolstered numbers to make the party worth while. In short, feeling increasingly isolated, I lost the habit of attending these dinners. Then, a son likely to become liable for military service, it seemed wise to re-establish bearings in a current army world, find out what was happening, pick up anything to be known. I put down my name again, without much hope of seeing anyone with whom closer bonds were likely to be evoked than shared memory of whether or not some weapon, piece of equipment, had 'come off the security list' for release to the Allies, or by swopping stories about the shortcomings, as an officer and a man, of the unpopular brigadier.

That year the dinner was held on the premises of a club or association of vaguely patriotic intent, unfamiliar to myself both in membership and situation. The dining-room was decorated in a manner sober to the point of becoming sepulchral, drinks obtainable from a bar at one end. No one standing about there was an acquaintance. At the table assigned to my former Section, faces were equally unknown. Mutual introductions took place. My righthand neighbour, Lintot, fair, bald, running to fat, had looked after some of the Neutrals—a 'dismal crowd', he said—before Finn commanded, later posted to Censorship in the Middle East. He worked in a travel agency. We talked of the best places to take an autumn holiday abroad.

Macgivering, on the other side, also belonged to a War Office epoch earlier than my own. His duties had been in the Section handling in-coming telegrams, where he remembered the stunted middle-aged lieutenant, for ever polishing his Sam Browne belt. We had both forgotten his name. Macgivering himself, tall, spare, haggard, with a slight stutter, had been invalided out of the army, consequent on injury from enemy action, while in bed at his flat one early night of the blitz. We split a bottle of indifferent Médoc, and discussed car insurance, as he had some sort of public relations connexion with the motor business.

Only towards the end of dinner did I notice Sunny Farebrother sitting at the end of a table on the far side of the room. During the war he had operated in several areas of army life, including at least one of those branches now joined to the increasingly disparate elements of this dinner. He had found himself a place at right angles to the 'high table', where more important members or guests sat. He was talking hard. His neighbour looked like a relatively senior officer, whom Farebrother appeared to be indoctrinating with some ideas of his own. Farebrother looked in the best of form. He must be close on seventy, I thought. At the end of these dinners movement away from table places was customary, so that people could circulate. I decided to have a word with Farebrother at this interspersion. He was still in earnest conversation with the supposed general, when the time came. He could be pushing a share in which he was interested. I had not seen him at or near the bar on arrival. Probably he had deliberately turned up at the last moment to avoid threatened liability for buying a drink.

While I waited for a suitable moment to move across to Farebrother's table, a man with woolly grey hair and wire spectacles (the latter not yet a fashionable adjunct) came to speak with Lintot. Macgivering had already left, to make contact elsewhere in the room. I changed into his former seat, to allow the wire-spectacled man to talk in more comfort sitting next to Lintot. They appeared to know each other through civilian rather than army connexions. Lintot was astonished at the wire-spectacled man's presence at this dinner. His wonderment greatly pleased the other.

'Didn't expect to find your accountant here, did you, Mr Lintot? We can both of us forget the Inland Revenue for once, can't we? To tell the truth, I'm attending this dinner under rather false pretences. The fact is a friend of mine told me he was coming to London for this reunion. We wanted to talk together about certain matters, one thing and another, so as I'd gained a technical right to be deemed Intelligence personnel, I applied to the organizers of this 'I' dinner. They said I could come. I always enjoy these get-togethers. My old mob have one. There's a POW one too. Why not roll up, I said to myself.'

'Never knew you were in the army. Of course we've always had a lot of other things to talk about, so that wasn't surprising.'

Lintot appeared rather at a loss what to say next. He drew me into the conversation, mentioning we had been in the same Section, though not in the War Office at the same period.

'This is—well, I've got to be formal, and call you Mr Cheesman, because I only know your initials—this is Mr Cheesman, whose accountancy firm acts for mine. For me personally too. We do our best against the taxman between us, don't we? I didn't expect to find him here. Never thought of Mr Cheesman as a military man somehow, though I never think of myself as one either, if it comes to that.'

'Yes, but you see my point. If I'm eligible, no reason why I shouldn't come to the dinner, is there?'

Cheesman was insistent. He was not in the least put out by Lintot's emphasis on the unmilitary impression he gave. What he was keen on, pedantically keen, consisted in establishing his, so to speak, legal right to be at the party. He spoke in a precise, measured tone, as if attendance at the dinner were a matter of logic, as much as free choice.

'Of course, of course. Glad to see you here. You're about the only man in the room I've met before.'

Lintot was quite uninterested in Cheesman's bona fides as 'I' personnel. Cheesman accepted that his point had been understood, even if unenthusiastically. Now, I remembered that manner, at once mild and aggressive. It brought back early days in the army—Bithel, Stringham, Widmerpool.

'Didn't you command the Mobile Laundry?'

I appended the number of General Liddament's Division to that question.

'You were there just for a short time, the Laundry only attached. Then it was posted to the Far East.'

Cheesman drew himself up slightly.

'Certainly I commanded that sub-unit. May I ask your name?'

I told him. It conveyed nothing. That was immaterial. Cheesman's own identity was the important factor.

'Surely you fetched up in Singapore?'

Cheesman nodded.

'In fact, you were a Jap POW?'

'Yes.'

Cheesman gave that answer perfectly composedly, but for a brief second, something much shorter than that, something scarcely measurable in time, there shot, like forked lightning, across his serious unornamental features that awful look, common to those who speak of that experience. I had seen it before. Cheesman's face reverted—the word suggests too extended a duration of instantaneous, petrifying exposure of hidden feeling—to an habitual sedateness. I remembered his arrival at Div. HQ; showing him the Mobile Laundry quarters; making this new officer known to Sergeant-Major Ablett. Bithel had just been slung out. I had left Cheesman talking to the Sergeant-Major (who had the sub-unit well in hand), while I myself went off for a word with Stringham. One of Cheesman's peculiarities had been to wear a waistcoat under his service-dress tunic. He had been surprised at that garment provoking amused comment in mess.

'A waistcoat's always been part of any suit I wore. Why change just because I'm in the army? I've got to keep warm in the army, like anywhere else, haven't I?'

He did not give an inch, either, in adapting himself to military manners and speech, behaving to superiors as he would in a civilian firm, where he was paid to give the best advice he could in connexion with his own employment. He dressed nothing up in the forms and terms traditional to the military subordinate. Colonel Hogbourne-Johnson had been particularly irked by that side of Cheesman. He used to call him 'our Mr Cheesman', a phrase in which Cheesman himself would have found nothing derogatory. Thirty-nine when he joined the army at the beginning of the war, he wanted to 'command men'. He must be nearly sixty now. Except when that frightful look shot across his face, the features were scarcely more altered than Sunny Farebrother's.

'How the hell did you survive your Jap POW camp?' asked Lintot cheerfully.

Cheesman brushed the question aside.

'A bit of luck. The Nips were moving some of their prisoners in '44. Don't know where they were taking us. When we were at sea, the Nip transport was sunk by an American warship. No arrangements made for POWs, of course, when ship's company took to the boats, but the Americans rescued most of us—and a lot of the Nips too.'

'Don't expect you were feeling too good by that time?'

'Naturally I wasn't fit for normal duties for a month or two. When I was on my feet again, I got a change of job. They were short of Intelligence wallahs where I was. I'd picked up a few words of Japanese. It was thought better to make use of me in 'I', rather than go back to Mobile Laundry duty, though I'd have liked to return to the job for which I'd been trained. That's why I'm allowed here, without being strictly speaking applicable. Funny meeting you, Mr Jenkins. I don't remember your face at all at that Div HQ. The officer I recall is the DAAG, Major Widmerpool. He made quite an impression on me. Very efficient, I should say. A really good officer. You can always tell the type. I expect he's done well in civilian life too.'

'Do you remember a man in your sub-unit called Stringham?'

Cheesman looked surprised at the question.

'Of course I do. How did you know Stringham?'

'We were friends in civilian life.'

'You were?'

Cheesman found that statement hard to credit. He thought about it for a second or two. Stringham and I—that was the impression—seemed miles apart. He wrestled with the question inwardly. When at last he answered, it was as if prepared to accept my word, even then the claim scarcely believable.

'I see. I do recall now Stringham wasn't just the ordinary bloke you find in the ranks. I was taken aback at first when you said you'd known him. Of course, you get all sorts in a war. He was a superior type, an educated man. You could see that. All the same I never thought about it much. He never made any difficulties. I'd forgotten altogether. Just remember him in the jobs he used to do. I could never place him myself. What was his work in civilian life?'

That was a hard question to answer. What did Stringham do? Cheesman must be told something. What about the time when (with Bill Truscott as dominant colleague) he had been a sort of personal secretary to Sir Magnus Donners? I fell back on that. To be a secretary implied at least a measure of professional identity. That would serve the purposes of the moment.

'Stringham was private secretary to a business tycoon.'

'Oh, was he?'

Cheesman seemed at first more surprised than ever. He did not pursue the matter. His own job could well have brought him face to face with eccentric business tycoons. Either that struck him, or he decided to leave the question vague in solution.

'He was very fond of making jokes, but I always found him an excellent worker in my sub-unit.'

Cheesman said that without the least disapproval. He spoke as one merely registering an unusual characteristic. So far as jokes were concerned, his own features proclaimed a state of intact virginity as to any experience or sense of them, immaculately so. Cheesman had never made a joke, never seen a joke, could live—and die—without jokes, even if he knew they existed. It did him credit to have so far rationalized Stringham's behaviour as to be capable of thus defining it. Stringham might have been worse typified.

'Stringham made jokes in the camp,' he added.

'He wasn't taken from Singapore too?'

'No.'

Again the ghastly forked lightning flashed, a flicker of Death's vision, reflected for a dreadful instant behind the wire spectacles' plates of glass. The flesh of Cheesman's face, softly wrinkled, made one think of those old servants of the past, who had worked unquestioningly for a lifetime in a single household. In Cheesman's case this unchanging interior had been, no doubt, his own austere, limited—one might reasonably say—heroic personality. There was the same self-assurance as Dan Tokenhouse, the same impression of having dispensed with sex. There was something else too.

'Stringham died in the camp. He behaved very well there.'

Cheesman thought for a moment after saying that.

'Very well. Yes. A good man. He wasn't too strong, you know. Fancy your having met him. They're odd these things. Sergeant-Major Ablett, you may remember him. He was rescued. He's quite prosperous now.'

The matter was better pressed no further. More information could easily become too much, too much anyway for one's peace of mind. Cheesman gave no sign that might be so. He also made no attempt to enlarge. Lintot, understandably, had not been much interested in these reminiscences. If Cheesman were his personal accountant, as well as his firm's, he may have felt he had a better right than myself to Cheesman's attention, even if he had brought us together again.

'Don't mind my talking shop for a moment, Mr Cheesman. It will save a letter. Now about Tax Reserve Certificates . . .'

By then Farebrother's senior officer had managed to get away, with or without buying the shares remained unknown. Farebrother himself was making preparations to leave the party, giving a final look round the room to make sure he had missed no one worthy of a few minutes' conversation. I went across to him. His friendliness was positively enormous. The powerful extrusion of Farebrother charm remained altogether undiminished by age. He was specially pleased about something, possibly success in whatever he had recommended his neighbour.

'There's an empty stretch of table over there, Nicholas. Let's sit at it. I don't feel like any more to drink, do you? Got to cut down on the pleasures of life nowadays. Something I want to ask you. What do you think of the latest development in the Widmerpool case?'

'I didn't know there was a case.'

'You haven't read the evening paper? The Question in the House? I think he's for it now.'

Farebrother was amazed anyone should have missed such a pleasure as that night's evening paper. His handsome greyhound profile, additionally distinguished with increased age, lighted up while he supplied a commentary. He made clear that, in his opinion, this news was going to offer no minor revenge. The Parliamentary Question had been on the subject of Widmerpool's commercial activities in Eastern Europe. To outward appearance worded in terms not at all sensational, they were, to an initiate in that form of attack, ominous in the extreme. The country concerned was the one where Widmerpool had been named in connexion with the State trial. Farebrother said he understood there had also been a denunciation on the air in one of their official broadcasts.

'The implications are of the most damaging order.'

'What's he really been up to?'

Farebrother, usually in the habit of cloaking his own imputations or reprisals in mild, vaguely expressed language, now made no bones about the disaster threatening his old enemy. He seemed to know more than was easily to be drawn from the mere wording of the Question, however much that were open to sophisticated interpretation. His war service (like that of Odo Stevens) had given Farebrother contacts from which such enlightenment might be derived. Someone in a position to 'know' could have dropped a hint. That was certainly the impression Farebrother himself, truly or not, hoped to give.

'Some underling on their side was accepting bribes, and has now defected, so I've heard said. That had been done with Widmerpool's connivance. He had been giving encouragement, too, by passing across little bits of information himself from time to time. How valuable that information was remains to be seen. In any case, I'm just putting two and two together. Most of it guesswork.'

'Will it come to arrest, a trial?'

'That depends what the employee reveals—if that story is true.'

'In any case that would be *in camera*?'

'You can't say. Some evidence probably.'

'The Question is just a ranging shot?'

'Not far from the target. Give him a jolt. I can tell you something else too.'

Farebrother looked about to make sure no one was sitting near us, who might overhear what he was going to say.

Most of the diners were now congregated round the bar. Many had left, or were leaving. He put his arm over the back of my chair.

'I've just retired from one of the smaller merchant banks. We deal with European and overseas commercial activities and investments. Fascinating work.'

I toyed with the fantasy that Trapnel's former girl, Tessa, was going to abut on to what Farebrother had to say, then remembered Gwinnett had described her as working for the chairman of a large, rather than small, merchant bank.

'I don't mind telling you some of the Eastern European deals of our friend might be of interest from the taxation angle, if figures had to be produced in a court of law. Nothing to do with treasonable dealings, just bank statements. I make no accusations. Just of interest, I suggest.'

Farebrother smiled his charming smile. He settled back into his own chair. Then he looked at his watch.

'Good gracious me, I must be getting home. Geraldine and I are not at all late birds.'

'She is well, I hope.'

Farebrother snapped his fingers in the air to give some idea of his wife's overflowing health and spirits. He was in his gayest mood. The Parliamentary Question had made his day. It provided something far better, in a different class, from the occasion when Widmerpool's career had been threatened by nothing worse than the disapproval of General Liddament.

'We've found a nice little flat, not too expensive, well appointed as you could wish. Geraldine has a wonderful instinct for the right sort of economies, so we don't have to be thinking about the pennies all the time now. In fact we find we can run a country cottage too. Roses are my interest these days. I don't mind telling you, Nicholas, I'm rather proud of my roses. You and your wife must look us up, if you're ever passing. We can't always manage luncheon. Tea certainly. Well, it's been a most enjoyable evening. I heard Ivo Deanery was to be present as a guest —can't remember if you know him, he's a major-general now—and we settled some useful matters. Don't forget that invitation—preferably when the roses are in bloom.'

He repeated the address of the cottage, waved one of his genial goodbyes, was gone. The following day, the Parliamentary Question was brought up again at another party, in very different circumstances. This occasion owed something to the diplomatic détente, of which Bagshaw had spoken. The so-called 'thaw' had been reflected, in a minor manner, by the tour through some of the European capitals of a well-known Russian author, bestseller in his own country. To give a few of our own literary world opportunity to meet a confrère, not in general encountered in the West, a luncheon, to which I found myself invited, was given at the Soviet Embassy.

At this gathering, a foreseen profusion of literary figures had been perceptibly infused with a sprinkling of MPs, other notabilities, official and semi-official, either with a view to imparting additional robustness of texture to the party, or, more probably, simply to work off individuals, whose names were listed for entertainment, sooner or later, on the ambassadorial roster. Including our hosts of the Embassy staff, a large number of whom were present, about forty or fifty persons were drinking vodka, sampling zakuski, sitting in small groups scattered about a long, austerely decorated drawing-room. There was a faint atmosphere of constraint, as if someone or something essential to the party had not yet been manifested, but that would happen in a moment, when, from then on, all would be well, much easier, more relaxed.

The invitation had not included wives of writers asked as guests, but both the Quiggins were there, Quiggin's status as a publisher no doubt judged of sufficient eminence to be considered out of context, permitting accompaniment of his novelist consort. Alaric Kydd—to use a favourite phrase of Uncle Giles's—was behaving as if he owned the place. Other writers included L. O. Salvidge, Bernard Shernmaker, Quentin Shuckerly, a lot more, men greatly predominating in numbers over women. Mark Members was absent, known to be ill; Len Pugsley, not important enough, or considered too closely 'committed' to be asked to a purely social party. Evadne Clapham had also been overlooked, more probably barred from acceptance by a too relentless social programme of her own. Dr Brightman, sprucely dressed in a fur cap and high fur collar, revealing a rather chilly manner to Ada Leintwardine, passed her with a smile, moving on to where L. O. Salvidge and I were chatting to one of the secretaries of embassy.

'I hope you don't think my clothes too *voulu*?'

The secretary nodded, and laughed. He was a tall fair young man, of surface indistinguishable from any other member of London's diplomatic corps, of similar age and seniority. We discussed signs of spring in the London parks. The young secretary moved away for a moment to receive incoming guests. Salvidge caught my eye. His silent lips formed the words 'KGB'. The secretary returned before any sort of secretly uttered return comment was possible. Dr Brightman shared none of Salvidge's trepidation about our surroundings.

'Have you seen anything of Russell Gwinnett? I've quite lost touch with him. He was staying at one moment with some people called Bagshaw. He wrote to me from their house. Rather a depressed letter. I hear he left after some sort of trouble. The most extraordinary story I was told.'

Salvidge must have thought this subject dangerously controversial, perhaps because Gwinnett was American. He showed disquiet. At the same time he did not want to appear excluded from the circles of which Dr Brightman spoke.

'Gwinnett came to see me. We had a talk. A nice young man. Not very exciting. I was not sure he was up to tackling so picturesque a figure as Trapnel.'

Salvidge turned to the secretary to explain what he was talking about.

'This is a young writer called Gwinnett—G-W-I-N-N-E-T-T—who is writing a book about a novelist, now dead, called Trapnel—T-R-A-P-N-E-L—a good writer. One of our best.'

'Yes?'

Salvidge must have thought this the moment to change the subject, probably what he had been leading up to.

'Dr Brightman here, you know, is writing a book about Boethius—B-O-E-no diphthong—'

The secretary nodded politely, but cut Salvidge off.

'See, we must go into luncheon.'

We were firmly shepherded into the dining-room. So far as Salvidge was concerned, not a moment too soon. Here again was a faint sense of austerity, an impression of off-white walls sparsely decorated with pictures, landscapes light in tone—the steppe—birch trees—sunset on snow—nothing in the least reminiscent of Tokenhouse and his school. My place at table was between another secretary, possibly counsellor, somewhat older than the first, equally trimmed to outward diplomatic convention; on the other side, a personage not encountered for years, Bill Truscott.

Tipped, as a young man, for at least a place in the Cabinet, even if by some mischance he failed to become Prime Minister, Truscott, after a promising start at Donners-Brebner, had come to rest in some governmental corporation, possibly the Coal Board. The Russian engaged with his other neighbour when I sat down, Truscott and I went through the process of recalling where we had last met. He still carried some of his old, rather distinguished style, a touch, too, of the old underlying toughness that had made people think he would forge ahead. Fresh from observing Farebrother as a professional charmer, one could not help feeling Truscott, at least ten years younger, had worn worse. His manner dated. If he had become the 'great man' predicted, no doubt it would have been perfectly serviceable. As he was, the demeanour was a trifle laboured, ponderous.

I thought of my undergraduate days, when Truscott had been not merely an imposing, but positively frightening figure, setting up, by his flow of talk, standards of sophistication never to be contemplated as attainable. This brilliance of exterior, again, had been of quite a different sort from Glober's. Even in those days, Truscott had been far less lively. There could be no great difference in age, even if the advantage was slightly on Truscott's side. Unlike Glober, he had remained a bachelor. I spoke of Sillery's ninetieth birthday party. It appeared Truscott had not been invited. He showed a little bitterness about that. It was true he had been one of the staunchest vassals of Sillery's court. He should not have been forgotten. He asked if I often found myself in this embassy.

'My first visit—and you?'

'I'm asked from time to time. I'm afraid I'm not at all conversant with the current work of the guest of honour. I never read novels nowadays . . .'

Possibly thinking that admission, for more than one reason, suggested a too headlong falling-off from what had once been an all embracing intellectual coverage, Truscott corrected himself. He gave one of his winning smiles.

'That is, you understand, I don't find much time, with so many things going on—as we all have—of course I fully intend . . . and naturally . . .'

I told him what I had heard about Stringham, once his fellow secretary. Truscott showed interest.

'Very sad. Poor Charles. He was a pleasant companion. One of the nicer people round Donners.'

Thought of his days working for Sir Magnus must have brought Widmerpool to mind; more specifically, as agent of his own sacking from Donners-Brebner. He lowered his voice.

'Hardly a subject for discussion here, but one cannot help being a little intrigued by the embarrassments, at the moment, of another protégé of Sir Magnus of that period.'

'What's going to happen to him?'

By that time, having read the morning paper, I saw what Farebrother meant by speaking of Widmerpool's position as insecure. Truscott certainly thought the same. He coughed, in a semi-official manner.

'I should expect various enquiries of a—well, not exactly public nature—not immediately public, I mean—likely to be set on foot.'

'You think it pretty serious?'

'That would certainly be . . .'

'Might come to a trial?'

'One cannot tell. I—'

Massive middle-aged waitresses had been bustling about the room, snapping out a sharp commentary to each other in their own language, as they clattered with the plates. Now, one of them interposed a large dish of fish between Truscott and myself, severing our connexion. At the same moment, my Russian neighbour began a conversation. Soon, by natural processes, we were discussing Russian writers. After Lermontov and Pushkin, Gogol and Gontcharov, Tchekov and Tolstoy, Dostoevsky's name cropped up. Pennistone—who would never allow intellectual standards to be lowered, just because he was in the army, a war on—had complained that, when he spoke of

Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor to General Lebedev, the Soviet military attaché (unconvincing as a regular soldier) had recommended Nekrasov's truer picture of Russian life. In short, Dostoevski, impossible to ignore, equally impossible to assimilate into Communist life, a monolithic embarrassment to his countrymen, was a tendentious subject for the present luncheon party, however unequivocally political the tradition of the Russian novel. Remembering Trapnel once speculated on the meaning of the surname 'Karamazov', I put the question.

'Am I right in thinking "kara" has some implication of blackness? The former Serbian royal house, Karageorgevitch, was not that founded by Black George? But "mazov"? How would that be translated into English?'

My Russian neighbour laughed. He seemed very willing that a Dostoevskian commentary should move into etymological channels, away from potentially political ones. The idea of giving The Brothers an English surname pleased him.

'I shall consult a colleague.'

He spoke quickly in his own language across the table. There was a short discussion. He returned to me.

'He says "kara" means "black" in Turkish. There is a Russian adjective "chernomazy"—do you say "swarthy"? Then "maz", it is "grease", the verb, to smear or to oil. Would that be "varnish" in English?'

Dr Brightman, sitting next to the informant on the other side of the table, was not to be left out of a discussion of this nature. She showed interest at once.

'*The Brothers Blackvarnish*? No, that would hardly do, I think. We must find something better than that.'

She shook her head, giving the matter her full attention.

'How would *The Blacklacquer Brothers* be?'

We discussed the question. While we did so, I reflected how this was all based on Trapnel's meditation on the meaning of the name, his argument with Bagshaw in that dreary pub came back, Trapnel's contention that there was no such thing as Naturalism in novel writing, one of his favourite themes.

'Reading novels needs almost as much talent as writing them,' he used to say.

The occasion had been just before Bagshaw and I had taken him home, on the way found that Pamela had thrown his manuscript into the Regent Canal. Trapnel had said something else that evening too. Now the words came back, in the way spoken words do, with quite a new meaning.

'Call Hemingway's impotent good guy naturalistic? Think of what Dostoevsky would have made of him? After all, Dostoevsky did deal with an impotent good guy in love with a bitch.'

Was that the answer? Was he a good guy? Was he in love? Was the condition only released by Death? The train of thought was interrupted by Dr Brightman offering a new suggestion.

'Simply making use of the connexion with linseed oil—*The Linseed Brothers*?'

'That omits the element of blackness, of darkness, which obviously broods over the story, and must be conveyed by the name.'

When it was time to thank for the party, leave, Truscott, who was by then talking with the Ambassador, gave a smile that indicated he had hopes of the very worst for Widmerpool. Coming down the steps of the Embassy, I found myself with the Quiggins. We walked along Kensington Palace Gardens together, moving south towards the High Street. I asked Ada if any progress had been made in deciding what was to be Glober's last great film.

'Do you mean to say you don't know? Louis is coming over next month. Everything is arranged.'

'What's it to be?'

'*Match Me Such Marvel*, of course. I'm sure it's going to make a box-office record. I can't wait.'

'So Trapnel's off?'

Ada showed more pity than astonishment.

'Trapnel?'

'Glober was going to do a Trapnel film when we were in Venice. Probably a kind of life of Trapnel, with Pamela Widmerpool in the lead. You'd only just begun to make St John Clarke propaganda with him.'

'He saw at once the St John Clarke novel was a much better idea.'

'Is Pamela equally happy?'

Quiggin cut in.

'I'm bored to death with this film of Glober's. I don't believe we're really going to make any money out of it, even if he does it. You never know with these people. Set against Ada's time writing her own novels, or working in the firm, I've always doubted whether it's worth while.'

'Oh, shut up,' said Ada.

She turned to me again.

'Do you really not know about Louis deciding on another girl for his leading lady, as well as ditching the Trapnel idea? That was all settled months ago.'

'Glober found Pamela too much in the end?'

'He fell for someone else.'

Quiggin continued to show irritation about the film.

'Do let's discuss another subject. The food at lunch wasn't too bad. I'm never sure Caucasian wine suits me. I thought he seemed rather a sulky little man, when I had a word with him through the interpreter.

'Who's Glober fallen for now?'

'Why, Polly Duport, of course. You must live absolutely out of the world not to know that. He saw her in the Hardy film at the Venice Festival. She turned up there herself. It was an instantaneous click.'

'Didn't that cause trouble?'

'With Pam?'

'Yes.'

'I don't think Pam really cared by then, even if she cared much before. She was already mad about that other American, what was he called—Russell Gwinnett. She still is. Haven't you heard about what happened at the Bagshaws'?'

'I know about that, more or less, but not about Polly Duport.'

'You remember how horrid Pam was to me in Venice, considering what friends we'd been. She's been ringing me up almost daily lately, trying to find out what's become of Gwinnett. How should I know? I barely met him. The most I did was to ask for us to be allowed to consider his book on X. Trapnel, when it's finished.'

This upset Quiggin again.

'A book on X. Trapnel is never going to sell. Why get us involved in it at all. It would only mean more money down the drain.'

'So any question of Pamela marrying Glober is at an end?'

'Why should she marry Glober?'

'You said he wanted to marry her—not just have an affair with her.'

'I did?'

'Yes.'

'I'm sure I didn't. Anyway, if I did, I shouldn't have done so. Forget about it. Of course, it's all off. How could it be anything else? Louis's terribly sweet and kind, but you never know what he's going to do next.'

'That's just what I've already stated,' said Quiggin.

'All film people go on like that. Never mind. I do think he really is keen on *Match Me Such Marvel*. Of course it's not going to be called that. We haven't decided on the best title yet. Polly is a marvellous girl too. Not only glamorous, but a real professional.'

'What I can't believe is Pamela making no row.'

'Even Pam realized she'd never get the part once Louis began taking Polly out to dinner.'

'Did Pamela meet Polly Duport?'

'I didn't think so. The Widmerpools went back to England halfway through the Film Festival. It was Pam's thing about Gwinnett, as much as anything else, that caused Louis to give her up. It serves Pam right. I believe she really did think she was going to become famous.'

'Why did Glober object so much? Gwinnett was positively running away from the situation, so far as anything Glober might object to. He still is. Even in the early stages, he only wanted Trapnel information.'

'Louis didn't think so. Anyway there was Pam. Perhaps it was because he was another American.'

'Is Glober going to marry Polly Duport now?'

'Isn't she married already, to an actor, though they're living apart? She was on her own when she came to Venice. Perhaps he will.'

'What does Widmerpool think about it all? His feelings don't seem to have been considered much, whether Pam leaves him or stays. Your idea was that he would be quite glad to get her taken off his hands. Now, if he goes to prison for spying, she'll be able to visit him in the Scrubs or Dartmoor, wherever he's sent—give him additional hell.'

Quiggin was outraged.

'You think that a matter to joke about?'

'Isn't that what it looks like?'

'That Parliamentary Question was disgraceful. Our own particular form of McCarthyism. All very gentlemanly, of course, none the less smearingly vindictive.'

'You think he'll emerge without a stain on his character?'

Quiggin was prepared to be less severe on that point.

'Haven't we all sins to forgive? Sins of over-enthusiasm, I mean. Look, Ada, there's our bus.'

5

Each recriminative decade poses new riddles, how best to live, how best to write. One's fifties, in principle less acceptable than one's forties, at least confirm most worst suspicions about life, thereby disposing of an appreciable tract of vain expectation, standardized fantasy, obstructive to writing, as to living. The quinquagenarian may not be master of himself, he is, notwithstanding, master of a passable miscellany of experience on which to draw when forming opinions, distorted or the reverse, at least up to a point his own. After passing the half-century, one unavoidable conclusion is that many things seeming incredible on starting out, are, in fact, by no means to be located in an area beyond belief. The 'Widmerpool case' fell into that category. It remained enigmatic so far as the public were concerned. People who liked to regard themselves as 'in the know' were not much better off, one rumour contradicting another, what exactly Widmerpool had done to put himself in such an awkward spot remaining undefined. One extraneous item came my own way, which, as purely negative evidence, could have been added to material sifted by whatever official body was undertaking an enquiry. It was expressed in the form of a picture postcard of the Doge's Palace.

'Have to date heard nothing from your friend about blocks. Weather here good. D. McN. T.'

That, at least, indicated none of the disaster, threatening Widmerpool on account of Dr Belkin's absence from the Conference, had resulted in Tokenhouse suffering comparable repercussions. I had intended to ask the Quiggins about the blocks for the Cubist series, when walking with them after luncheon at the Soviet Embassy. More personally engrossing matters had intervened. The blocks remained forgotten. I sent Tokenhouse a postcard of Nelson's Column, saying (in army parlance) the matter would be looked into, a report forwarded.

In early summer, Isobel and I went by chance to a musical party organized by Rosie and Odo Stevens. It was a charity affair, our inclusion nothing to do with the meeting in Venice. In fact, the people who brought us knew the Stevenses hardly at all. I make this point to emphasize that guests present at this particular entertainment were not handpicked. No doubt everyone who received an invitation, in the first instance, was an acquaintance of some sort. Beyond such intermediaries stretched a relatively anonymous conflux of persons, whose passport to the house lay only in willingness to buy a ticket. Had things been otherwise, the evening might have turned out differently; possibly not certain other events that followed.

The Stevens house in Regent's Park, not large by the standards of Rosie's parents, though done up inside with a touch of the old Manasch resplendence, had room for a marquee to be built out on to a flat roof at the back to create an improvised auditorium, accommodating a respectable number of persons. Rosie had inherited two or three very acceptable pictures, and pieces of furniture, which Hugo Tolland, speaking from an antique dealer's point of view, regarded with respect. He had sold her two French commodes from his own shop, so they had not been acquired cheaply. Offering this sort of show for a charitable purpose was, on Rosie's part, a pious memento of the days when Sir Herbert and Lady Manasch, great patrons of the arts, had mounted similar projects. Stevens himself, claiming musical enthusiasms, as well as a strong taste for parties, may on this occasion have been at least as responsible as his wife. The 'good cause' was connected with one or more of the emergent African countries; the piece to be performed, Mozart's *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*—the '*Seraglio*'. The price of a ticket included supper after the opera had been performed.

Like the Soviet luncheon party—some of the same guests—there was a distinctly political flavour about the people collected, before the performance, in the Stevens drawing-room, MPs from both sides of the house, some African diplomatic representatives. This time the musical world, Rosie always maintaining links there, took the place of writers. Many of those present were not known to me. I recognized a Tory Cabinet Minister, and a female member of the Labour Shadow Cabinet, from pictures in the press. The music critic, Gossage, and Norman Chandler, who directed now, rather than dancing or acting, had come together. Gossage, a trifle more dried up and toothy than formerly, had exchanged his former pince-nez for rimless spectacles. His little moustache had gone white. Chandler, slightly filled out from the skeletal thinness of his younger days, retained a marionette-like appearance, a marionette now of a certain age. Living in one of the Ted Jeavons flats, Chandler had developed into rather a crony of Jeavons. They used to watch television together.

'Don't think there's much fear I'll be suspected,' Jeavons said. 'All the same, you never know what people will say behind your back.'

On arrival, Isobel had paused to talk with Rosie, who had been a former friend of Molly Jeavons. Moving through the crowd, I came on Audrey Maclintick. She announced the unforeseen fact that Moreland had advised on the *Seraglio*'s production. Quite apart from his poor health, that was unexpected. Moreland had always set his face against charity performances, although there had been occasions in the past when he had been more or less forced to take part in them. Audrey Maclintick agreed their presence was unlooked for. She added that it was not at all the sort of party she was used to. She had said just the same thing when Mrs Foxe had given a party for Moreland's Symphony, more than twenty years before. She herself was not much altered from then, even to the extent of still wearing a version, modified into a more contemporary style, of the dress which, at Mrs Foxe's, had caused Stringham to address her as 'Little Bo-Peep.'

'Hugh's name isn't on the programme?'

'He didn't want it there. The word "Africa" did it. Moreland's cracked about Africa. Always has been, always will be, I suppose. Goes off on the quiet to the British Museum to gaze on the African idols there. Mrs Stevens only had to say the money was going to Africa for Moreland to knock off all his other work, and set about the Mozart. Doesn't matter what worry it causes me. Of course, Moreland knew Mrs Stevens in what he loves to call The Old Days, so The Old Days might have been sufficient anyway, without being clinched by Africa. Whatever I said wasn't going to make any difference.'

Moreland, it was true, had always responded strongly to things African, rather as fountainhead of fetish and voodoo, than aspects of the African continent likely to be benefited by funds raised that night. The fascination exercised on his imagination by such incantatory cults was not unlike Bagshaw's unquenched curiosity about the ritual and dogma of Marxism, neither believers, both enthralled. Once Moreland's attention had been imaginatively aroused, he would find no difficulty in ignoring the fact that witch-doctors, zombies, cults of the dead, might not greatly profit from his help. Moreland himself came up at that moment. Audrey Maclintick did not give him time to speak.

'I expect you've seen who's here tonight—Lady Donners. That was bound to happen. Just her sort of party. I don't expect she wants to see me, any more than I do her. Well, I'll leave you two together to have a talk about The Old Days, which I've no doubt you'll start off on at once. Don't let Moreland have another drink before the curtain goes up. It isn't good for him. He ought to be in bed in any case, not mooning about at a place like this.'

She made off. So far as Moreland having another drink, she was probably right. He did not look at all well. Once, he would have been put out by such an injunction from wife, mistress, anyone else, made a great fuss about being treated as if not able to look after himself. Now, he was not at all concerned, taking the admonition as a matter of course, almost a demonstration of affection, which no doubt in a sense it was. Audrey Maclintick was said to look after him well, in what were not always easy circumstances. Moreland, too, showed signs of accepting her view that his own presence in the Stevens house required excuse.

'Never again. Not after what I've been through with the *Seraglio* committee ladies. Valmont's valet remarked the big difference between persuading a woman to sleep with you, which she really wants to do—though personally I've often found to the contrary—and inducing her to agree to something that offers no comparable satisfaction. My God, he was right.

Put me
To yoking foxes, milking of he-goats,
Gathering all the leaves fall'n this autumn.

Drawing farts from dead bodies,
Mustering of ants and numbering of atoms,
There is no hell to a lady of fashion.

I don't mean Rosie. She's all right. It was the rest of them. They expected me to do just the very things I've mentioned—every one of them.'

'You've been saying for years you live beyond the pleasure principle. Why boggle at ladies of fashion? Do they still exist?'

'Believe me they do. Matty's one now. I've just been having a word with her. Almost the first since we were husband and wife, beyond saying hullo, when we saw each other at the Ballet or the Opera. She seems to have supported the death of the Great Industrialist remarkably well.'

Matilda Donners was standing on the far side of the room. I had the impression Moreland had never managed to fall entirely out of love with her.

'I got her to introduce me to Polly Duport, whom she's talking to now. I've always been rather a fan. What I mean about Matty's social manner is that, having brought Polly Duport and myself together, she then had to suggest that I do the musical settings for some film Polly Duport's going to play the lead in. It's made from a St John Clarke novel, if you can imagine anything more grotesque. I remember my aunt thinking me too young to read *Fields of Amaranth*, but it isn't that one, and that isn't my objection. The producer, an American called Glober, was also pressed on me by Matty. He's that tall, bald, melodramatic character, talking to her now, looking as if he's going to play Long John Silver in a Christmas production of *Treasure Island*.'

'You've met Glober before.'

I recalled to Moreland the Mopsy Pontner dinner party. The effect was almost startling. The blood came rushing into his face as if he were about to have apoplexy. He began to laugh uncontrollably, quite in the old manner. Then, with an effort, he stopped. He was almost breathless, coughing hard. At the end of this near paroxysm he looked less ill, more exhausted. The information had greatly cheered him.

'No, really, that's too much. Am I to be suffocated by nostalgia? Will that be my end? I should not be at all surprised. I can see the headline:

MUSICIAN DIES OF NOSTALGIA

They'd put someone like Gossage on to the obit. "Mr Hugh Moreland—probably just Hugh Moreland these days—(writes our Music Critic), at a fashionable gathering last night—I'm sure Gossage still talks about fashionable gatherings—succumbed to an acute attack of nostalgia, a malady to which he had been a martyr for years. His best known works, etc, etc. . ." Are you aware, quite apart from Matty turning up here tonight, there hangs on the stairs of this very house Barnby's drawing—in his naturalistic manner, I'm glad to say—of Norma, that little waitress at Casanova's Chinese Restaurant? All this, and Mopsy Pontner too. I can't bear it. I shall mount the stage, and announce that, instead of Mozart tonight, I am myself going to entertain the company with a potpourri of nostalgic melodies.'

Moreland paused. He stepped back, clasping his hands, intoned gently:

'Dearest, our day is over,
Ended the dream divine.
You must go back to your life,
I must go back to mine.

Nothing short of some such outward expression of my own nostalgic feelings would be at all adequate. You shouldn't have told me about Mopsy Pontner. It wasn't the act of a friend.'

Although still laughing, Moreland, as before sometimes in such moods, had stirred himself emotionally by his own irony, his eyes filling with tears. Stevens came up to us.

'Look, Hugh, the curtain isn't going to rise absolutely on time. A Second Violin was a minute or two late. The regular player went down with flu at the last moment, and a substitute had to be found at short notice. We've been assured he's all right. He's upstairs peeing at the moment, but he'll be along when he's finished, and start fiddling away. Don't get worked up about the delay.'

'You speak as if I was a temperamental impresario about to throw a scene. It's no affair of mine when the curtain goes up. I'd much rather have another drink, which the delay gives me the right to do, whatever Audrey says.'

It was remarkable he should admit to being defiant about what she said. Moreland went off. There was no means of putting a veto on drink into operation. He moved as if his joints were rather stiff these days. Stevens laughed.

'Isn't Hugh splendid? Rosie thought he wasn't well, but he seems perfectly all right to me. I say, who do you think have turned up tonight? The Widmerpools. I suppose he's celebrating.'

'What's he got to celebrate about? I thought he was going to be sent to the Tower, hanged, drawn and quartered.'

'Not now. It's been found "not in the public interest" to proceed with the case. I was hearing about it earlier in the day. A journalist I know told me some quite interesting things. Widmerpool was damned lucky. You can take it from me he was in a tight corner. I suppose he thought this a good opportunity to show himself in public. You can't exactly say with an untarnished reputation, but at least not serving twenty-five years for espionage.'

'Did he apply to you for a ticket, as a once close friend of his wife's?'

'The Widmerpools, old cock, were brought by a friend of Rosie's, Sir Leonard Short, a civil servant with musical leanings, who used to frequent her parents' house. As luck will have it, Tompsitt's here too, our ambassador in the place where Widmerpool was having his trouble. They'll be able to dish it up together. All very respectable.'

'Is the large grim lady Tompsitt's wife?'

'She's rather rich. Schweizer Deutsch. Been married before. Ah, things are moving quicker now. I see Rosie is making signs. Do you and Isobel know where your seats are? I want to talk to Isobel. I haven't seen her for ages.'

He obviously had no idea how much Isobel disliked him. We all passed into the marquee. The Widmerpools, with Short (knighted at the last Birthday Honours), were several rows in front. Short, although his prim buttoned-up exterior allowed few inner doubts to be observed, looked less happy than the occasion seemed to demand, if what Stevens reported about Widmerpool were true. Pressure had perhaps been put on him to arrange this public appearance signalizing exculpation. Less dramatically than that, Widmerpool could simply have wished to hear the opera performed because he hoped to be identified with this particular charity. Love of music was unlikely to have brought him, whatever other reason. He, too, was looking more aggrieved than triumphant. Short's apparent uneasiness—Widmerpool's too, for that matter—may have been due to discovering that Pamela was far from popular with her hostess. If it came to that, Short was not at all well disposed to Pamela himself. She sat beside him, a look of utter contempt on her face, at the same time, rare with her, smiling faintly. She had got herself up in her smartest manner. Only those who knew her reputation might have reflected that, in another, more perverse mood, she might easily have turned up to watch the *Seraglio* wearing an old pair of jeans.

Rosie, Stevens, the Tory Cabinet Minister, his wife, Matilda Donners (who seemed to have brought the last two), were all sitting rather to the side of the front row. Their group, which included Polly Duport and Glober, had probably dined together. Behind the Widmerpools sat the Tompsitts, whom I had noticed on arrival. I had not set eyes on Tompsitt since hearing him, at the close of some inter-service committee, deplore, with Widmerpool, the Poles' lack of circumspection in making representations about Katyn to the International Red Cross. The air of disorder, marking out Tompsitt in his early days as a young diplomatist free from the conventionality ascribed to his kind, had settled down to a middle-aged unkemptness, implying chronic irritability, as much as a free spirit. The exceptionally peevish expression on his face at that moment could be attributed to Widmerpool himself, who, leaning back in a manner threatening to repeat his wife's chair-breaking incident at the French Embassy, showed no sign of ceasing to talk, in deference to the opening notes of the Overture. Finally, Tompsitt's wife raised her programme menacingly. Widmerpool, bowing to force, turned away from them. The curtain rose revealing the Pasha's palace.

During the first interval, on the way out of the marquee, we came on Glober. He was holding Polly Duport lightly by the arm.

'Why, hullo, Nick. Fancy meeting you here. What a hell of a good time we all had in Venice. I'm not going to forget your Major Tokenhouse in years. I had that picture of his packaged, and sent back to the States, where it's to become one of the treasures of the Glober collection of twentieth-century primitives. Why didn't you stop over for the Film Festival, and meet Polly here?'

In saying all this Glober managed also to convey an odd sense of added remoteness, not only in speaking of our Venetian meeting, also somehow in relation to himself. He was not in the least unfriendly, absolutely the reverse, still enormously cordial, at the same time in a manner that set him at a distance, put a cordon round him, entrenched his position. It was a little like the rays people seem to emit when they have promised a job, promotion, invitation, satisfaction of one sort or another, then withdrawn the offer. He continued to speak for a minute or two about the Tokenhouse picture, imprisoning all around him within the net of his own social technique, moving on to the Film Festival, then the St John Clarke novel. He was not quite prepared for Isobel's knowledge (in certain areas rivalling Trapnel's) of obscure or forgotten fiction.

'How well you handle the scene where Phyllida and Prosper get lost in the mist on the glacier at Schwarenbach?'

While Glober dealt with that question, I reminded Polly Duport of our drive back from the St Paul's service, with her mother and stepfather. Undeniably a beauty, less remarkably so off the stage, she had now, I thought, come to resemble Duport more than Jean. She had her father's cool, wary scepticism, as well as Jean's figure and grey eyes. In her thirties, already well known, she had in the film at Venice somehow achieved this additional prestige, a flowering which had instinctively caught Glober's fancy, aroused his untiring interest in the immediate.

'I remember an English officer joining us. So that was you? I suppose you were keeping an eye on my stepfather, making sure he behaved properly in church?'

The comment recalled her mother.

'How is Colonel Flores?'

'Very well indeed. He's a general now, but more or less retired from the army, and in politics.'

'And your mother?'

'She's all right. Fine, in fact. Carlos's new job suits her. You see he's Head of the Government.'

'I didn't know that.'

'For a year now.'

'Dictator?'

'We don't call it that.'

'Your mother must enjoy being Dictatress—Dictatrix, more correctly.'

Polly Duport laughed. She was charming, in spite of resemblance to her father, much 'nicer', one felt, than her mother, but without, so far as I was myself concerned, any of her mother's former bowling-over endowments. Glober must have felt the reverse. Her professionalism of the Theatre, a seriousness her mother could never have achieved, in the Theatre, or any other of the arts, possibly exerting some of that effect on him.

'I think Mama would certainly rather do the job herself.'

'And your father?'

'Do you know him too? You are well up in our family. Papa's in the crude still.'

'The crude?'

This seemed an enormously suitable calling, whatever it was, for Duport to follow, but one could not in the least imagine financial or administrative shape taken by such employment.

'Crude oil. That's how it's known in the trade. His business is mixed up with importing into Canada for processing. He doesn't do too badly. That's his life. Has been for quite a long time now. He's rather crotchety these days. Trouble with his inside. He never really recovered from that upset in the war. Still, Papa has his moments.'

The way she said that recalled Jean again. Glober, who had been explaining to Isobel how he was going to shoot

Match Me Such Marvel in Spain, returned to holding Polly Duport's arm.

'More Mozart now. We'll see you at the next intermission.'

The Widmerpools, Tompsitts, and Short, were standing not far away, the men discussing something in an undertone. Mrs Tompsitt, no beauty, looked less than pleased. As Stevens remarked, she had the air of being rich. She and Pamela were not talking together. Pamela's eye was on us. She was still smiling a little to herself. Glober glanced in her direction, raising his hand slightly in greeting. From the gesture, they appeared not to have met earlier that evening. Pamela made no sign in return, not altering her faint smile. If Glober felt himself in a delicate position, he gave no outward evidence of that. As he strolled away, hand on Polly Duport's elbow, he was perfectly at ease.

'That was the American who planned to run away with Lady Widmerpool, but is to do so no longer?'

'That's the one.'

'She's looking rather frightening tonight.'

Isobel's comment, although it could not possibly have been heard by Pamela at that range, appeared in some manner to react on her. As we approached the marquee again, she broke off from the Tompsitt group, and came towards us. We said good evening.

'I've just this afternoon found where Gwinnett's staying.'

Pamela spoke that like a comment on something we had already discussed together.

'You have?'

'He's been in hiding.'

She laughed. The laugh sounded a little mad.

'You'll never guess who gave me the address.'

'I'm sure I can't.'

'A tart.'

'Indeed?'

'Does it surprise you, him knowing a tart?'

'I'll have to think about the answer to that.'

'Perhaps you know her too?'

'I've no reason to suppose so.'

'She's called Pauline.'

'As it happens, I never met her.'

'A girl of X's.'

'Of course.'

'So it's all above board, so far as Gwinnett's concerned.'

'I agree.'

The music began. She laughed again, and turned away. We found our seats. The Second Act took place, the drunken scenes, the setting to rest of fears that the girls might join the Pasha's harem. When we came out for the second interval, Moreland reappeared. Gossage and Chandler came up.

'I'm always fond of the English maid, Blonde,' Moreland said. 'Unlike the Pasha's gardener, I find that vixenish touch sympathetic.'

'I'm mad about Osmin,' said Chandler.

Gossage giggled nervously, a giggle unaltered by increased age. He brought conversation back to more serious criticism.

'The man's more of a baritone than a bass. Some cardinal appoggiaturas went west in the last Act, I'm afraid. No harm in subordinating virtuosity to dramatic expression once in a way. Not least in a work of this kind. We can't deny a lyrical tenderness, can we? I expect you agree with that, Mrs . . .'

Hesitating to call her 'Mrs Maclintick', after all these years of living with Moreland, at the same time, never having graduated to addressing her as 'Audrey', Gossage's voice trailed gently away. Audrey Maclintick took no notice of him. She spoke quietly, but there was a rasp in her tone.

'Have you seen the Second Violin, Moreland?'

Moreland guessed from her manner of speaking trouble was on the way. He was plainly without a clue what form that might take, why she had asked the question.

'Has he arrived tight, or something? I've conducted unshaved myself before now. One mustn't be too critical. This one's a substitute for the regular man, who's ill. The orchestra wasn't too bad. Allowing for Gossage's just strictures on the subject of appoggiaturas.'

'You haven't noticed one of the Violins, Moreland?'

'No, should I? Has he got two heads, or a forked tail emerging from the seat of his trousers?'

Moreland said that in a conciliatory manner, one he used often to employ with Matilda. Audrey Maclintick brought out the answer through her teeth.

'It's Carolo.'

Moreland was not at all prepared for that. It was not a contingency anyone was likely to foretell; at the same time, the musical world being what it was, one not in the least unheard of in the circumstances. At first Moreland looked dreadfully upset. Then, seeing the matter in clearer proportion, his face cleared. There were signs that he was going to laugh. He successfully managed not to do so, his mouth trembling so much in the effort that it looked for a second as if he might burst into an almost hysterical peal, similar to that brought on by news of Glober's identity. Audrey Maclintick, for her part, showed no sign of seeing anything funny in the presence of her former lover—the man for whom she had left Maclintick—turning up in the *Seraglio* orchestra. Her demeanour almost suggested suspicion that Moreland himself had deliberately engineered transposition of violinists, just to disturb her own feelings. Seeing she was thoroughly agitated about what seemed to himself merely comic—another nostalgic enrichment of the Stevens party—he pulled himself together, plainly with an effort, and spoke soothingly.

'Is this really true? Are you sure it's Carolo? Musical types often resemble each other facially, especially violinists. I've noticed when conducting.'

Audrey Maclintick would have none of that.

'I lived with the man for three years, didn't I? Why should I say he was Second Violin, if he wasn't? I got to know him by sight, even if he didn't spend much time in the house.

Her fluster about the matter was unforeseen. On the whole, one would have been much more prepared for complete indifference. Objecting to the presence of Matilda was another matter. The intensity of feeling that bound Audrey Maclintick to Moreland was all at once momentarily revealed. Moreland made a face in my direction. He must have been wondering whether Matilda—actually married to Carolo for a short period in her early life—had also noticed the presence of her former husband. All this talk caused Gossage to suffer one of his most severe conjunctions of embarrassment. Like a man playing an invisible piano, he made wriggling movements in the air with fingers of both hands, while he mused aloud in a kind of aside.

'I did hear Carolo was not so very prosperous some years ago. No reason why he shouldn't have substituted tonight, prosperous or not. Did it to oblige, I expect.'

Chandler disagreed.

'Who ever heard of Carolo being obliging, since the days when he was fiddling away at Vieuxtemps, in a black velvet suit and lace collar? He's not dressed like that tonight, is he? Now that we're none of us so young, I'm wearing quieter clothes myself.'

That gave Moreland a chance to deflect the conversation.

'Nonsense, Norman, you're known as London's most eminent Teddy Boy.'

The measure was successful so far as putting an end to further discussion about Carolo, until time to return to the marquee. On the way there, Gossage was still muttering to himself.

'They've got polish. Vivacity.'

That was safely to relegate Carolo to a collective group. The orchestra could not be seen from where we sat. So far as I know, direct contact was never made during the further course of the evening between Carolo and his former ladies, but, at the termination of the opera, expression was given to a kind of apotheosis of the situation. This juncture, brief but striking, to be appreciated only by those conversant with Carolo's earlier fame, was too dramatic, too trite, to be altogether good art. Nevertheless, it had its certain splendour, however banal. This happened when, praise of the Pasha's renunciation of revenge chanted to a close, the curtain fell to much applause; then rose again for the reappearance of the cast. The audience was enthusiastic. The curtain rose, fell again, several times. The cast bowed their way off. It was the turn of the orchestral players. They trooped on to the stage.

'Which is Carolo?' whispered Isobel.

I was not sure I should have recognized him among the Violins without prompting. That was not because Carolo's appearance had become in any manner less picturesque than when younger. On the contrary, the romantic raven locks, now snow white, had been allowed to grow comparatively long, in the manner of Liszt, to whom Carolo bore some slight resemblance. His whole being continued to proclaim the sufferings of the artist, just as in days gone by, in the basement dining-room of the Maclinticks. He bowed repeatedly (without the warmth of the old singer in Venice) to the charity-performance guests, with his colleagues, the general acknowledgment of the orchestra.

Then the orchestral players turned, in unison, towards the side of the auditorium, where Rosie and Stevens sat, together with Matilda, the Cabinet Minister and his wife. To these, as begetters of the show, Carolo and his fellows now made a personal tribute, Matilda, of necessity, included in this profound obeisance. The faint smile she gave, while she clapped, was not, I think, illusory. It marked her recognition that rôles had changed since Carolo, young and promising musician, had picked up, married, a little girl from the provinces, just managing to keep afloat as an actress. Matilda's attitude, more philosophic than Audrey Maclintick's, had not been of the temperament to remain married to Moreland. A few minutes later, illustration was provided of unlikely ties that can, on the other hand, keep a couple together, without marriage, probably without sexual relationship. This took place on the way to the supper-room. Odo Stevens came up with two people for whom he wanted to find a place.

'Do you remember, when you and I lived in that block of flats during the war—just before I went off with my Partisans? Of course you do. Here's Myra Erdleigh, who was there too, and this is Mr Stripling. Jimmy Stripling is teaching me a lot about my new passion I was talking about in Venice, vintage cars. Let's find a table.'

Age—goodness knows how old she was—had exalted Mrs Erdleigh's unsubstantiality. She looked very old indeed, yet old in an intangible, rather than corporeal sense. Lighter than air, disembodied from a material world, the swirl of capes, hoods, stoles, scarves, veils, as usual encompassed her from head to foot, all seeming of so light a texture that, far from bringing an impression of accretion, their blurring of hard outlines produced a positively spectral effect, a Whistlerian nocturne in portraiture, sage greens, sombre blues, almost frivolous greys, sprinkled with gold.

Jimmy Stripling, certainly a lot younger than Mrs Erdleigh, had become old in a different, more conventional genre. Tall, shambling, what remained of his hair grey, rather greasy, his bulky figure, which took up more room than ever, was shapeless and bent. Even so, he seemed in certain respects less broken down, morally speaking, than in his middle period. To be old suited him better, gave excuse to a bemused demeanour, pulled it together. Stevens was delighted with both of them.

'Myra and I met again in Venice. That was after you'd left. We talked a lot about those wartime flats, and the people who lived there. All those Belgians. Myra told my fortune then. She predicted a *belle guerre* for me. I didn't have too bad a one, so she prophesied right.'

Mrs Erdleigh took my hand. As in the past, her touch brought a sense of intercommunication, one conveyed by vibrations that imposed themselves almost more by not-being, than by being. They emphasized the inexistence of the flesh, rather than, by direct contact, extending its pressures and undercurrents.

'We have not met since that night of dangers.'

She smiled her otherworldly smile, misted hazel eyes roaming over past and future, apportioning to each their substance and shadow, elements to herself one and indivisible. I asked if she had been staying at the Bragadin palace. She shook her head in a faraway manner.

'I went only a few times to see Baby Clarini. She is a very old friend. Under Scorpio, like that other lady at the Palazzo, who is here tonight. Baby has had a sad life. She has never delved down to those eternal foundations, of which Thomas Vaughan speaks—Eugenius Philalethes, as we know him—that transform the hard stubborn flints of the world into chrysolites and jasper.'

She did not seem at all surprised when I told her Dr Brightman had also, speaking of *Borage and Hellebore*, invoked the name of Thomas Vaughan in Venice.

'His spirit was moving there. The Lion of St Mark could symbolize that green lion he calls the body, the magical entity that must clip the wings of the eagle. Do you remember planchette on that dark afternoon in the country? It was Baby's planchette that had beeen borrowed.'

I had forgotten that fact. The occasion, in any case, was not one desirable for resurrection at that moment. Better reminiscence should stop there. Mrs Erdleigh, who had perhaps been teasing, allowed that view to prevail. I followed up her astrological connotation of Baby Clarini by drawing attention to Isobel's horoscope.

'My wife is under Pisces. She rebels against that.'

Isobel made some complaint about the trials to which Piscians are subject. Mrs Erdleigh turned on to her a soothsayer's gaze, friendly but all-seeing.

'Remember always The Fishes are ruled by Jupiter—give no credence to Neptune. There is the safeguard. When first I put out the cards for your husband, I told him you two would meet, and all would be well.'

If my acknowledgment fell short of absolute agreement that Mrs Erdleigh had seen so far ahead, it also fell much farther short of truthful denial that she had said anything of the sort. Sorceresses, more than most, are safer allowed their professional *amour propre*. Stripling leant across the table. He had sat down opposite, next to Stevens. He was probably under permanent orders to remain directly within Mrs Erdleigh's eye.

'Are you one of these musical people? I expect so. I don't know a thing about Mozart opera, or anyone else's, but Myra wanted to come. Myra and I have been friends for years. I have to do what she wants. She's such a wonderful person. What she knows is uncanny, far more than that. No, it is, Myra, I mean it.'

Mrs Erdleigh had made no attempt to deny omniscience, but Stripling may have felt the whole speech necessary to establish his own standing. I attempted some remark about having met him at the Templers' years before.

'Of course, of course. Poor old Peter.'

Stripling did not seem very capable of taking in chronological bearings about people any longer, only motor-cars, as it turned out a moment later, when I told him about seeing Sunny Farebrother some months before. Farebrother, too, then a butt of Stripling's derision, had been at the Templer house when we first met.

'Sunny Farebrother? Do you know I was thinking of Sunny the other day. He used to own an old Ford car years ago—thirty or forty, old even then—so much so, people like me ragged him about it. No hope he's kept it, I suppose? He's always been a very economical man, but I don't expect there's any hope of that. I'd give a lot to possess that car. Cars are the only things I know about. Are you interested in cars?'

'I possess one, so I have to be to that extent.'

Stripling shook his head. That was not enough.

'I've loved cars all my life. Love's the only word. Passionate love. Some feel like that about them. Probably why my marriage wasn't a success. I loved cars over well. I'm too old to race them now, but I study them, and collect them. Not a rally, not a *concours d'élégance*, I miss. You know Odo's got very keen on vintage cars too.'

When people speak of a subject close to them, they can look transformed. Almost as mystically absorbed in car lore as Mrs Erdleigh in a transcendental vision, Stripling suddenly changed from his dreamy state to one of intense excitement. He had just thought of something he could not wait to communicate to Stevens, something of paramount importance to both of them.

'I say, Odo, do you know there's an American at this party who's keen on vintage cars? A fellow called Glober. Told me quite by chance a minute before the opera started. It's just come back to me. I'd mentioned I owned two Armstrong Siddeleys, '26 and '27, which both still go like smoke. Powerful as dreadnoughts, the pair of them. He was as keen as mustard at once. They're 14 h.p., o.h.v., four-cylinder, sparely raked windscreens, both absolute treasures the way they pound along. What do you think Glober told me? He owns a 4½ litre supercharged '31 Bentley, which he's got here tonight. Only bought her last week. Of course, he wanted to see the Armstrong Siddeleys, when he's got a chance to let up on the film he's making—he's a film producer—and he's going to show me the Bentley when we leave. He's pondering a Bugatti 35.'

Stevens took charge of Stripling at this stage.

'Of course I know Louis Glober's in the vintage market, Jimmy. What are you thinking about? But, look here, tell me again what you were saying the other day about the 1902, 5 h.p., Renault Voiturette. It's the big stuff I'm getting interested in now. There was also a 1903 Panhard et Levassor, 10 h.p., tonneau, I wanted to discuss.'

They settled down to the subject.

'Though many desire these treasures, none enter but he who knows the key and how to use it.'

For a moment, Mrs Erdleigh sounded as if he she, too, had embarked on the subject of vintage cars, but occult practices were still her theme.

'I remember Dr Trelawney saying much the same not long before he—'

I stopped just in time, at the last minute remembering no one, least of all a mage like Dr Trelawney, should be disparaged by the statement that Death had overtaken him.

Providential suspension on my lips of that misnomer was barely accepted by Mrs Erdleigh. She had already begun to shake her head at such a near lapse, congenital lack of insight, all but openly displayed.

'You mean not long before he achieved the Eighth Sphere to which Trismegistus refers?'

'Exactly.'

'Where, as again Vaughan writes, the liberated soul ascends, looking at the sunset towards the west wind, and hearing secret harmonies. He calls this world, where we are now, an outdoor theatre, in whose wings the Dead wait their cue for return to the stage—an image from the *opéra bouffe* we have just witnessed. In a short space now, I too shall leave for the wings. Perhaps before the drama is played out, of which the opening Act was in the Bragadin palace. The rumble of wheels sounds. Once set in motion, the chariot of the soul does not long linger.'

'What was begun at Jacky Bragadin's?'

'Much to disorder the hierarchy of being. Elsewhere too. Pluto disports himself in the Eighth House.'

I should have liked to continue, try to persuade Mrs Erdleigh to show herself a little more explicit, but her attention was distracted by a young Labour MP, politely sceptical, also anxious to enquire into his own astrological nativity. Mrs Erdleigh's engagement in this, other similar interrogations, took up the rest of supper. After we had moved away from the table, further opportunity came to talk to Stevens, who had for the moment renounced vintage cars, about Widmerpool, what had taken place to extricate him from his embarrassments. Stevens himself was greatly preoccupied with this question.

'It's been suggested he wrote an indiscreet letter. Realised he'd gone too far, then tried to withdraw. That might have been in office hours, or when he was being cultured in Eastern Europe. You can't tell. It's not denied now he's a close sympathizer. Even so, he didn't want to get in trouble with his own security authorities. A spot of blackmail seems to have been the result. I know the form. One of my own mob found himself in a tangle that way. Thought it all in the interests of "international goodwill" to hand over one or two quite important little items. They asked for more, he stalled—got cold feet—they gave him away to us.'

'Somebody said there was a defection on their side.'

Stevens gave a sharp look.

'Perhaps there was. Whatever happened, he's got away with it.'

Stevens moved at ease through the world of secret traffickings of this kind. He was about to continue an exposition of what happened to such suspects, when—when not—convenient to prosecute, but was interrupted by Rosie. She came up in a state of some disquiet. Her little black eyes were popping out of her head with agitation.

'Odo, come at once. Something rather worrying has happened.'

Stevens went off with her. Rosie's anxiety might have any cause, the house on fire, an undesired invitation she wanted help in refusing, one of the children been sick, the degree of seriousness could not be estimated. Stevens's comments had interest. What dreams of power, practical or phantasmic had long tantalized Widmerpool's heart, what plans meditated to put them into effect? Stevens had spoken ironically of betrayals in the interest of 'international goodwill'; Bagshaw, speculating on less highflown motives, satisfaction of a taste for wholesale destruction, vicarious individual revenge against society. Neither Bagshaw nor Stevens spoke without experience. Perhaps, in Widmerpool's case, he managed to coalesce in himself both aspects. Chandler and Gossage passed. They said goodnight.

'A nice turn of power in the middle notes, didn't you think?' said Gossage. 'A fine sensibility of phrase?'

'Hugh didn't look too well,' said Chandler. 'I hope he's all right. I hadn't seen him for an age.'

They passed on. It was time to leave. I began to look about for Isobel. Before I found her, Stevens returned to the room. I took this opportunity of saying goodbye, as he seemed on his way somewhere. He confirmed, as it were, the words spoken a minute before by Chandler.

'Hugh Moreland's not very well. He's gone to lie down in the study. I'm on my way to get the car. I can run them home.'

Stevens, many of his characteristics uncommendable, was good at taking charge when certain kinds of awkward situation arose.

'Is Hugh bad?'

'Doesn't look too good. He had a blackout, and fell. He's all right now, all right in the sense that he doesn't want to leave, because he says there are a lot of things about the *Seraglio* he still wants to discuss. We've persuaded him to take it easy for the moment. He'll be better when he gets to bed.'

'Can one see him?'

'Yes, do go up. Might keep him quiet. Don't bring a crowd with you. The room's the little study on the second floor, to the left.'

I found Isobel, and we both went upstairs. Moreland was lying on a small sofa, Rosie and Audrey Maclintick standing over him. The sofa was not big enough to contain his body comfortably at full length. He was drinking a glass of water, something I had never before seen him do, except after a heavy evening the night before. As Chandler had said, he did not look at all well. He was refusing to compromise with his own situation further than agreement to be driven home, when Stevens returned. Audrey Maclintick was trying to persuade him to rest quietly, until the car was announced as at the front door. When he saw us, he began to laugh in his old way.

'I told you nostalgia would get me. It did. Absolutely spun me over like a ninepin. It was Carolo put the finishing touch. I can't take it as I used. They say you lose your head for nostalgia, as you get older. That's also the time when waves of it come sweeping down without warning. You have to ration yourself, or a sudden dose knocks you out, as it did me.'

'You stop talking so much, and take it easy,' said Audrey Maclintick. 'I'm going to get that precious doctor of yours round as soon as you're in bed, no matter what the time is, and how much he's had to drink, if he hasn't passed out cold. Even he told you to be careful, the last time he looked you over. You're going to stay in bed for a week or two now, if I have anything to do with it.'

Moreland did not listen. In spite of Rosie's added protest that he would be wiser to remain quiet, he continued to insist he would be perfectly recovered the following day. He also kept on returning to what had been happening that evening.

'There were a lot of people near me talking about vintage cars. There's nostalgia, if you like.

For some we loved, the loveliest and the best,
That from his vintage rolling Time hath pressed.

That's a striking image. I remember, years ago, a man who kept on quoting Omar at that party of Mrs Foxe's, after my Symphony. I've only just grasped that the verse refers to a car. Life's vintage car, in which we're all travelling. Better than Trapnel's Camel, more Hegelian too. Then you're suddenly told to get out and walk—pressed to, as the poet truly says.'

There was nothing to be done until Stevens returned.

Staying with Moreland was only to encourage running on like this, tiring himself, so Isobel and I spoke a word or two, then said goodnight. It was not quite clear what sort of a fall he had suffered. He seemed to have lost his senses for a minute or so, afterwards felt no worse than a little dazed.

'I was pretty normal when I got up from the floor. If one could ever truthfully say that about oneself.'

A large proportion of the guests had already left when we arrived downstairs again.

'Poor Hugh,' said Isobel. 'He didn't look at all well to me.'

'Nor me.'

Outside, the night was dark. There was no moon. A breeze, fresh, almost country-scented, blew in from the Park's tall clusters of trees. We were aiming to cut through from the terrace, where the Stevens house stood, making for a street beyond, which ran parallel, where a taxi could be picked up. A few doors away from the Stevens entrance, two or three persons, standing against the railings, were having some sort of argument. Having attended the party, they seemed now to be squabbling. Numbers and sex were not at first distinguishable in the gloom, but turned out as a woman, two men, in fact the Widmerpools and Short. Widmerpool was giving Short a dressing-down. He was very angry. Short was defending himself mildly, but with bureaucratic obstinacy. He could be heard maintaining that administrative breakdowns were from time to time unavoidable.

'I've already told you, Kenneth, that I quite plainly instructed the car to be outside waiting. The driver must have mistaken the address. If so, he will be along in a minute or two.'

As we went by, Widmerpool recognized us.

'Have you by any chance got a car? Our hired vehicle hasn't turned up. Leonard has made some sort of muddle. I suppose you couldn't give us a lift?'

'We're on our way to pick up a taxi.'

'Oh.'

'Why not do the same? They come down fairly frequently in the street behind here.'

'Pam doesn't want to walk that far. Oh, hell and blast. Why must this have happened?'

Widmerpool was not merely cross, put out by the car not being on time, but wrought up to an extent almost resembling drunkenness. Drink, which he hardly touched as a rule, was unlikely to have played any part in this highly strung state, unless, quite exceptionally, he had felt the *Seraglio* an occasion to swallow a few glasses, more to impress others with his own improved situation, than because he enjoyed their effect. Apart from threat of prosecution, he could have been suffering more than usual domestic strain, Pamela's design to leave him—if all alleged about Glober were true—now suddenly put into reverse gear. Even if Widmerpool did not know the reason, her change of plans, involvement with Gwinnett, might well have caused more than usually uncomfortable repercussions at home. The fact that she would not walk the few yards necessary to find a taxi showed her mood. Widmerpool stamped his feet. Short addressed us in a more temperate manner.

'If you should see anything looking like a hired car waiting round the corner, please ask the chauffeur if he's booked in the name of Sir Leonard Short, will you? He may have mistaken the address. If so, just send him along here.'

We said we would do that.

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

The only answer was Short's.

'I told you Lady Widmerpool was looking frightening,' said Isobel.

'Will they wait there all night?'

'I think she's planning something. That was how she looked to me.'

By that time we had reached the main road. A taxi cruised by. So far as we were both concerned, that closed the *Seraglio* evening.

As with stories of Trapnel's last hours, others in connexion with Gwinnett's decampment from the Bagshaws', what followed, outside the Stevens house in Regent's Park, appeared afterwards in various versions. One hears about life, all the time, from different people, with very different narrative gifts. Accordingly, not only are many episodes, in which you may even have played a part yourself, hard enough to assess; a lot more must be judged from haphazard accounts given by others. Even if reported in good faith, some choose one aspect on which to concentrate, some another. This truth, obvious enough, was particularly applicable to the events following the *Seraglio* party. Even so, essential facts were scarcely in question. My own informants were Moreland and Stevens.

There was no irreplaceable divergence between these two accounts, although, when it came to telling a story in which veracity had to be measured against picturesque detail, neither could be called pedantically veracious; Moreland, in this respect the more reliable, being, if the more imaginative, the one who also best appreciated the graphic power of fact. Moreland talked about the scene right up to the end. He never tired of it. There can be no doubt it cheered his last months, added, as he himself said, to the richness of his own experience. His powerful gift of creative imagery led him, over and over again, to reconstruct the incidents, whenever anyone came to visit him.

Stevens, in principle to be thought of as a type used to violent scenes, was in a sense more taken by surprise, worse shocked, than Moreland. Marriage may have enervated Stevens, accustomed him by then to sedate, well-behaved routines. The rational, utilitarian, unruffled point of view, tempered with toughness, that directed most of his life —had so directed it in the past—could mislead, as well as stimulate. Like many persons who had enjoyed a comparatively adventurous career, knocked about the world a good deal, he retained a strain of naivety, naivety penetrating just the areas of the mind which, in Moreland's case, were quite free from any such inhibition. Indeed, Moreland used to complain himself that 'naivety in short supply' could be a disadvantage in practising the arts, where it is often necessary to see one thing only, that particular thing with supreme clarity. In fact, when it came to giving a convincing description of what took place that night, the details Stevens produced, except for a few useful appendices, were little more than confirmation of Moreland's epic account. Stevens himself excused the scrappiness of his own narration.

'It was so bloody dark, and I was worrying all the time about getting Hugh home, before he had another fit, or whatever it was.'

The Stevens garage was in a mews behind the house. When Stevens drove the car back towards his own front door, he noticed figures talking together a few yards up the terrace. He did not identify them, merely supposing they were guests having a final musical dispute before parting on their separate ways. Moreland, Audrey Maclintick, several others, were by then chatting with Rosie in the hall, Moreland having become so restless lying on the sofa that it seemed best to come downstairs to wait for the car. There they found Mrs Erdleigh, Stripling, Glober, Polly Duport, all about to leave. Moreland at once recognized the potentialities of Mrs Erdleigh, whom he had not met earlier that evening. Within a matter of minutes—as he himself admitted—they were discussing together the magical writings of Cornelius Agrippa. Moreland and Mrs Erdleigh had already reached the Book of Abramolin the Mage, spells for surrounding an enemy with a vision of trellis-work, others for causing the Pope to fall in love with you, when Stevens came up the steps. Meanwhile Glober and Stripling had returned to vintage cars.

'Now we'll take a look at the Bentley, Mr Stripling. My automobile's parked at the end of the block.'

Stripling must already have obtained permission from Mrs Erdleigh to inspect the Bentley, before restoring her to whatever witch's lair she inhabited, but there is some uncertainty as to how exactly the outgoing party came on the Widmerpools and Short, still hanging about in the terrace, waiting for their car. It seems possible that Moreland refused to enter the Stevens car before he had finished his occult conversation with Mrs Erdleigh. Alternatively, his interest by now aroused in vintage cars, he too could have wanted to inspect Glober's vehicle. Moreland seems to have been strolling with Mrs Erdleigh; Stevens and Audrey Maclintick behind; Stripling, Glober, Polly Duport, a short way ahead. The talk of cars may have been carried to the ears of Short, who (having made contact with Glober at supper on the subject of the French political situation vis-à-vis Algeria) now repeated a request for a 'lift'. Polly Duport was alleged to have thrown back a comment to the effect that the '31 Bentley was the 'size of a bus', thereby raising Short's hopes. Another possibility is that Pamela had intended that something of this sort should happen. She had been waiting for a chance not arisen at the party. She could hardly have foreseen the lateness of the hired car, but might have grasped that Glober, still in the Stevens house, was bound sooner or later to pass that way. Short, having no reason to connect Glober with the Widmerpools, stepped forward, and made a little speech.

'If your car is really so commodious, Mr Glober, I wonder whether you could include in it a party of three—for our own hired vehicle does not seem to have turned up. It would be too kind were you able to manage that good office. We all live in the Westminster direction, if you happened to be going that way. It ill becomes a native of this country to seek transport from a transatlantic visitor, guest to our shores, but, not for the first time in recent years, we must needs throw ourselves upon the goodwill of American resources.'

Uncertainty prevails whether or not, at this stage, Glober immediately grasped that the other applicants for help were the Widmerpools. On the whole, it seems likely he did not. In the dark, there was no reason why he should recognize them. At the same time, Glober, out of sheer love of living dangerously, may have accepted this as a challenge. Moreland was ignorant of Glober's former affiliations with Pamela, of whom he knew little or nothing at that time. Stevens, too, had not kept up with Pamela's ever varying situation, by then of no particular interest to him, provided his own married life was not embarrassed by it. In Venice, he had no doubt thought of the Widmerpools as guests of Jacky Bragadin, rather than connecting either of them with Glober; Pamela's own references to Glober giving no reason to convey the comparative seriousness of her relationship with him.

'I'd just love to give you all a ride in my new automobile. Come with us.'

Only after Glober had made that statement, so it appears, did Widmerpool join the group. Pamela still remained a little apart.

'This is very kind,' said Widmerpool. 'We have not seen each other since Venice.'

That indicated he and Glober had exchanged no word at the party. Glober bowed.

'You're welcome.'

Glober then introduced Mrs Erdleigh, Jimmy Stripling, Moreland, and Audrey Maclintick. If Widmerpool was to make a convenience of his car, Glober was determined to have some amusement too. Audrey Maclintick, of course, wanted to get Moreland into the Stevens car—and home—but for once does not seem to have succeeded in making her voice heard. Moreland, telling the story, emphasized the formality of Glober's introductions. That was the moment when Pamela joined the group. She came towards them hesitantly, as if she wanted to be introduced too. Her arrival impressed Moreland, not on account of any foreseeable disharmony that might include Glober, but because of the look given her by Mrs Erdleigh, more precisely rays of mystic disapproval trajected with force noticeable even in the dark. That perception was characteristic of Moreland. Mrs Erdleigh had made a deep impression on him.

'The Sorceress seemed to know Lady Widmerpool already. At least she gave her extraordinary smile—one I would rather not have played on myself.'

Pamela had smiled in return. She took no other notice of Mrs Erdleigh, nor the rest of them. The person to whom she addressed herself was Polly Duport. Pamela did not come close, but it was plain to whom she was speaking.

'I hear you're going to be the star in Louis's new film.'

Pamela said that very gently, barely audibly. Her tone almost suggested she was shy of mentioning the matter at all, though beyond words delighted at hearing such a rumour. All she wanted was to have the good news confirmed. Both Moreland and Stevens agreed there was not the smallest hint of unfriendliness in Pamela's voice. At the same time, Stevens, knowing Pamela to the extent of having lived with her for at least a few weeks, had no doubt something ominous was brewing. Moreland, it seemed, had not bothered to categorize Pamela at all; so far as he was concerned, another 'lady of fashion', full of every sort of nonsense about music, to be avoided at all costs. He admitted to having been struck by her looks, when he came to examine her.

Polly Duport, whether she knew much or little about Pamela, can have had few illusions as to friendliness. She could hardly have failed to hear of Glober's comparatively recent intention to cast Pamela for the lead she herself—anyway for the moment—was intended by him to play. Beyond that knowledge, of a purely business sort, the extent of her awareness of Pamela's character, even nature of relationship with Glober, could well be over-estimated. The segregated life of the Theatre, separated by its nature from so much going on round about, might easily have prevented her from hearing more than essential; so to speak, her own cue in taking Pamela's place. Polly Duport herself may not have been, over and above that, at all interested. She would know that Pamela, not a professional actress, had been in the running as 'star' of Glober's film, had probably experienced some sort of love affair with him. That was not necessarily significant. There was no reason for her to guess Glober had planned to marry Pamela.

Polly Duport, replying to Pamela's question, seems to have let fall a scrap of stylized stage banter adapted to such an enquiry, one of those conventional sets of phrase, existing in every professional world, in this case designed for use in counteracting another player, complimentary, spiteful, a mixture of both; clichés probably often in demand throughout the give-and-take of life in the Theatre. Moreland could not remember the actual comeback employed. He suggested several known to himself from his own backstage undertakings. Whatever form Polly Duport's answer presented was amicably accepted by Pamela, but she did not abandon the subject.

'I'm sure you'll like working with Louis.'

'Who could doubt that?' said Polly Duport.

She spoke lightly, of course. Pamela was behaving as if so pleased about the whole arrangement, that she was even a little anxious that it might not all go as well as deserved.

'You mean because all women love Louis?'

'All the world, surely?'

That was a neat reply. Pamela recognized it as such. She smiled, rather sadly, even though the idea seemed to please her. There was an instant's pause. Moreland said this was the point when the atmosphere became very highly charged. One of the elements causing him to notice that was Stripling suddenly ceasing to reel off names and dates of vintage cars, which, until this tenseness made itself felt, he had, up to the last possible moment, continued to recite to Glober. Pamela spoke again, this time reflectively.

'Quite a lot of people have loved Louis.'

'They couldn't help it,' said Polly Duport.

Pamela laughed softly.

'I expect you know,' she said. 'Louis's stuffed a charming little cushion with hair snipped from the pussies of ladies he's had?'

Stevens said afterwards that he 'recognized that enquiry as signal for trouble starting'. Both he and Moreland, in whatever other respects their stories differed, stood shoulder to shoulder as regards those precise words of Pamela's. Where they disagreed was as to the manner in which Polly Duport took them. Stevens thought her outraged. Moreland's view was of her merely raising an eyebrow, so to speak, at the crudeness of phrasing. She was not in the least disconcerted by the eccentricity of the practice. Moreland was absolutely firm on that.

'Miss Duport showed not the slightest sign of wilting.'

He agreed with Stevens that she made no comment. No one else made any comment either. They just stood, 'as if hypnotized', Moreland said. Pamela laughed quietly to herself, giving the impression that thought of Glober's whim amused her. She turned towards him.

'You have, haven't you, Louis?'

'Have what, honey?'

Glober was absolutely relaxed. Stevens, again fancying other people as scandalized as himself, supposed him taken aback a moment before. If so, Glober was now completely recovered.

'Stuffed a cushion?'

'Sure.'

'As well as the ladies themselves?'

'Correct.'

Glober remained unrattled. Pamela laughed this time shrilly. She was working herself up to a climax, possibly a sexual one. Stevens said her behaviour reminded him of a scene made at a black-market night-club during the war, when she had started a sudden row, calling out to the people at the next table that he was impotent. Stevens never minded telling that sort of story about himself. It was one of his good points. In any case, even if at one time or another he had failed to satisfy Pamela, the charge was hard to substantiate, in her case not a specially damaging one. As Barnby used to say in that connexion, 'There's a boomerang aspect.' Glober remained equally undisturbed. His conversational tone matched Pamela's.

'I thought Miss Duport would just like to know what's expected. Perhaps you've been at work with the nail-scissors already, Louis? Anyway, it's a cheaper hobby than his.'

She pointed at Widmerpool. At this stage of the proceedings, Mrs Erdleigh seems to have taken charge. One imagines that, in her own incorporeal manner, she floated from the exterior of the group to its moral centre, wherever that might be. She appears to have laid a hand on Pamela's arm, a movement to suggest restraint. This was the interlude Moreland most enjoyed describing, what he called 'the Sorceress in the ascendant, Lady Widmerpool afflicted'. He said that Pamela, at contact of Mrs Erdleigh's fingers, shot out a look of intense malevolence, hesitating for a second in whatever she was about to say.

'My dear, beware. You are near the abyss. You stand at its utmost edge. Do not forget the warning I gave when you showed me your palm on that dread night.'

Stevens took the line later that neither second-sight nor magical powers were required to foretell the way things were moving. He may have been right. At the same time, however obscurely phrased, Mrs Erdleigh's presentiments were near the mark.

'The vessels of Saturn must not be shed to their dregs.'

Stevens, incapable himself of reproducing cabalistic dialectic, was no less impressed than Moreland, in whose repetition such specialized language lost none of its singularity. The unwonted nature of Mrs Erdleigh's invocations did not so much in themselves bewilder Stevens as in their practical effect on Pamela.

'The extraordinary thing was Pam more or less understood the stuff. That was how it looked. At least she stopped in her tracks for a second or two. I've never seen anything like it.'

Stevens was certainly taken aback, but the spell, as it turned out, was short lasting. Briefly quelled, Pamela recovered herself.

'Then you know?'

'Time yet remains to evade the ghastly cataract.'

'But you know?'

'Knowledge is the treasure of our unsealed fountains.'

Pamela gave what Stevens, in his flamboyant manner, called a 'terrible laugh'. Moreland admitted he, too, had found that laugh uncomfortable.

'Then I'll unseal them—and him.'

Mrs Erdleigh made some sort of motion with her hand, one of her mystic passes, conceivably no more than an emotional gesture, at which Pamela drew herself away, Moreland said, 'like a serpent'. Mrs Erdleigh issued her final warning.

'Court at your peril those spirits that dabble lasciviously with primeval matter, horrid substances, sperm of the world, producing monsters and fantastic things, as it is written, so that the toad, this leprous earth, eats up the eagle.'

Then Pamela began to scream with laughter again, shriller even than before.

'You know, you know, you know. You're a wonderful old girl. You don't have to be told Léon-Joseph croaked in bed with me. You know already. You know it's true, what nobody else quite believes.'

To what extent that plain statement was at once comprehended by those standing round remains uncertain. Probably the words did not wholly sink in until later. At moment of utterance they could have sounded all part of this extraordinary interchange, at once metaphorical and coarsely earthy. Some doubt existed, in due course, as to the exact phrases Pamela used. Whatever they were, positiveness of assertion was in no way diminished. She turned to Widmerpool again.

'You tell them about it. After all, you were there.'

She pointed at him, now speaking to the others.

'He thought I didn't spot he was watching through the curtain.'

Up to this stage of things, it appears, no one except Mrs Erdleigh had attempted to tackle Pamela. Mrs Erdleigh, so far as it went, having done that with success; spoken her warning, withdrew into the shadows. Widmerpool had remained all the time silent. Even now he did not at once answer this imputation on himself. He heard it to the end without speaking. Glober, uncharacteristically at a loss for the inspired wisecrack to ease the situation, was equally mute. After that, from the moment Pamela voiced these revelations, there is difficulty in pinpointing order of events, reliable continuity almost impossible to establish. Accounts given by Moreland and Stevens were at odds with each other. What appears to have taken place is that Pamela, dissatisfied at her words being received with comparative calm, at best so stunning that her bearers lacked reaction, chose another line of attack. It is no less possible she was building up, in any case, to that. Stevens, more at home this time with plain statements, rather than Mrs Erdleigh's oracular sayings, gave a convincing imitation of Pamela's hissing denunciation.

'You might think that enough. Watching your wife being screwed. Naturally it wasn't the first time. It was just the first time with a blubber-lipped Frenchman, who couldn't do it, then popped off. Of course he had arranged it all with Léon-Joseph beforehand—except the popping off—and in some ways it made things easier to have two of us to explain to the hotel people that Monsieur Ferrand-Sénéschal had just passed away, while we were visiting him. Then there's a tart called Pauline he has games with. He used to photograph her. I found the photographs. He didn't guess I'd meet Pauline too.'

Even then Widmerpool seems to have made no active protest. What really upset him was Pamela's next item.

'He's been telling everybody that he hasn't the slightest idea why they thought he was spying. I can explain that too, all his little under-the-counter Communist games. How he's got out of his trouble, in spite of their holding an interesting little note in his own handwriting. He's given the show away as often, and as far, as he dares. Unfortunately, he gave it away to his old pals, the Stalinists. The lot who are in now want to discredit some of those old pals. That's where Léon-Joseph comes in again. Poor old Ferrand-Sénéschal was playing just the same sort of game—as well as an occasional orgy, when he felt up to it. So what he did was to hand over all the information he possessed about Ferrand-Sénéschal, some of that quite spicy. That's why he was let off this time with a caution.'

Stevens, his mind, as I have said, adjusted to secret traffickings, his nature to physical violence, reported Pamela's words as cut short at Widmerpool seizing her by the throat. Moreland disagreed that anything so forcible had happened, at least immediately. Moreland thought Widmerpool had simply caught her arm, possibly struck her on the arm, attempting to silence his wife. The scene partook, in far more savage temper, of that enacted at the Huntercombes' ball, when, after Barbara Goring had cut his dance, Widmerpool grasped her wrist. The upshot then had been Barbara pouring sugar over his head. Widmerpool's onslaught this time might be additionally menacing, stakes of the game, so to speak, immensely higher; the physical protest was the same, final exasperation of nerves kept by a woman too long on edge. Another analogy with this earlier grapple was Pamela, no more daunted at the assault than Barbara by her clutched wrist, dragged herself away, screaming with laughter. The scene was not without its horrifying, morally upsetting, side. Moreland emphasized that; Stevens, too, in his own terms.

'In fact, I thought I was going to be sick,' Moreland said. 'Nausea might have been caused by my recent *crise*. If I had vomited, that would scarcely have added at all to other gruesome aspects.'

In emerging from this hand-to-hand affray with Pamela, possibly beaten off by her own counter-attack, Widmerpool seems to have stepped back without warning, retreating heavily on to Glober, who may himself have moved forward with an idea of separating husband and wife. Stevens thought Stripling had made some ponderous, ineffectual attempt to intervene. That is to some extent controverted by subsequent evidence. The view of Stevens was that Stripling had tried to catch Widmerpool round the waist, with the idea of restraining him, an act misattributed by Widmerpool to Glober. Both Moreland and Stevens agreed that, in the early stages of the Widmerpools' clinch, Glober took no special initiative. Perhaps, for once, he felt a certain diffidence, owing to the intricacies of his own position. Possibly, too, he was not unwilling to watch them fight it out on their own. There is some corroboration of Stripling playing a comparatively active part at this stage, but things moving so quickly, it was hard to know what he did, how long remained present.

What does seem fairly certain is that Widmerpool, stepping backwards, immediately supposed himself to have been in some manner curbed or coerced. Simultaneously, Mrs Erdleigh, foreseeing trouble when Stripling laid a hand on Widmerpool, may at once have spirited Stripling away by some more or less occult means. That would to some extent explain why Widmerpool, finding Glober, rather than Stripling, made an angry, presumably derogatory comment. It is possible, of course, Glober had indeed taken hold of him. They faced one another. That was when Glober hit Widmerpool.

'It's never a KO on these occasions,' said Stevens. 'I've seen it happen before, though not with men of quite that age. Widmerpool just staggered a bit, and put his hand up to his face. No question of dropping like a sack of potatoes, being out for the count, floored by a straight left, or right hook. That only happens professionally, or in the movies. The chief damage was his spectacles. They were knocked off his nose, and broke, so the midnight match had to be called off.'

No one watching denied the light had been too bad for the fracas to be critically assessed blow by blow. For this latter stage of the story, Stevens was probably the better equipped reporter. Moreland, his own nervous tensions by this time strongly reacting, not to mention the recent collapse he had suffered, was by now partly repelled by what was happening, partly lost in a fantastic world of his own, in which he seemed to be dreaming, rather than observing. He admitted that. Stevens, more down to earth in affecting to regret unachieved refinements of the boxing-ring, seems also to have been a little shocked, a condition vacillatingly induced, in this case, by the age of the antagonists. It is impossible to say how matters would have developed had not interruption taken place from outside. A large car drove jerkily down the terrace, the chauffeur slowing up from time to time, while he looked out of its window to ascertain the number of each house as he passed. He drew up just beside the spot where everyone was standing.

'None of you gentlemen Sir Leonard Short by any chance?'

Short stepped forward. Until then he had been inactive. He may have withdrawn completely, while the imbroglio was at its worst. Now he entered the limelight.

'Yes. I am Sir Leonard Short. I should like some explanation. I cannot in the least understand why this car should be so late.'

'I am a trifle after time, sir. Sorry about that. Went to the wrong address. There's a Terrace, and a Place, and a Gate. Very confusing.'

'This unpunctuality is not at all satisfactorv. I shall take the matter up.'

Short opened the door of the car with a consciously angry jerk. He brusquely indicated to Widmerpool that he was to get in, do that quickly. Short was in command. Stevens said one saw what he could be like in the Ministry. Widmerpool, who had already picked up the remains of his spectacles from the pavement, obeyed. Short followed, slamming the door. The car drove slowly down the terrace. Moreland said it was a good, an effective exit.

'When I looked round, the three of us—Audrey, Odo, myself—were alone. It was like a fairy story. The Sorceress was gone, taking off, no doubt, on her broomstick, the tall elderly vintage-car-bore riding pillion. Lady Widmerpool was gone too. That was the most mysterious. I have the impression she made some parting shot to the effect that none of us would see her again. The American tycoon and Polly Duport were almost out of sight, heading for the far end of the terrace. I don't exactly know how any of them faded away. I was feeling I might pass out again by then. Much relieved when Odo drove us home.'

6

Gwinnett wrote me a longish letter about a year later. By then he was living in the south of Spain. He referred only indirectly to the embarrassments ('to use no harsher term') suffered during the latter period of his London visit. He said he wrote chiefly to confirm details I had given him in Venice concerning Trapnel's habits, dress, turns of phrase. The notes he had then made seemed to conflict, in certain minor respects, with other sources of research. Apart from checking this Trapnel information, he just touched on the comparatively smooth manner in which dealings with the police, other persons more or less officially concerned, had passed off, including journalists. The briefness, relatively unsensational nature of the inevitable publicity, had impressed him too.

Pamela's name did not occur in the letter. At the same time, Gwinnett's emphasis on Trapnel, in what he wrote, may have been a formality, something to supply basis for communication, felt to be needed, of necessity delicate to express. The Trapnel enquiries were plainly not urgent. In their connexion, Gwinnett spoke of returning to his critical biography only after sufficient time had elapsed to ensure the dissertation's approach remained objective, ran no risk of being too much coloured by events that concerned himself, rather than his subject. Characteristically, he added that he still believed in 'aiming at objectivity, however much that method may be currently under fire'. As well as reducing immediate attention to the Trapnel book—though not his own fundamental interest in Trapnel himself—Gwinnett had abandoned academic life as a formal profession for the time being. He might return to the campus one of these days, he said, at the moment he only wanted to ruminate on that possibility. His new job, also teaching, was of quite a different order. He had become instructor of water-skiing at one of the Mediterranean seaside resorts of the Spanish coast. He said he liked the work pretty well.

Gwinnett also touched on Glober's death. The accident (on the Moyenne Corniche) had been one of those reflecting no marked blame on anyone, except that the car had been travelling at an unusually high speed. A friend of Glober's, a well-known French racing-driver, had been at the wheel. The story received very thorough press coverage. It was the sort of end Glober himself would have approved. Although the last time I saw him—of which I will speak later—he was with Polly Duport, *Match Me Such Marvel* was soon after abandoned as a project. No one seemed to know how far things had gone between them in personal relationship. The general view was that her profession, rather than love affairs, came first in her life. She may have been well out of the Glober assignment, because, about a month before Glober died, she acquired a good part (not the lead, one in some ways preferable to that) in a big 'international' film made by Clarini, Baby Wentworth's estranged husband.

I had the impression that Gwinnett and Glober had never much cared for one another. Beyond appreciating the obvious fact of their differing circumstances, I had no well defined comprehension of how they would have mutually reacted in their own country. In his letter, Gwinnett—like Gwinnett in the flesh—remained enigmatic, but he did comment on the way Death (he gave the capital letter) had been in evidence all round. There was nothing in the least obsessive in the manner he treated the subject. He did not, of course, disclose whether he had 'known' Pamela's condition before she came to the hotel. How could he disclose that?

The fact is, Gwinnett must have known. Otherwise there would have been no point in Pamela making the sacrifice of herself. Her act could only be looked upon as a sacrifice—of herself, to herself. So far as sacrifice went, Gwinnett could accept Pamela's, as much as Iphigenia's. The sole matter for doubt, in the light of inhibitions existing, not on one side only, was whether, at such a cost, all had been achieved. One hoped so. I wrote a letter back to Gwinnett. I told him how I had seen Glober, without having opportunity to speak with him, in the autumn of the previous year. I did not mention I had seen Widmerpool too on that occasion. It seemed better not. I always liked Gwinnett. I liked Glober too.

During the months that remained to Moreland, after the *Seraglio* party, we often used to talk about the story of Candaules and Gyges. He had never heard of the Jacky Bragadin Tiepolo. The hospital was on the south bank of the River.

'One might really have considered the legend as a theme for opera,' Moreland said. 'I mean, if other things had been equal.'

He lay in bed with an enormous pile of books beside him, books all over the bed too. He would quote from these from time to time. He was very taken with the idea of the comparison Pamela herself had made.

'Candaules can obviously be better paralleled than Gyges. Most men have a bit of Candaules in them. Your friend Widmerpool seems to have quite a lot, if he really liked exhibiting his wife. She was the Queen all right, if she's to be believed as being put on show. Also, in knowing that, herself intending to kill the King. Not necessarily physical killing, but revenge. Who was Gyges?'

'Hardly Ferrand-Sénéschal. In any case, through no fault of his own, he failed in that rôle. Others seemed to have enjoyed his Gyges-like privileges without dethroning the King. Candaules-Widmerpool continues to reign.'

'No, it doesn't really work,' said Moreland. 'All the same, it's a splendid fable of Love and Friendship—what you're liable to get from both—but the bearings are more general than particular, in spite of certain striking resemblances in this case. You really think she took the overdose, told him, then . . .'

'What else could have happened?'

'Literally dying for love.'

'Death happened to be the price. The sole price.'

'All other people's sexual relations are hard to imagine. The more staid the people, the more inconceivable their sexual relations. For some, the orgy is the most natural. On that night after the *Seraglio*, I was very struck by the goings-on with which Lady Widmerpool taxed her husband. I've next to no voyeurist tastes myself. I lack the love of power that makes the true voyeur. When I was in Marseilles, years ago, working on *Vieux Port*, there was a brothel, where, allegedly unknown to the occupants, you could look through to a room used by other clients. I never felt the smallest urge to buy a ticket. It was Donners's thing, you know.'

Moreland reflected a moment on what he had said. While still married to Matilda, he had, rather naturally, always avoided reference to that side of Sir Magnus's life. This was the first time, to my own knowledge, he had ever brought up the subject.

'Did I ever tell you how the Great Industrialist once confided to me that, when a young man—already doing pretty well financially—the doctors told him he had only a year to live? Of course that now seems the hell of a long time, in the light of one's own medical adviser's admonitions —not that I'm greatly concerned about keeping the old hulk afloat for another voyage or two, in the increasingly stormy seas of contemporary life, especially by drastic cutting down of the rum ration, and confining oneself to ship's biscuit, the régime recommended. That's by the way. The point is, I now find myself in a stronger position than in those days for vividly imagining what it felt like to be the man in the van Gogh pictures, so to speak Donners-on-the-brink-of-Eternity. Do you know what action Donners took? I'll tell you in his own words.'

Moreland adopted the flat lugubrious voice, conventionally used by those who knew Sir Magnus, to imitate—never very effectively, because inimitable—his manner of talking.

'I rented a little cottage in The Weald, gem of a place that brought a lump to the throat by its charm. There I settled down to read the best—only the best—of all literatures, English, French, German, Italian, Scandinavian.'

Moreland paused.

'I don't know why Spanish was left out. Perhaps it was included, and I've forgotten. Between these injections of the best literature, Donners listened to recordings of the best —only the best—music.'

'Interrupted by meals composed of the best food and the best wine?'

'Donners, as you must remember to your cost, like most power maniacs, was not at all interested in food and drink. Although far more in his line, I presume the best sexual sensations were also omitted. That would be not so much because their physical expression might hasten ringing down the curtain, as on account of the apodictic intention. Is "apodictic" the right word? I once used it with effect in an article attacking Honegger. The *villeggiatura* was very specifically designed to rise above coarser manifestations of the senses.'

'In the end did all this culture bring about a cure?'

'It wasn't the culture. The medicos made a mistake. They'd got the slides mixed, or the doctrine changed as to whatever Donners was suffering from being fatal. Something of the sort. Anyway they guessed wrong. Everything with Donners was right as rain. After spending a month or two at his dream cottage, he went back to making money, governing the country, achieving all-time records in utterance of conversational clichés, diverting himself in his own odd ways, all the many activities for which we used to know and love him. That went on until he was gathered in at whatever ripe old age he reached—not far short of eighty, so far as I remember.'

'Also, if one may say so, without showing much outward sign of having concentrated on the best literature of half-a-dozen nations.'

'Not the smallest. I was thinking that the other day while reading a translation of *I Promessi Sposi*. It sounds as if I were modelling myself on Donners, but I've got a lot of detective stories too. There was a special reason why *I Promessi Sposi* made me think of Donners, wonder whether it figured on his list, when he put on that final spurt to become cultured before *rigor mortis* set in. Like so many romantic novels, the story turns to some extent on the Villain upsetting the Hero by abducting the Heroine, unwilling victim threatened by the former's lust. That particular theme always misses the main point in the tribulations of Heroes in real life, where the trouble is that the Heroine, once abducted, is likely to be only too anxious to suffer a fate worse than death.'

'You mean Sir Magnus and his girls?'

For the moment I had not thought of Matilda.

'I meant when he abducted Matty, and married her. Not exactly a precise parallel with Manzoni, I admit, but you'll see what I mean.'

I did not know what to answer. This was the first time Moreland had ever spoken in such terms of Matilda leaving him for Sir Magnus Donners. He sighed, then laughed.

'I suppose she liked being married to him. She remained in that state without apparent stress. She knew him, of course, from their first round together. In his odd way, he must have been attached to her too. All the same, I believe her when she said—consistently said—that she herself always refused to play his games, the way some—presumably most—of his girls did. I mean his taste, like your friend Lord Widmerpool's, for watching other people make love.'

'He was a friend of Donners too, but I don't think Widmerpool got the habit there. What you say was certainly one of the things alleged. So it was true?'

'Let's approach the matter in the narrative technique of *The Arabian Nights*—the world where Donners really belonged—with a story. In fact, two stories. You must be familiar with both, favourite tales of my youth. To tell the truth, I've heard neither of them since the war. I've no doubt they survive in renovated shape.'

Moreland sighed again.

'The first yarn is of a man making his way home late one night in London. He finds two ladies whose car has broken down. It is in the small hours, not a soul abroad. The earliest version ever told me represented the two ladies—one young and beautiful, the other older, but very distinguished—as having failed to crank their car with the starting-handle. Thought of this vintage jewel would make the mouths water of those vintage-hounds at the *Seraglio*, and shows the antiquity of the legend. No doubt the help required was later adapted to more up-to-date mechanics. In yet earlier days, the horses of their phaeton were probably restive, or the carriage immobilized for some other contemporary reason. Anyway, the man gets the engine humming. The ladies are grateful, so much so, they ask him back to their home for a drink. He accepts. After placing the glass to his lips, he remembers no more. He is found the following day, unconscious, in the gutter of some alley in a deserted neighbourhood. He has been castrated.'

' A favourite anecdote of my father's.'

'Of all that generation. The other story concerns a man —I like to think the same man, before he was so cruelly incapacitated—who is accosted by a beautiful girl, again late at night, no one about. He thinks her a tart, though her manner does not suggest that. She says she wants not money, but love. At first he declines, but is at last persuaded by assurances that something about him attracted her. They adjourn to her flat, conveniently near. The girl leads the way up some stairs into a room, unexpectedly large, hung with dark curtains up to the ceiling. Set in the middle of the floor is a divan or bed. On it, in one form or another, perhaps several, they execute together the sexual act. When all is ended, the man, still incredulous, makes attempt to offer payment. The girl again refuses, saying the pleasure was its own reward. The man is so bewildered that, when he leaves, he forgets something—umbrella, hat, overcoat. Whatever it is, he remembers at the foot of the stairs. He remounts them. The door of the curtained room is shut—locked. Within, he can hear the babble of voices. A crowd of people must have emerged from behind the curtains. His sexual activities—possibly deviations—have been object of gratification for a concealed clientèle.'

'I've heard that one too.'

'We all have. It's gone the round for years. Just within the bounds of possibility, do you think?'

'Why was the situation complicated by refusal of payment?'

'To make sure he agreed. The appeal to male vanity may have added to the audience's fun. If he swallowed the declaration that she thought him so attractive, the display would not be over too quickly. Do you suppose Sir Magnus was behind the curtain?'

'He may have watched the castration too.'

'Some of his ladies would have been well qualified as surgeons,' said Moreland.

He lay back in the bed. I suppose he meant Matilda. Then he took a book from the stack of works of every sort piled up on the table beside him.

'I always enjoy this title—*Cambises, King of Percia: a Lamentable Tragedy mixed full of Pleasant Mirth.*'

'What's it like?'

'Not particularly exciting, but does summarize life.'

One day in November, having a lot of things to do in London, before returning to the country that afternoon, I went to see Moreland earlier than usual. It was bleak, rainy weather. When I crossed the River, by Westminster Bridge, two vintage cars were approaching the Houses of Parliament. Another passed before I reached the hospital. Some sort of rally was in progress, for others appeared. I watched them go over the bridge, then went on. Moreland had no one with him. Audrey Maclintick would turn up later in the morning, possibly someone else drop in. Usually these friends were musical acquaintances, unknown to myself. I reported that droves of vintage cars were traversing the Thames in convoy. Moreland reached out for one of the books again.

'I've been researching the subject, since quoting to you the Khayyám reference. Keats was an addict too. I found this yesterday.

Like to a moving vintage down they came,
Crowned with green leaves, and faces all on flame . . .
Within his car, aloft, young Bacchus stood . . .

What could be more specific than that? Interesting that you stood upright to drive those early models. One presumes the vintage, where the Grapes of Wrath were stored, was a tradesman's van of Edwardian date or earlier.'

He threw the book down, and chose another. He was full of nervous energy. The impression one derived of his state was not a good one.

'I've been haunted by the story of Lady Widmerpool. Have you ever read *The Dutch Courtezan*? Listen to her song—forgive me quoting so much verse. Things one reads become obsessional, while one lies here.

> The darke is my delight,
> So 'tis the nightingale's.
> My musicke's in the night,
> So is the nightingale's.
> My body is but little,
> So is the nightingale's.
> I love to sleep next prickle
> So doth the nightingale.

It makes her sound nice, but she wasn't really a very nice girl.'

'The Dutch Courtezan, or Pamela Widmerpool?'

'I meant the former. Lady Widmerpool had her failings too, if that evening was anything to go by. Still, it's impressive what she did. How some men get girls hotted up. No, what I was going to say about the Dutch Courtezan was—if there'd been time to spare—I might have toyed with doing a setting for her song, whatever she was like. One could have brought it into the opera about Candaules and Gyges perhaps. That would have made Gossage sit up.'

He sighed, more exhaustedly than regretfully, I thought. That morning was the last time I saw Moreland. It was also the last time I had, with anyone, the sort of talk we used to have together. Things drawing to a close, even quite suddenly, was hardly a surprise. The look Moreland had was the one people take on when a stage has been reached quite different from just being ill.

'I'll have to think about that song,' he said.

Drizzle was coming down fairly hard outside. I walked back over the bridge. Vintage cars still penetrated the traffic moving south. They advanced in small groups, separated from each other by a few minutes. More exaggerated in style, some of the period costumes assumed by drivers and passengers recalled the deerstalker cap, check ulster, General Conyers had worn, when, on the eve of the 'first' war, he had mastered the hill leading to Stonehurst, in his fabled motor-car. I wondered if the Conyers car had survived, to become a collector's piece of incalculable value to people like Jimmy Stripling. Here and there, from open hoodless vehicles, protruded an umbrella, sometimes of burlesque size or colour. I paused to watch them by the statue of Boadicea—Budicca, one would name her, if speaking with Dr Brightman—in the chariot. The chariot horses recalled what a squalid part the philosopher, Seneca, with his shady horse-dealing, had played in that affair. Below was inscribed the pay-off for the Romans.

Regions Ceasar never knew
Thy posterity shall sway.

Whatever else might be thought of that observation, the Queen was obviously driving the ultimate in British vintage makes. A liability suddenly presented itself, bringing such musings sharply to a close, demanding rapid decisions. Widmerpool, approaching from right angles, was walking along the Embankment in the direction of Parliament. It might have been possible to avoid him by crossing quickly in front, because, as usual when alone, his mind seemed bent on a problem. At that moment something happened to cause the attention of both of us to be concentrated all at once in the same direction. This was the loud, prolonged hooting of one of the vintage cars, which, having crossed Parliament Square, was approaching Westminster Bridge.

Widmerpool stopped dead. He stared for a second with irritated contempt. Then his face took on a look of enraged surprise. The very sight of the vintage cars appeared to stir in him feelings of the deepest disgust, uncontrollable resentment. That would not be altogether out of character. His deep absorption in whatever he was regarding gave opportunity to avoid him. Instead, I myself tried to trace the screeching noises to their source. They were issuing from the horn, whimsically shaped like a dragon's head, of a vintage car driven by a man wearing neo-Edwardian outfit, beside whom sat a young woman in normal dress for an outing. The reason for Widmerpool's outraged expression became clear, even then not immediately. I am not sure I should have recognized Glober, in his near-fancy-dress, had not Polly Duport been there too. My first thought, complacently self-regarding, had been to suppose they had seen me, hooted, if not in a mere friendly gesture, at least to signalize Glober's own glorious vintage progress. A similar explanation of why the horn had sounded offered itself to Widmerpool. He, too, thought they had hooted at him. He took for granted that Glober was hooting in derision.

The doubtful taste of such an act—given all the circumstances—had time to strike me, slightly appal me, before I became aware that the imputation was altogether unjust. Glober had noticed neither Widmerpool, nor myself. The crescendo of resonances on the dragon-horn had been prompted by Odo Stevens, with Jimmy Stripling, at that moment passing Glober's Boadicean machine, in one of similar date, though without a hood. Stevens, clad even more exotically than Glober, was driving; Stripling, wearing a simple cap and mackintosh, holding a large green umbrella over their heads. Widmerpool turned away from contemplation of the scene. He was red with anger. There could be no doubt he supposed himself the object of ridicule. All this had taken a moment or two to absorb. Escape was now out of the question. We were only a few yards apart. He could not fail to see me. I spoke first, as the best form of defence.

'I'm glad I'm not driving a long distance on a day like this in a car liable to break down.'

That was not a particularly interesting nor profound observation. Nothing better came to mind to bridge the moments before mutation of the traffic lights allowed evasion by crossing the road. Widmerpool accepted this opening by giving an equally flat reply.

'I'm on my way to the House of Lords.'

The statement carried conviction. The block of flats in which he lived was only a few minutes walk from where we stood. Riverside approach to Parliament would be preferable to the Whitehall route. He showed outward mark of the stresses endured. His body was thinner, the flesh of his face hanging in sallow pouches. So deeply, so all envelopingly, was he dressed in black, that he looked almost ecclesiastical.

'After what I've been through, I think it my duty to show I can rise above personal attack—and, I might add, personal misfortune.'

I made some acknowledgment, one not conspicuously glowing, of these sentiments. Short of turning on one's heel, which would have been overdramatic, it was still impossible to get away. Widmerpool, for his part, appeared quite pleased at this opportunity for uttering a short address on his own situation, possibly some sort of informal rehearsal of material later to be used in a speech.

'I do not propose for one moment to abandon the cause of genuine internationalism. It has been said that a presumption of innocence is a peculiarity of bourgeois liberal law. My own experience of bourgeois liberal law is the reverse. From the first, in my own case, there was a presumption of culpability. Fortunately, I was in a position to rebut my accusers. In the Upper House, wherever else I am called upon to serve the purposes of political truth, I shall continue to assail the limitations of contemporary empiricism, and expose the bankruptcy of cold-war propagandists.'

He sounded more than a little unhinged. Widmerpool had not finished. Without altering his tone, he changed the subject.

'The squalor—the squalor of that hotel.'

Traffic, beginning to slow up at the amber, came at last to a halt at red. Grinding noises provided exemption from need to produce an audible reply. Widmerpool showed no sign of expecting anything of the sort.

'The sheer ingratitude,' he said.

'I must be getting on. There's a lot to do. I want to get home before dark.'

He was never greatly interested in other people's doings. I added some platitude about the evenings drawing in. Widmerpool did not question the notation of the days. He turned to wait for the other lights to change, enabling him to proceed towards his destination. I crossed Whitehall swiftly. Another burst of vintage cars was advancing towards the bridge.

Hearing Secret Harmonies

for
Robert Conquest

1

Duck, flying in from the south, ignored four or five ponderous explosions over at the quarry. The limestone cliff, dominant oblong foreground structure, lateral storeyed platforms, all coral-pink in evening sunlight, projected towards the higher ground on misty mornings a fading mirage of Babylonian terraces suspended in haze above the mere; the palace, with its hanging gardens, distantly outlined behind a group of rather woodenly posed young Medes (possibly young Persians) in Mr Deacon's *Boyhood of Cyrus*, the picture's recession equally nebulous in the shadows of the Walpole-Wilsons' hall. Within this hollow bed of the stream the whole range of the quarry was out of sight, except for where the just visible peak of an escarpment of spoil shelved up to the horizon's mountainous coagulations of floating cottonwool, a density of white cloud perforated here and there by slowly opening and closing loopholes of the palest blue light. It was a warm windy afternoon. Midday thunder had not brought back rain. Echoes of the blasting, counterfeiting a return of the storm, stirred faintly smouldering wartime embers; in conjunction with the duck, recalling an argument between General Bobrowski and General Philidor about shooting wildfowl. The angular formation taken by the birds (mimed by Pole and Frenchman with ferocious gestures) was now neatly exhibited, as the flight spiralled down deliberately, almost vertically, settling among reeds and waterlilies at the far end of the pool. Two columns of smoke rose above a line of blue-black trees thickly concentrated together beyond the dusty water, scrawling slate-coloured diagonals across the ceiling of powdered grit, inert and translucent, that swam above the screened workings. Metallic odours, like those of a laboratory, drifted down from a westerly direction, overlaying a nearer-by scent of fox.

'Here's one,' said Isobel. 'At least he's considering the matter.'

After the dredging of crevices lower down the brook, expectation was almost at an end. The single crayfish emerging from under the stones was at once followed by two more. Luck had come at last. The three crayfish, swart miniature lobsters of macabrely knowing demeanour, hung about doubtfully in a basin of mud below the surface. The decision was taken by the crayfish second to enter. He led the way with fussy self-importance, the other two bustling along behind. The three of them clawed a hold on to opposite sides of the outer edge of the iron rim supporting the trap's circle of wire-netting submerged at the water's edge, all at the same moment hurrying across the expanse of mesh towards a morsel of flyblown meat fastened at the centre.

'Do you want to hold the string, Fiona?' asked Isobel. 'Wait a second. A fourth has appeared.'

'Give it to me.'

The dark young man spoke with authority. Presented under the name of Scorpio Murtlock, he was by definition established as bossing the other three. As Fiona made no attempt, either as woman or niece, to assert prior right, Isobel handed him the lengths of twine from which the trap dangled. His status, known on arrival, required observation to take in fully. The age was hard to estimate. He could be younger than Barnabas Henderson, the other young man, thought to be in his later twenties. Fiona herself was twenty-one, so far as I could remember. The girl introduced as Rusty (no surname attached) looked a battered nineteen. I felt relieved that crayfish, as such, had not proved illusory, a mere crazy fancy, recognizable from the start as typical of those figments of a superannuated imagination older people used to put forward when one was oneself young. Four crayfish had undeniably presented themselves, whether caught or not hardly mattered. In any case the occasion had been elevated, by what had been said earlier, to a level above that of a simple sporting event. This higher meaning had to be taken into consideration too.

'The trap must be hauled up gently, or they walk off again,' said Isobel. 'The frustration of the Old Man and the Sea is nothing to it.'

Murtlock, still holding the strings, gathered round him the three-quarter-length bluish robe he wore, a kind of smock or kaftan, not too well adapted to country pursuits. He went down on one knee by the bank. Sweeping out of his eyes handfuls of uncared-for black hair, he leant forward at a steep angle to inspect the crustaceans below, somehow conveying the posture of a priest engaged in the devotions of a recondite creed. He was small in stature, but impressive. The shining amulet, embossed with a hieroglyph, that hung round his throat from a necklace of beads, splashed into the water. He allowed it to remain for a second below the surface, while he gazed fixedly into the depths. Then, having waited for the fourth crayfish to become radically committed to the decomposing snack, he carefully lifted the circle of wire, outward and upward as instructed, from where it rested among pebbles and weed under the projecting lip of the bank.

'The bucket, Barnabas—the gloves, one of you.'

The order was sternly given, like all Murtlock's biddings.

Barnabas Henderson fumbled with the bucket. Fiona held out the gardening gloves. Rusty, grinning to herself uneasily, writhed her body about in undulating motions and hummed. Murtlock snatched a glove. Fitting on the fingers adroitly, without setting down the trap, by now dripping over his vestment-like smock, he picked a crayfish off the wire, dropping the four of them one by one into a pail already prepared quarter-full with water. His gestures were deft, ritualistic. He was totally in charge.

This gift of authority, ability to handle people, was the characteristic attributed by hearsay. At first the outward trappings, suggesting no more than a contemporary romantic vagabondage, had put that reputation in doubt. Now one saw the truth of some at least of what had been reported of him; that the vagabond style could include ability to control companions—notably Fiona—as well as crayfish and horses; the last skill demonstrated when they had arrived earlier that day in a small horse-drawn caravan. Murtlock's rather run-of-the-mill outlandishness certainly comprised something perceptibly priestly about it. That was over and above the genuflexion at the water's edge. There was an essentially un-sacerdotal side, one that suggested behaviour dubious, if not actively criminal. That aspect, too, was allied to a kind of fanaticism. Such distinguishing features, more or less, were to be expected after stories about him. A novice in a monastery of robber monks might offer not too exaggerated a definition. His eyes, pale, cold, unblinking, could not be denied a certain degree of magnetism.

Barnabas Henderson was another matter. He was similarly dressed in a blue robe, somewhat more ultramarine in shade, a coin-like object hanging from his neck too, hair in ringlets to the shoulder, with the addition of a Chinese magician's moustache. His spectacles, large and square, were in yellow plastic. The combination of moustache and spectacles created an effect not unlike those one-piece cardboard contraptions to be bought in toyshops, moustache and spectacles held together by a false nose. That was unfair. Henderson was not a badlooking young man, if lacking Murtlock's venturesome bearing, as well as his tactile competence. Henderson's garments, no less eclectically chosen, were newer, a trifle cleaner, less convincingly part of himself. The genre was carried off pretty well by Murtlock, justly heralded as handsome. Henderson's milder features remained a trifle apologetic, his personality, in contrast, not by nature suited to the apparent intent. He was alleged to have abandoned a promising career as an art-dealer to follow this less circumscribed way of life. Perhaps that was a wrong identification, the new life desirable because additionally circumscribed, rather than less so. There could be little doubt that Henderson owned the caravan, painted yellow, its woodwork dilapidated, but drawn by a sound pair of greys. Probably Henderson was paying for the whole jaunt.

The girls, too, were dressed predominantly in blue. Rusty, whose air was that of a young prostitute, had a thick crop of dark red hair and deep liquid eyes. These were her good points. She was tall, sallow-skinned, hands large and coarse, her collar-bones projecting. Having maintained total silence since arrival, except for intermittent humming, she could be assessed only by looks, which certainly suggested extensive sexual experience.

Fiona, daughter of Isobel's sister Susan and Roddy Cutts, was a pretty girl ('Fiona has a touch of glamour,' her first-cousin, Jeremy Warminster, had said), small, fair-skinned, baby-faced, with her father's sandy hair. Otherwise she more resembled her mother, without the high spirits (an asset throughout her husband's now closed political career) brought out in Susan by any gathering that showed signs of developing into a party. Susan Cutts's occasional bouts of melancholy seemed latterly to have descended on her daughter in the form of an innate lugubriousness, which had taken the place of Fiona's earlier tomboy streak.

The upper halves of both girls were sheathed in T-shirts, inscribed with the single word HARMONY. Rusty wore jeans, Fiona a long skirt that swept the ground. Dragging its flounces across the damp grass, she looked like a mediaeval lady from the rubric of an illuminated Book of Hours, a remote princess engaged in some now obsolete pastime. The appearance seemed to demand the addition of a wimple and pointed cap. This antique air of Fiona's could have played a part in typecasting Murtlock as a reprobate boy-monk. Equally viewed as whimsical figures in a Tennysonian-type Middle Age, the rôles of Rusty and Henderson were indeterminate; Rusty perhaps a recreant knight's runaway mistress disguised as a page; Henderson, an unsuccessful troubadour, who had mislaid his lute. This fanciful imagery was not entirely disavowed by the single word motto each girl bore on her breast, a lettered humour that could well have featured in the rubric of a mediaeval manuscript, inscribed on banner or shield of a small figure in the margin. The feet of all four were bare, and—another mediaeval touch—long unwashed.

Fiona (whose birth commemorated her parents' reconciliation after Roddy Cutts's misadventure with the cipherine during war service in Persia) had given a fair amount of trouble since her earliest years. This was in contrast with her two elder brothers: Jonathan, married, several children, rising rapidly in a celebrated firm of fine arts auctioneers; Sebastian, still unmarried, much addicted to girlfriends, though no less ambitious than his brother, 'in computers'. Both the Cutts sons were tireless conversationalists in their father's manner, uncheckable, informative, sagacious, on the subject of their respective jobs. Fiona, who had run away from several schools (been required to leave at least one), had strengthened her status as a difficult subject by catching typhoid abroad when aged fourteen or fifteen, greatly alarming everyone by her state. Abandonment of boisterous forms of rebellion, in favour of melancholic opposition, dated from the unhappy incident with the electrician, handsome and good-natured, but married and not particularly young. Since then nothing had gone at all well. Fiona's educational dislodgements had not impaired education sufficiently to prevent her from getting a living on the outskirts of 'glossy' journalism.

No one seemed to know where exactly Fiona had run across Scorpio Murtlock, nor the precise nature of this most recent association. It was assumed—anyway by her parents—to include cohabitation. Her uncle, Isobel's brother, Hugo Tolland, cast doubts on that. Hugo's opinions on that sort of subject were often less than reliable, a taste for exaggeration marring the accuracy that is always more interesting than fantasy. In this case, Hugo coming down on the side of scepticism—on grounds that, if Murtlock liked sex at all, he preferred his own—the view had to be taken into consideration. How Murtlock lived seemed as unknowable as his sexual proclivities. The Cutts parents, Roddy and Susan, always very 'good' about their daughter's vagaries, continued to be so, accepting the Murtlock régime with accustomed resignation.

The member of the family best equipped to speak with anything like authority of Fiona, and her friends, was Isobel's unmarried sister, Blanche Tolland, who had, in fact, rung up to ask if we were prepared to harbour a small caravan in our field for one night, its destination unspecified. The easygoing unambitious nature that had caused Blanche, in early days, to be regarded—not wholly without reason—as rather dotty, had latterly given her a certain status in dealing with a generation considerably younger than her own; Blanche's unemphatic personality providing a diplomatic contact, an agency through which dealings could be negotiated by either side without prejudice or loss of face. This good nature, allied to a deep-seated taste for taking trouble in often uncomfortable circumstances, led to employment in an animal sanctuary, a job that had occupied Blanche for a long time by now.

'Blanchie meets the animals on their own terms,' said her sister, Norah, also unmarried. 'The young people too. She really runs a sanctuary for both.'

'Do you mean the young people think of Blanchie as an animal, or as another young person?' asked her brother.

'Which do you suppose, Hugo?' said Norah sharply. 'It's true they might easily mistake you for an ape.'

Hugo, rather a sad figure after the death of his partner, Sam, could still arouse the mood in Norah that had caused her to observe he would 'never find a place for himself in the contemporary world'. Working harder than ever in the antique shop, now he was on his own, Hugo's career could be regarded, in general, as no less contemporary than anyone else's. Sam (said to have begun life as a seaman) had remained surnameless (like Rusty) to the end, so far as most of the family were concerned. It was during this exchange in Norah's Battersea flat that I first heard the name of Scorpio Murtlock.

'Blanchie says Fiona's turned over a new leaf under the influence of this new young man, Scorp Murtlock. Sober, honest, and an early riser, not to mention meditations. No hint of a drug. It's a kind of cult. Religious almost. Harmony's the great thing. They have a special greeting they give one another. I can't remember the exact words. Quite impressive. They don't wash much, but then none of the Cutts family ever did much washing.'

'How did he come to be christened Scorp?' I asked.

'Short for Scorpio, his Zodiac sign.'

'What's he like?'

'Blanche says attractive, but spooky.'

At this point Hugo showed unexpected knowledge.

'I didn't know Fiona's latest was Scorpio Murtlock. I've never met him, but I used to hear about him several years ago, when he was working in the antique business. Two fellow antique dealers told me they had engaged a very charming young assistant.'

Norah was not prepared for Hugo to take over entirely in the Murtlock field.

'Blanchie says he has a creepy side too.'

'You can be creepy and attractive. There are different forms of creepiness, just as there are different forms of attractiveness.'

'The antique dealers are presumably queers?'

'Even so, that's hardly the point. Murtlock made himself immensely useful in the business—which ranges from garden furniture to vintage cars—so useful that the owners suddenly found they were being relegated to a back place themselves. Murtlock was slowly but surely elbowing them out.'

'Did their passion remain unsatisfied?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Unlike you, Hugo, not to be sure about that sort of thing.'

'One of them implied he'd brought off something. That was not the rather nervy one. The nervy one complained he had begun to feel like a man bewitched. Those were his own words. The unnervy one agreed after a while that there was something uncomfortable about Murtlock. They were wondering how best to solve their problem, when Murtlock himself gave notice. He'd found someone more profitable to work over. His new patron—a man of some age, even older than oneself, if that can be imagined—was apparently more interested in what Blanchie calls Murtlock's spooky side than in his sex appeal. They met during some business deal.'

'Murtlock doesn't sound a particularly desirable friend for Fiona.'

'Blanche says he makes her behave herself.'

'Even so.'

'Susan and Roddy are thankful for small mercies.'

'Taking exercise, meditation, no alcohol, sound quite large ones.'

'They sound to me like the good old Simple Life,' said Hugo. 'Still it's a relief one won't catch one's foot in a hypodermic when next at Blanchie's cottage.'

'You always talk about your nephews and nieces in the way Aunt Molly used to talk about you,' said Norah.

Hugo was not at all discomposed by the comparison.

'And you, Norah dear—and you. Think how Aunt Molly used to go on about you and Eleanor Walpole-Wilson. As a matter of fact, I quite agree I've turned into Aunt Molly. I'd noticed it myself. Old age might have transformed one into something much worse. Everybody liked her. I flatter myself I'm much what she'd have been had she remained unmarried.'

'I shall begin to howl, Hugo, if you talk like that about poor Eleanor.'

The Norah Tolland/Eleanor Walpole-Wilson ménage had not been revived after the war, their ways dividing, though they remained friends. Norah, never so fulfilled as during her years as driver in one of the women's services, had taken a job with a small car-hire firm, where she continued to wear a peaked cap and khaki uniform. Later she became one of the directors of the business, which considerably enlarged itself in scope, Norah always remaining available to drive, especially if a long continental trip were promised. Eleanor Walpole-Wilson, for her part, securing a seat on the Urban District Council, became immersed in local politics. Of late years she had embarked on a close relationship with a Swedish woman-doctor. Staying with this friend in Stockholm, Eleanor had been taken ill and died, bequeathing to Norah, with a small legacy, a pair of short-tempered pugs. Sensing mention of their former mistress, this couple now began to rush about the flat, snuffling and barking.

'Oh, shut up, pugs,' said Norah.

The commendation accorded to Scorpio Murtlock—that he could keep Fiona in order—limited in compass, was not to be lightly regarded, if valid. It was reiterated by Blanche, when she rang up about the caravan party. Never very capable of painting word pictures, she was unable to add much additional information about Murtlock, nor did she know anything, beyond her name, of the girl Rusty. Barnabas Henderson, on the other hand, possessed certain conventional aspects, notably a father killed in the war, who had left enough money for his son to buy a partnership in a small picture-dealing business; a commercial venture abandoned to follow Murtlock into the wilderness.

Blanche's assurance of comparatively austere behaviour—what Hugo called the good old Simple Life—had been to some extent borne out, on the arrival of Fiona and her friends, by refusal of all offers of food and drink. Provided with a bivouac under some trees, on the side of the field away from the house, they at once set about various minor tasks relative to settling in caravan and horses, behaviour that seemed to confirm the ascription of a severe standard of living. When, early in the afternoon, Isobel and I went to see how they were getting on, they had come to the end of these dispositions. Earlier negotiations about siting the caravan had been carried out with Fiona, Murtlock standing in silence with folded arms. Now he showed more sign of emerging as the strong personality he had been billed.

'Is there anything you'd all like to do?'

Fiona had been addressed. Murtlock took it upon himself to answer.

'Too late in the year to leap the fires.'

He spoke thoughtfully, without any touch of jocularity. This was evidently the line Blanche had denominated as spooky. Since we had agreed to put up the caravan, there was no reason, if kept within bounds, why Beltane should not be celebrated, or whatever it was he had in mind.

'We could make a bonfire.'

'Too near the solstice.'

'Something else then?'

'A sacrifice.'

'What sort?'

'One in Harmony.'

'Like Fiona's shirt?'

'Yes.'

He did not laugh. He did not even smile. This affirmative somehow inhibited further comment in a frivolous tone, imposing acquiescence in not treating things lightly, even Fiona's shirt. At the same time I was uncertain whether he was not simply teasing. On the face of it teasing seemed much more likely than all this assumed gravity. Nevertheless uncertainty remained, ambivalence of manner leaving one guessing. No doubt that was intended, after all a fairly well recognized method of establishing one sort of supremacy. The expressed aim—that things should be in Harmony—could not in itself be regarded as objectionable. It supported the contention that Fiona's latest set of friends held to stringent moral values of one sort or another. How best to achieve an act of Harmony was another matter.

'Harmony is not easy to define.'

'Harmony is Power—Power is Harmony.'

'That's how you see it?'

'That's how it is.'

He smiled. When Murtlock smiled the charm was revealed. He was a boy again, making a joke, not a fanatical young mystic. At the same time he was a boy with whom it was better to remain on one's guard.

'How are we going to bring off an act of Harmony on a Saturday afternoon?'

'Through the Elements.'

'What elements?'

'Fire, Air, Earth, Water.'

The question had been a foolish one. He smiled again. We discussed various possibilities, none of them very sparkling. The other three were silent throughout all this. Murtlock seemed to have transformed them into mere shadows of himself.

'Is there water near here? I think so. There is the feel of water.'

'A largish pond within walking distance.'

'We could make a water sacrifice.'

'Drown somebody?'

He did not answer.

'We could go crayfishing,' said Isobel.

Since demands made by improvisation at a moment's notice of the necessary tackle for this sport were relatively onerous, the proposal marked out Isobel, too, as not entirely uninfluenced by Murtlock's spell.

'The crayfish are in the pond?'

'In the pools of the brook that runs out of it.'

He considered.

'It can't be exactly described as a blood sport,' I added.

I don't know why inserting that lame qualification seemed required, except that prejudice against blood sports could easily accord with an outlook to be inferred from people dressed in their particular style. If asked to rationalize the comment, that would have been my pretext. Aggressive activities against crayfish might be, by definition, excluded from an afternoon's programme devoted to Harmony. Who could tell? Harmony was also Power, he said. Power would be exercised over crayfish, if caught, but possibly the wrong sort of Power. He pretended to be puzzled.

'You mean that without blood there is no vehicle for the spirit?'

'I mean that you might not like killing.'

'I do not kill, if not killed.'

He seemed glad to have an opportunity to make that statement, gnomic to say the least. It sounded like a favourite apophthegm of a luminary of the cult to which they all belonged, the familiar ring of Shortcuts to the Infinite, Wisdom of the East, Analects of the Sages. For some reason the pronouncement seemed also one recently brought to notice. Had I read it not long before in print? The Murtlock standpoint, his domination over Fiona and the others, was becoming a little clearer in a certain sense, if remaining obscure in many others.

'I don't think we'll be killed. Deaths crayfishing are comparatively rare.'

'You spoke not of death, but of killing.'

'The latter is surely apt to lead to the former?'

'There is killing—death is an illusion.'

This was no help so far as deciding how the afternoon was to be spent.

'The point is whether or not you would consider the killing of crayfish to be in Harmony?'

Once more his smile made me feel that it was I, rather than he, who was being silly.

'Not all killing is opposed to Harmony.'

'Let's kill crayfish then.'

The odd thing was that he managed never to be exactly discourteous, nor even embarrassing, when he talked in this way. It was always close to a joke, though a joke not quite brought to birth. At least you did not laugh. You accepted on its own merits what he said, unintelligible or the reverse. I wondered—had not some forty years stretched between us—

whether, as a contemporary, I should have been friends with Scorpio Murtlock. Indications were at best doubtful. That negative surmise was uninfluenced by his manner of talking, mystic and imperative, still less the style of dress. Both might have been acceptable at that age in a contemporary. In any case fashions of one generation, moral or physical, are scarcely at all assessable in terms of another. They cannot be properly equated. So far as they could be equated, the obstacles set up against getting on with Murtlock were in themselves negligible.

The objection to him, if objection there were, was the sense that he brought of something ominous. He would have been ominous—perhaps more ominous—in a City suit, the ominous side of him positively mitigated by a blue robe. His accents, liturgical, enigmatic, were also consciously rough, uncultivated. The roughness was imitated by Fiona and Henderson, when they remembered to do so. Rusty never uttered. No doubt Murtlock's chief attraction was owed to this ominousness, something more sexually persuasive than good looks, spectacular trappings, even sententious observations. Certainly Fiona was showing an altogether uncharacteristic docility in allowing, without any sign of dispute or passive disapproval, someone else to make all the going. It might be assumed that she and Rusty were 'in love' with Murtlock. Probably Henderson shared that passion. Murtlock himself showed no sign of being emotionally drawn to any of them. In the light of what had been reported, it would have been surprising had he done so.

'What do we need?'

He spoke this time in a tone of practical enquiry.

'A circle of wire mesh kept together by a piece of iron. Something like the rim of an old saucepan or fryingpan does well.'

'The circle, figure of perfection—iron, abhorred by demons.'

'Those aspects may help too.'

'They will.'

'Then a piece of preferably rotting meat.'

'Nothing far different from a sacrifice for a summoning.'

'In this case summoning crayfish.'

'Crayfish our sacrifice, rather.'

The requirements took a little time to get into order. A morsel of doubtful freshness was found among bones set aside for stock. The four of them joined in these preparations usefully, shaping the wire-netting, measuring out cords, fixing the tainted bait. When the trap was assembled Murtlock swung it gently through the air. Even in undertaking this trial of weight, which showed grasp of the sport, there was something of the swaying of a priest's censer.

'And now?'

'The crayfish beds, such as they are, lie about a quarter of a mile away.'

The brook flowed through fields of poorish pasture, tangled with undergrowth as they sloped down more steeply to the line of the stream. Once the trap was slung among its stones Murtlock seemed satisfied. If the others were bored, they did not dare show it during the long period when there was no sign of a catch. Conversation altogether flagged. Murtlock himself possessed to a marked degree that characteristic—perhaps owing something to hypnotic powers—which attaches to certain individuals; an ability to impose on others present the duty of gratifying his own whims. It seemed to matter that Murtlock should get what he wanted—in this case crayfish—while, if the others were bored, that was their affair. No particular obligation was laid on oneself to prevent it. When at last the circle of iron showed signs of possessing the supposedly magical properties he had attributed, four crayfish caught, this modest final success, obviously pleasing to Murtlock, was for some reason exceptionally pleasing to oneself too. By then afternoon was turning to evening. Again he took the initiative.

'We'll go back now. There are things to do at the caravan. Barnabas must water the horses.'

'Sure you won't dine?'

'Yes.'

'I can easily run up something,' said Isobel.

'The day is one of limited fast.'

Fiona had not explained that when the dinner invitation had been issued some hours earlier.

'Nothing else you want?'

'No.'

'A bottle of wine?'

Then I remembered that they abstained from alcohol.

'No—have you a candle?'

'We can lend you an electric torch.'

'Only for a simple fire ritual.'

'Come back to the house. We'll look for candles.'

'Barnabas can fetch it, if needed. It may not be.'

'Don't start a forest fire, will you?'

He smiled at that.

'Only the suffusion of a few laurel leaves.'

'As you see, laurel is available.'

'Pine-cones?'

'There are one or two conifers up the road to the right.'

'We'll go back then. Take the bucket, Barnabas. The gloves are on the ground, Fiona. Rusty, carry the trap—no, Rusty will carry it.'

None of them was allowed to forget for a moment that he or she was under orders. When the crayfishing paraphernalia had been brought together we climbed the banks that enclosed this length of the stream. After crossing the fields the path led through trees, the ground underfoot thick with wild garlic. At one point, above this Soho restaurant smell, the fox's scent briefly reasserted itself. Here Murtlock stopped. Gazing towards a gap between the branches of two tall oaks, he put up a hand to shade his eyes. The others imitated his attitude. In his company they seemed to have little or no volition of their own. Murtlock's control was absolute. The oak boughs formed a frame for one of the blue patches of sky set among clouds, now here and there flecked with pink. Against this irregular quadrilateral of light, over the meadows lying in the direction of Gauntlett's farm a hawk hovered; then, likely to have marked down a prey, swooped off towards the pond. Murtlock lowered his arm. The others copied him.

'The bird of Horus.'

'Certainly.'

'Do you often see hawks round here?'

He asked the question impatiently, almost angrily.

'This particular one is always hanging about. He was near the house yesterday, and the day before. He's a well-known local personality. Perhaps a retired kestrel from a 'Thirties poem.'

The allusion might be obscure to one of his age. So much the better. Obscurity could be met with obscurity. A second later, either on the hawk's account, or from some other disturbing factor in their vicinity—the quarry end of the pond—the duck flew out again. Rising at an angle acute as their former descent, the flight took on at once the disciplined wedge-shaped configuration used in all duck transit, leader at apex, main body following behind in semblance of a fan. Mounting higher, still higher, soaring over copper and green beechwoods, the birds achieved considerable altitude before a newly communicated command wheeled them off again in a fresh direction. Adjusting again to pattern, they receded into creamy cavernous billows of distant cloud, beyond which the evening sun drooped. Into this opaque glow of fire they disappeared. To the initiated, I reflected—to ancient soothsayers—the sight would have been vaticinatory.

'What message do the birds foretell?'

Even allowing for that sort of thing being in his line, Murtlock's question, put just at the moment when the thought was in my own mind, brought a slight sense of shock. He uttered the words softly, as if now gratified at being able to accept my train of thought as coherent, in contrast with earlier demur on the subject of death and killing. Even with intimates that sort of implied knowledge of what is going on in one's head, recognition of unspoken thoughts passing through the mind—in its way common enough—can be a little disconcerting, much more so to be thought-read by this strange young man. The ducks' coalescence into the muffled crimsons of sunset had been dramatic enough to invoke reflection on mysterious things, and such a subject as ornithomancy was evidently of the realm to which he aspired. The process was perhaps comparable with the intercommunication practised by the birds themselves, their unanimous change of direction, well ordered regrouping, rapid new advance, disciplined as troops drilling on the square; more appositely, aircraft obeying a radioed command.

This well disciplined aspect of duck behaviour must have been partly what entranced the generals, when with such fervour both of them had demonstrated the triangular formation. The evening came back vividly. Duties of the day over—I had been conducting officer with a group of Allied military attachés—we had been sitting in the bar of the little Normandy auberge where we were billeted. Bobrowski had almost upset his beer in demonstrating the precise shape of the flight. Philidor was calmer. Some years after the war—he was in exile, of course, from his own country—Bobrowski had been knocked down by a taxi, and killed. Oddly enough Philidor, too, had died in a car accident—so a Frenchman at their Embassy said—having by then attained quite high rank. Perhaps such deaths were appropriate to men of action, better than a slow decline. Aware that a more than usually acute consciousness of human mortality had descended, I wondered for a moment whether Murtlock was responsible for that sensation. It was not impossible.

'I was thinking of the Roman augurs too.'

'They also scrutinized the entrails of animals for prophecy.'

He added that with a certain relish.

'Sometimes—as the Bard remarks—the sad augurs mocked their own presage.'

One had to fight back. Murtlock made no comment. I hoped the quotation had floored him. The rest of the walk back to where the caravan was parked took place in silence and without incident. At the caravan our ways would divide, if the four of them were not to enter the house. Separation was delayed by the appearance of Mr Gauntlett advancing towards us.

'Good afternoon, Mr Gauntlett.'

Mr Gauntlett, wearing a cowslip in his buttonhole, greeted us. He showed no sign whatever of thinking our guests at all unusually dressed, nodding to them in a friendly manner, without the least curiosity as to why the males should be wearing blue robes.

'Happen you've seen my old bitch, Daisy, this way, Mr Jenkins? Been gone these forty-eight hours, and I don't know where she's to.'

'We haven't, Mr Gauntlett.'

A farmer, now retired as close on eighty, Mr Gauntlett lived in an ancient tumbledown farmhouse not far away, where—widower, childless, sole survivor of a large family—he 'did for himself', a life that seemed to suit him, unless rheumatics caused trouble. His house, associated by local legend with a seventeenth-century murder, was said to be haunted. Mr Gauntlett himself, though he possessed a keen sense of the past, and liked to discuss such subjects as whether the Romans brought the chestnut to Britain, always asserted that the ghosts had never inconvenienced him. This taste for history could account for a habit of allowing himself archaisms of speech, regional turns of phrase, otherwise going out of circulation. In not at all disregarding the importance of style in facing life—even consciously histrionic style—Mr Gauntlett a little resembled General Conyers. They both shared the same air of distinction, firmness, good looks that resisted age, but above all this sense of style. Mr. Gauntlett had once told me that during service (in the first war) with the Yeomanry, he had found himself riding through the Khyber Pass, a background of vast mountains, bare rocks, fierce tribesmen, that seemed for some reason not at all out of accord with his own mild manner.

'Maybe Daisy's littered in the woods round here, as she did three years gone. Then she came home again, and made a great fuss, for to bring me to a dingle down by the water, where she'd had her pups. The dogs round about knew of it. They'd been barking all night for nigh on a week to drive foxes and the like away, but I haven't heard 'em barking o' nights this time.'

'We'll keep an eye out for Daisy, Mr Gauntlett. Tell her to go home if we find her, report to you if we run across a nest of her pups. We've all been crayfishing.'

I said that defensively, speaking as if everyone under thirty always wore blue robes for that sport. I felt a little diminished by being caught with such a crew by Mr Gauntlett.

'Ah?'

'We landed four.'

Mr Gauntlett laughed.

'Many a year since I went out after crayfish. Used to as a boy. Good eating they make. Well, I must go on to be looking for the old girl.'

He was already moving off when Murtlock addressed him.

'Seek the spinney by the ruined mill.'

He spoke in an odd toneless voice. Mr Gauntlett, rare with him, showed surprise. He looked more closely at Murtlock, evidently struck not so much by eccentricity of dress as knowledge of the neighbourhood.

'Ah?'

'Go now.'

Murtlock gave one of his smiles. Immediately after speaking those two short sentences a subtle change in him had taken place. It was as if he had fallen into—then emerged from—an almost instantaneous trance. Mr Gauntlett was greatly pleased with this advice.

'I'll be off to the spinney, instead of the way I was going. That's just where Daisy might be. And my thanks to you, if I find her.'

'If you find her, make an offering.'

'Ah?'

'It would be well to burn laurel and alder in a chafing dish.'

Mr Gauntlett laughed heartily. The suggestion seemed not to surprise him so much as might be expected.

'I'll put something extra in the plate at church on Sunday. That's quite right. It's what I ought to do.'

'Appease the shades of your dwelling.'

Mr Gauntlett laughed again. I do not know whether he took that as an allusion to his haunted house, or even if such were indeed Murtlock's meaning. Whatever intended, he certainly conveyed the impression that he was familiar with the neighbourhood. Perhaps he had already made enquiries about haunted houses round about, the spinney by the old mill entering into some piece of information given. Murtlock would have been capable of that. Mr Gauntlett turned again to continue his search for Daisy. Then, suddenly thinking of another matter, he paused a moment.

'Is there more news of the quarry and The Fingers, Mr Jenkins?'

'They're still hoping to develop in that direction,' said Isobel.

'Ah?'

'We mustn't take our eye off them.'

'No, for sure, that's true.'

Mr Gauntlett repeated his farewells, and set off again, this time in the direction of the old mill.

'How on earth did you know about Daisy being at the spinney?'

'The words came.'

Murtlock spoke this time almost modestly. He seemed to attach no great importance to the advice given, in fact almost to have forgotten the fact that he had given it. He was clearly thinking now of quite other matters. This was where we should leave them. Henderson had set down the bucket containing the crayfish. Rusty was sitting on the grass beside the trap. When Fiona handed over the gardening gloves she allowed a faint gesture in the direction of humdrum usage to escape her.

'Thanks for letting us put up the caravan.'

She looked at Murtlock quickly to make sure this was not too cringing a surrender, too despicable a retreat down the road of conventionality. He nodded with indifference. There was apparently no harm in conceding that amount in the circumstances. Henderson, blinking through the yellow specs, simpered faintly under his Fu Manchu moustache. Rusty, rising from the ground, scratched under her armpit thoughtfully.

'Why not take the crayfish as hors d'oeuvres for supper—or would they be too substantial for your limited fast?'

Fiona glanced at Murtlock. Again he nodded.

'All right.'

'They have to be gutted.'

Murtlock seemed pleased at the thought of that.

'Fiona can do the gutting. That will be good for you, Fiona.'

She agreed humbly.

'You'll be able to prophesy from the entrails,' I said.

No one laughed.

'Bring the bucket back before you leave in the morning,' said Isobel. 'I expect we shall see you in any case before you go, Fiona?'

The matter was once more referred to Murtlock for a ruling. He shook his head. The answer was negative. We should not see them the following day.

'No.'

Murtlock gruffly expanded Fiona's reply.

'We take the road at first light.'

'Early as that?'

'Our journey is long.'

'Where are you making for?'

Instead of mentioning a town or village he gave the name of a prehistoric monument, a Stone Age site, not specially famous, though likely to be known to people interested in those things. Aware vaguely that such spots were the object of pilgrimage on the part of cults of the kind to which Fiona and her friends appeared to belong, I was not greatly surprised by the answer. I supposed the caravan did about twenty miles a day, but was not at all sure of that. If so, the group of megaliths would take several days to reach.

'We were there some years ago, coming home from that part of the world. Are you planning to park near the Stones?'

It was a characteristic 'long barrow', set on the edge of a valley, two uprights supporting a capstone, entrance to a chambered tomb. The place had been thoroughly excavated.

'As near as sanctity allows.'

Murtlock answered curtly.

'Sanctity was being disturbed a good deal by tourists when we were there.'

A look of anger passed over his face, either at the comment, or thought of the tourists. He was quite formidable when he looked angry.

'If you're interested in archaeological sites, we've a minor one just over the hill from here. You probably know about it. The Devil's Fingers—The Fingers, as Mr Gauntlett calls it.'

If he knew something of Mr Gauntlett's house being haunted, he might well have heard of The Devil's Fingers. The name seemed new to him. He became at once more attentive.

'It's worth a visit, if you like that sort of thing. Only a short detour from the road you'll probably be taking in any case.'

'A prehistoric grave?'

'No doubt once, though that's been disputed.'

'What remains?'

'Two worn pillars about five foot high, and the same distance apart.'

'No portal?'

'Only the supports survive, if that's what they are.'

'The Threshold.'

'If a tomb, the burial chamber has long disappeared through ploughing. The general consensus of archaeological opinion accepts the place as a neolithic grave. There have been dissentient theories—boundary stones in the Dark Ages, and so on. They don't amount to much. Local patriotism naturally makes one want the place to be as ancient as possible. The lintel probably went for building purposes in one of the farms round about. The uprights may have been too hard to extract. In any case there's usually a superstition that you can't draw such stones from the earth. Even if you do, they walk back again.'

'Why the name?'

'One Midsummer night, long ago, a girl and her lover were lying naked on the grass. The sight of the girl's body tempted the Devil. He put out his hand towards her. Owing to the night also being the Vigil of St John, the couple invoked the Saint, and just managed to escape. When the Devil tried to withdraw his hand, two of his fingers got caught in the outcrop of rock you find in these quarrying areas. There they remain in a petrified condition.'

Murtlock was silent. He seemed suddenly excited.

'Any other legends about the place?'

'The couple are sometimes seen dancing there. They were saved from the Devil, but purge their sin by eternal association with its scene.'

'They dance naked?'

'I presume.'

'On Midsummer Night?'

'I don't know whether only on the anniversary, or all the year round. In rather another spirit, rickety children used to be passed between the Stones to effect a cure.'

That was one of Mr Gauntlett's stories.

'Is the stag-mask dance known to have been performed there?'

'I've never heard that. In fact I've never heard of the stag-mask dance.'

Murtlock was certainly well up in these things.

'Do the Stones bleed if a dagger is thrust in them at the Solstices?'

'I've never heard that either. There's the usual tale that at certain times—when the cock crows at midnight, I think—the Stones go down to the brook below to drink.'

Murtlock made no comment.

'Covetous people have sometimes taken that opportunity for seeking treasure in the empty sockets, and been crushed on the unexpected return of the Stones. The Stones' drinking habits are threatened. They will have to remain thirsty, unless the efforts of various people are successful. One of the quarries is trying to extend in that direction. They want to fill up the stream. Local opposition is being rallied. Where else will the Stones be able to quench their thirst? That was what the old farmer who talked to us was referring to.'

This time Murtlock showed no interest. The threat to The Devil's Fingers might have been judged something to shock anyone who had spoken of the sanctity of another prehistoric site, but he seemed altogether unmoved. At least he enquired no further as to the conservation problem as presented to him. He did, however, ask how the place could be reached, showing close attention when Isobel explained. He discarded all his elaborately mystical façade while listening to instructions of that sort.

'Is it a secluded spot?'

'About half-a-dozen fields from the road.'

'On high ground?'

'I'd guess about five or six hundred feet.'

'Surrounded by grass?'

'Plough, when we were last there, but the farmer may have gone back to grass.'

'Trees?'

'The Stones stand in an elder thicket on the top of a ridge. It's one of those characteristic settings. The land the other side slopes down to the stream.'

Murtlock thought for a moment or two. His face was pallid now. He seemed quite agitated at what he had been told. This physical reaction on his part suggested in him something more than the mere calculating ambition implied by Hugo's story. Forces perhaps stronger than himself dominating him, made it possible for him also to dominate by the strength of his own feelings. He turned abruptly on the others, standing passively by while his interrogation was taking place.

'Tomorrow we'll go first to The Devil's Fingers. We'll reach there by dawn.'

They concurred.

'You'll find it of interest.'

He made an odd gesture, indicative of impatience, amazement, contempt, at the inadequacy of such a comment in the context. Then his more mundane half-amused air returned.

'Barnabas will leave the bucket by the kitchen door when we set out in the morning.'

'That would be kind.'

'Don't forget, Barnabas.'

Henderson's lip trembled slightly. He muttered that it would be done.

'Then we'll bid you goodbye,' said Isobel.

Fiona, assuming the expression of one taking medicine, allowed herself to be kissed. Henderson rather uneasily offered a hand, keeping an eye on Murtlock in case he was doing wrong. Rusty gave a grin, and a sort of wave. Murtlock himself raised his right hand. The gesture was not far short of benediction. There was a feeling in the air that, to be wholly correct, Isobel and I should have intoned some already acquired formula to convey that gratitude as to the caravan's visit was something owed only by ourselves. There was a short pause while this antiphon remained unvoiced. Then, since nothing further seemed forthcoming on either side, each party turned away from the other. The four visitors moved towards the caravan, there to perform whatever rites or duties, propitiatory or culinary, might lie before them. We returned to the house.

'I agree with whoever it was thought the dark young man creepy,' said Isobel.

'Just a bit.'

Departure the following morning must have taken place as early as announced. No one heard them go. A candle had apparently proved superfluous, because Henderson never arrived to demand one. His own responsibilities, material and moral, must have turned out too onerous for him to have remembered about the bucket. It was found, not by the kitchen door, but on its side in the grass among the tracks of the caravan. The crayfish were gone. Traces of a glutinous substance, later rather a business to clean out, adhered to the bucket's sides, which gave off an incense-like smell. Isobel thought there was a suggestion of camphor. A few charred laurel leaves also remained in an empty tomato juice tin. Whatever the scents left behind, they were agreed to possess no narcotic connotations. This visit, well defined in the mind at the time, did not make any very lasting impression, Fiona and her companions manifesting themselves as no more than transient representatives of a form of life bound, sooner or later, to move into closer view. Their orientation might be worth attention, according to mood; meanwhile other things took precedence.

2

TWO COMPENSATIONS FOR GROWING OLD are worth putting on record as the condition asserts itself. The first is a vantage point gained for acquiring embellishments to narratives that have been unfolding for years beside one's own, trimmings that can even appear to supply the conclusion of a given story, though finality is never certain, a dimension always possible to add. The other mild advantage endorses a keener perception for the authenticities of mythology, not only of the traditional sort, but—when such are any good—the latterday mythologies of poetry and the novel. One such fragment, offering a gloss on the crayfishing afternoon, cropped up during the summer months of the same year, when I was reading one night after dinner.

The book, Harington's translation of *Orlando Furioso*—bedside romance of every tolerably well-educated girl of Byron's day—now requires, if not excuse, at least some sort of explanation. Twenty years before, writing a book about Robert Burton and his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I had need to glance at Ariosto's epic, Burton being something of an Ariosto fan. Harington's version (lively, but inaccurate) was then hard to come by; another (less racy, more exact), just as suitable for the purpose. Although by no means all equally readable, certain passages of the poem left a strong impression. Accordingly, when a new edition of Harington's *Orlando Furioso* appeared, I got hold of it. I was turning the pages that evening with the sense—essential to mature enjoyment of any classic—of being entirely free from responsibility to pause for a second over anything that threatened the least sign of tedium.

In spite of the title, Orlando's madness plays a comparatively small part in the narrative's many convolutions. This does not mean Ariosto himself lacked interest in that facet of his story. On the contrary, he is profoundly concerned with the cause—and cure—of Orlando's mental breakdown. What happened? Orlando (Charlemagne's Roland), a hero, paladin, great man, had gone off his head because his girl, Angelica, beautiful, intelligent, compassionate, everything a nice girl should be—so to speak female counterpart of Orlando himself—had abandoned him for a nonentity. She had eloped with a good-looking utterly boring young man. Ariosto allows the reader to remain in absolutely no doubt as to the young man's total insignificance. The situation is clearly one that fascinates him. He emphasizes the vacuity of mind shown by Angelica's lover in a passage describing the young man's carving of their intertwined names on the trunks of trees, a whimsicality that first reveals to Orlando himself his own banal predicament.

Orlando's ego (his personal myth, as General Conyers would have said) was murderously wounded. He found himself altogether incapable of making the interior adjustment required to continue his normal routine of living the Heroic Life. His temperament allowing no half measures, he chose, therefore, the complete negation of that life. Discarding his clothes, he lived henceforth in deserts and waste places, roaming hills and woods, gaining such sustenance as he might, while waging war against a society he had renounced. In short, Orlando dropped out.

Ariosto describes how one of Orlando's friends, an

English duke named Astolpho, came to the rescue. Riding a hippogryph (an intermediate beast Harington calls his 'Griffith Horse', like the name of an obscure poet), Astolpho undertook a journey to the Moon. There, in one of its valleys, he was shown all things lost on Earth: lost kingdoms: lost riches: lost reputations: lost vows: lost hours: lost love. Only lost foolishness was missing from this vast stratospheric Lost Property Office, where by far the largest accretion was lost sense. Although he had already discovered in this store some of his lost days and lost deeds, Astolpho was surprised to come across a few of his own lost wits, simply because he had never in the least missed them. He had a duty to perform here, which was to bring back from his spacetrip the wits (mislaid on an immeasurably larger scale than his own) of his old friend and comrade-in-arms, Orlando. It was Astolpho's achievement—if so to be regarded—to restore to Orlando his former lifestyle, make feasible for him the resumption of the Heroic Life.

Journeys to the Moon were in the news at that moment (about a year before the astronauts actually landed there) because Pennistone had just published his book on Cyrano de Bergerac, whose *Histoire comique des états et empires de la lune* he used to discuss, when we were in the War Office together. Pennistone was more interested in his subject as philosopher and heresiarch than space-traveller, but, all the same, Cyrano had to be admitted as an example of a remark once made by X. Trapnel: 'A novelist writes what he is. That is equally true of authors who deal with mediaeval romance or journeys to the Moon.' I don't think Trapnel had ever read Ariosto, feel pretty sure he had never attempted Cyrano—though he could surprise by unexpected authors dipped into—but, oddly enough, *Orlando Furioso* does treat of both Trapnel's off-the-cuff fictional categories, mediaeval romance and an interplanetary journey.

Among other adventures on the Moon, during this expedition, Astolpho sees Time at work. Ariosto's Time—as you might say, Time the Man—was, anthropomorphically speaking, not necessarily everybody's Time. Although equally hoary and naked, he was not Poussin's Time, for example, in the picture where the Seasons dance, while Time plucks his lyre to provide the music. Poussin's Time (a painter's Time) is shown in a sufficiently unhurried frame of mind to be sitting down while he strums his instrument. The smile might be thought a trifle sinister, nevertheless the mood is genial, composed.

Ariosto's Time (a writer's Time) is far less relaxed, indeed appallingly restless. The English duke watched Ariosto's Time at work. The naked ancient, in an eternally breathless scramble with himself, collected from the Fates small metal tablets (one pictured them like the trinkets hanging from the necks of Murtlock and Henderson), then moved off at the double to dump these identity discs in the waters of Oblivion. A few of them (like Murtlock's medallion at the pond) were only momentarily submerged, being fished out, and borne away to the Temple of Fame, by a pair of well disposed swans. The rest sank to the bottom, where they were likely to remain.

On the strength of this not too obscure allegory, I decided to go to bed. Just before I closed the book, my eye was caught by a stanza in an earlier sequence.

And as we see straunge cranes are woont to do,
First stalke a while er they their wings can find,
Then soare from ground not past a yard or two,
Till in their wings they gather'd have the wind,
At last they mount the very clouds unto,
Triangle wise according to their kind:
So by degrees this Mage begins to flye,
The bird of *Jove* can hardly mount so hye;

And when he sees his time and thinks it best,
He falleth downe like lead in fearfull guise,
Even as the fawlcon doth the foule arrest,
The ducke and mallard from the brooke that rise.

The warm windy afternoon, cottonwool clouds, ankle-deep wild garlic, rankness of fox, laboratory exhalations from the quarry, parade ground evolutions of the duck, hawk's precipitate flight towards the pool, all were suddenly recreated. Duck, of course, rather than cranes, had risen 'triangle wise', but the hawk, as in Ariosto's lines (or rather Harington's), had hung pensively in the air, then swooped to strike. I tried to rationalize to myself this coincidental passage. There was nothing at all unusual in mallard getting up from the water at that time of day, nor a kestrel hovering over the neighbouring meadows. For that matter, reference to falconry in a Renaissance poem was far from remarkable. Something in addition to all that held the attention. It was the word Mage. Mage carried matters a stage further.

Mage summoned up the image of Dr Trelawney, a mage if ever there was one. I thought of the days when, as a child, I used to watch the Doctor and his young disciples, some of them no more than children themselves, trotting past the Stonehurst gate on their way to rhythmical callisthenics—whatever the exercises were—on the adjacent expanse of heather. In those days (brink of the first war) Dr Trelawney was still building up a career. He had not yet fully transformed himself into the man of mystery, the thaumaturge, he was in due course to become. The true surname was always in doubt (Grubb or Tibbs, put forward by Moreland), anyway something with less body to it than Trelawney. In his avatar of the Stonehurst period he had been less concerned with the predominantly occult engagement of later years; then seeking The Way (to use his own phrase) through appropriate meditations, exercises, diet, apparel.

Once a week Dr Trelawney and his neophytes would jog down the pine-bordered lane from which our Indian-type bungalow was set a short distance back. The situation was remote, a wide deserted common next door. Dr Trelawney himself would be leading, dark locks flowing to the shoulder, biblical beard, grecian tunic, thonged sandals. The Doctor's robe (like the undefiled of Sardis) was white, somewhat longer and less diaphanous than the single garment—identical for both sexes and all weathers—worn by the disciples, tunics tinted in the pastel shades fashionable at that epoch. People who encountered Dr Trelawney by chance in the village post-office received an invariable greeting:

'The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True.'

The appropriate response can have been rarely returned.

'The Vision of Visions heals the Blindness of Sight.'

One of the firmest tenets—so Moreland always said—in the later teachings of Dr Trelawney was that coincidence was no more than 'magic in action'. There had just been an example of that. *Orlando Furioso* had not only produced that evening a magical reconstruction of considerable force, it had also brought to mind the reason why such activities as Dr Trelawney's were already much in the air. A recent newspaper colour supplement article, dealing with contemporary cults, had mentioned that—with much of what Hugo Tolland called the good old Simple Life—a revival of Trelawneyism had come about among young people. That was probably where Murtlock had acquired the phrases about killing, and no death in Nature. It was Dr Trelawney's view—also that of his old friend and fellow occultist, Mrs Erdleigh—that death was no more than transition, blending, synthesis, mutation. To be fair to them both, they seemed to some extent to have made their point. However much the uninstructed might regard them both as 'dead', there were still those for whom they were very much alive. Mrs Erdleigh (quoting the alchemist, Thomas Vaughan) had spoken of how the 'liberated soul ascends, looking at the sunset towards the west wind, and hearing secret harmonies'. Perhaps Vaughan's words, filtered through a kind of Neo-Trelawneyism, explained the girls' T-shirts.

In any case it was impossible to disregard the fact that, while a dismantling process steadily curtails members of the cast, items of the scenery, airs played by the orchestra, in the performance that has included one's own walk-on part for more than a few decades, simultaneous derequisitionings are also to be observed. Mummers return, who might have been supposed to have made their final exit, even if—like Dr Trelawney and Mrs Erdleigh—somewhat in the rôle of Hamlet's father. The touching up of time-expired sets, reshaping of derelict props, updating of old refrains, are none of them uncommon. An event some days later again brought forcibly to mind these lunar rescues from the Valley of Lost Things. This was a television programme devoted to the subject of the all-but-forgotten novelist, St John Clarke.

Above all others, St John Clarke might be judged, critically speaking, as gone for good. Not a bit of it. Here was a consummate instance of a lost reputation—in this case a literary one—salvaged from the Moon, St John Clarke's Astolpho being Ada Leintwardine. Keen on transvestism, Ariosto would have found nothing incongruous in a woman playing the part of the English duke. Maidens clad in armour abound throughout the poem. Ada Leintwardine, as a successful novelist married to the well-known publisher, J. G. Quiggin, could be accepted as a perfectly concordant Ariosto character. In any case she had latterly been taking an increasingly executive part in forming the policy of the firm of which her husband was chairman. Quiggin used to complain that St John Clarke's novels (all come finally to rest under his firm's imprint) sold 'just the wrong amount', too steady a trickle to be ruthlessly disregarded, not enough comfortably to cover production costs. Nor was there compensatory prestige—rather the reverse—in having a name in the list unknown to a younger generation. In fact Quiggin himself did not deny that he was prepared to allow such backnumbers to fall out of print. Ada, on the other hand, would not allow that. Her reasons were not wholly commercial; not commercial, that is, on the short-term basis of her husband's approach.

Ada's goal was to have a St John Clarke novel turned into a film. This had become almost an obsession with her. Ten years before she had failed—she alleged by a hair's breadth—to persuade Louis Glober to make a picture of *Match Me Such Marvel*, and, after Glober's death, vigorous canvassing of other film producers, American or British, had been no less fruitless. Meanwhile, St John Clarke's literary shares continued to slump. Ada, though she made fairly frequent appearances on television, had not herself produced a novel for some years. Remaining preoccupied with the St John Clarke project, she at last achieved the small advance in her plans that a television programme should be made about the novelist's life and work. This she regarded as a start, something to prepare the ground for later adaptation of one of the books.

Even their old friend, Mark Members, agreed that the Quiggins' marriage, whatever its ups and downs, had been on the whole a success. Members, who had no children himself, used to laugh at the disparity between Quiggin's former views on rebellion, and present attitude towards his twin daughters, Amanda and Belinda, now of university age and troublemakers. Quiggin's grumbling on that subject usually took place when Ada was not about. One of the twins had recently been concerned (only as a witness) in a drug prosecution; the other, about the same time, charged (later acquitted) with kicking a policeman. Quiggin was less reconciled to that sort of thing than, say, Roddy Cutts in relation to Fiona's caprices. In business matters the Quiggins got on well together too, showed a united front. It was the exception that there should be disagreement about St John Clarke.

Quiggin was doubtful as to the wisdom of propagating the novelist's name at this late stage. He feared that a small temporary increase in demand for the books would merely add to his own embarrassments as their publisher. His objection did not hold out very long. In due course Ada had her way. She seems to have brought about her husband's conversion to the idea by pointing out that he himself, as former secretary of St John Clarke, would play a comparatively prominent part in any documentary produced. Quiggin finally gave in at one of their literary dinner parties, choosing the moment after his wife had produced an aphorism.

'The television of the body brings the sales everlasting.'

Quiggin bowed his head.

'Amen, then. I resign St John Clarke to the makers of all things televisible.'

As a fellow ex-secretary of St John Clarke, Members would also have to be included in any programme about the novelist. That was no great matter. Members and Quiggin had been on goodish terms now for years, even admitting the kinship (second-cousins apparently), always alleged by Sillery, nowadays disputing with each other only who had enjoyed the more modest home. Both had come to look rather distinguished, Quiggin's dome-like forehead, sparse hair, huge ears, gave him a touch of grotesquerie, not out of place in a prominent publisher. Members, his white hair worn long, face pale and lined, had returned to the

Romantic Movement overtones of undergraduate days. His air was that of an eighteenth-century sage too highminded to wear a wig—Blake, Benjamin Franklin, one of the Encyclopaedists—suitable image for a figure of his eminence in the cultural world. When in London, his American wife, Lenore, fell in with this historical mood, doing so with easy assurance. They remained married, though Lenore spent increasingly long spells in her own country, an arrangement that seemed to suit both of them.

A graver problem than Members, in relation to the St John Clarke programme, was Vernon Gainsborough—now generally styled Dr Gainsborough, as holding an academic post in political theory—who (under his original name of Wernher Guggenbühl) had as a young man, finally displaced both Members and Quiggin in St John Clarke's employment. Quiggin (in those days writing letters to the papers in defence of the Stalinist purges) used to complain that Guggenbühl (as he then was) had perverted St John Clarke to Trotskyism. Some sort of a rapprochement had taken place after the war, when the firm of Quiggin & Craggs had published the recantation of Gainsborough (as he had become) in his study *Bronstein: Marxist or Mystagogue?* Gainsborough could not, therefore, be omitted from the programme. The only other performer who had known St John Clarke in the flesh was L. O. Salvidge, the critic. In his early days, when in low water, Salvidge had done some devilling, when St John Clarke was without a secretary, collecting French Revolution material for *Dust Thou Art.* The cast was made up with several self-constituted friends of the deceased novelist, professional extras, who appeared in all such literary resuscitations on the TV screen.

Isobel and I watched this rescue job from the Valley of Lost Things, to which another small item was added by the opening shot, St John Clarke's portrait (butterfly collar, floppy bow tie), painted by his old friend, Horace Isbister, RA. A few minutes later, Isbister's name appeared again, this time in an altogether unexpected connexion, only indirectly related to painting.

For some years now fashion had inclined to emphasize, rather than overlook, the sexual habits of the dead. To unearth anything about a man so discreet as St John Clarke had proved impossible, but Salvidge ventured to put forward the possibility that the novelist's 'fabulous parsimony' had its origins in repressed homosexuality. Members then let off a mild bombshell. He suggested that the friendship with Isbister had been a homosexual one. The contention of Members was that the central figure in an early genre picture of Isbister's—*Clergyman eating an apple*—was not at all unlike St John Clarke himself as a young man, Members advancing the theory that Isbister could have possessed a fetishist taste for male lovers dressed in ecclesiastical costume.

Quiggin questioned this possibility on grounds that Isbister had finally married his often painted model, Morwenna. Members replied that Morwenna was a lesbian. Gainsborough—who had never heard of Morwenna, and found some difficulty with the name—attempted to shift the discussion to St John Clarke's politics. He was unsuccessful. Something of an argument ensued, Gainsborough's German accent thickening, as he became more irritable. St John Clarke, rather a prudish man in conversation, would have been startled to hear much surmised, before so large an audience, on the subject of his sexual tastes. It was not a very exciting forty minutes, of which Ada was to be judged the star. Isbister's portrait of his friend—perhaps more than friend—flashed on the screen again as finale.

'Shall we stay for the News?'

'All right.'

There was some routine stuff: the Prime Minister in a safety helmet at a smelting plant; royalty launching a ship; strike pickets; tornado damage. Then, from out of the announcer's patter, a name brought attention—'... Lord Widmerpool, where he was recently appointed the university's chancellor...'

The last time I had seen Widmerpool, nearly ten years before, was soon after the troubles in which he had been involved: his wife's grim end; official enquiries into his own clandestine dealings with an East European power. We had met in Parliament Square. He said he was making for the House of Lords. He looked in poor shape, his manner wandering, distracted. We had talked for a minute or two, then parted. Whatever business he had been about that morning, must have been the last transacted by him for a longish period. The following week he disappeared for the best part of a year. He was probably on his way to wind up for the time being his House of Lords affairs.

Pamela Widmerpool's death, in itself, had caused less stir than might be supposed. Apart from the bare fact that she had taken an overdose in an hotel bedroom, nothing specially scandalous had come to light. Admittedly the hotel—as Widmerpool had complained in Parliament Square—had been a sordid one. Russell Gwinnett, the man with whom Pamela was believed to be in love, was staying there, but Gwinnett had an explicable reason for doing so, the place being a haunt of the novelist, X. Trapnel, whose biography he was writing. Pamela had occupied a room of her own. In any case her behaviour had long burst the sound barrier of normal gossip. It was thought even possible that, having heard of the hotel through Gwinnett, she had booked a room there as a suitably anonymous setting to close her final act. Sympathetic comment gave Pamela credit for that.

From the point of view of 'news', Gwinnett's scholarly affiliations, adding a touch of drabness, detracted from such public interest as the story possessed. The suicide of a life peer's wife obviously called for some coverage. That was likely to be diminished by the addition of professorial research work on a novelist unknown to the general public. The coroner went out of his way to express regret that a young American academic's visit to London should have been clouded by such a mishap. Gwinnett had apparently made an excellent impression at the inquest. In short, the whole business was consigned to the ragbag of memories too vague to remain at all clear in the mind. That was equally true of Widmerpool's dubious international dealings, regarding which, by now, no one could remember whether he was the villain or the hero.

'People say he was framed by the CIA,' said Lenore Members. 'The CIA may have fixed his wife's death too.'

By the time that theory had been put forward—and largely accepted—Widmerpool himself had recovered sufficiently to have crossed the Atlantic, reappearing in the United States after his year's withdrawal from the world. Whether by luck, or astute manipulations, no one seemed to know, he had been offered an appointment of some kind at the Institute of Advanced Study of an Ivy League university; ideal post for making a dignified retreat for a further period from everyday life in London. His years of engagement on the Eastern Seaboard were succeeded by a Westward pilgrimage. He was next heard of established at a noted Californian centre for political research. That was where Lenore Members had come across him. Widmerpool had impressed her as a man who had 'been through' a great deal. That was now his own line about himself, she said, one that could not reasonably be denied. Lenore Members was a woman with considerable descriptive powers. She conveyed a picture of undoubted change. Among other things, Widmerpool had spoken with contempt of parliamentary institutions. In public addresses he had been very generally expressing his scorn for such a vehicle of government. In his opinion the remedy lay in the hands of the young.

'Lord Widmerpool said he was working on a book that puts forward his views. It's to be called *Pogrom of Youth*.'

'How does he go down in the States?'

'He has strong adherents—strong opponents too. There's a pressure group to put his name forward for the Nobel Prize. Others say he's crazy.'

'You mean actually mad?'

'Mentally disturbed.'

'How long is he going to stay in the US?'

'He said he might be taking out naturalization papers.'

Whatever the reason, Widmerpool's vision of American citizenship must have been abandoned. He had returned to England. How, in general, he had been occupying himself, I did not know. During the past two or three years since arriving back there had been fairly regular appearances on television. These were usually in connexion with the sort of subjects Lenore Members had indicated as his latest interest, his new axis for power focus. He had played no part in the Labour administration of 1964. He may not even have been back in England by then. I had not watched any of his TV appearances, nor heard about this appointment to a university chancellorship. The post would not be at all inconsistent with the latest line he seemed to be designing for himself. I had no idea what were its duties and powers, probably a job that was much what the holder made of it.

The university to which Widmerpool had been nominated was a newish one. Malcolm Crowding (main authority on the last hours of X. Trapnel) taught English there. Crowding was not to be observed in the procession of capped and gowned figures on the screen; nor, for that matter, was Widmerpool. They had just reached the foot of a flight of steps. In the background were buildings in a contemporary style of scholastic architecture. The persons composing the crocodile of dons and recipients of honorary degrees were preceded by a man in uniform bearing a mace. The cortège was making its way across an open space, shut in by what were probably lecture-halls. A fairly large crowd, students of both sexes, parents, friends, onlookers of one sort or another, stood on either side of the route, watching the ceremony. It was probably a more grandiose affair than usual owing to the installation of the new chancellor. I did not pick out Widmerpool immediately, my attention being caught for a moment by a black notability in national dress of his country, walking between two academically gowned ladies, all three recipients of doctoral degrees. Then Widmerpool came into sight. As he did so there was scarcely time to take in more of him than that he was wearing a mortarboard and gold brocaded robe, its train held up by a page.

Widmerpool, advancing towards the camera, had turned to say a word to this small boy, apparently complaining that the hinder part of his official dress was being borne in a manner inconvenient to its wearer, when the scene suddenly took on a new and startling aspect. What followed was acted out so quickly that only afterwards was it possible to disentangle specific incident from overall confusion. On different sides of the path, at two points, the watching crowd seemed to part. From each of these gaps figures of indeterminate sex briefly emerged, then withdrew themselves again. Some sort of a scuffle arose. An object, perhaps two objects, shot up in the air. In the background a flimsy poster, inscribed with illegible words outlined in shaky capital letters, fluttered for a second in the air, hoisted on the end of a long pole, then appeared to collapse. All these things, flitting by too quickly to be taken into proper account, were accompanied by the sound of singing or chanting. By the time I had grasped the fact that some sort of a demonstration was afoot, Widmerpool was no longer in sight.

Before the scene changed—which it did in a flash—I had just time to recollect Moreland's words, uttered at Stourwater nearly thirty years before. It was the night we had all dressed up as the Seven Deadly Sins, and been photographed by Sir Magnus Donners, with whom we were dining—'One is never a student at all in England, except possibly a medical student or an art student. Undergraduates have nothing in common with what is understood abroad by a student—young men for ever rioting, undertaking political assassination, overturning governments.'

Moreland had offered that opinion about the time of 'Munich'. Sir Magnus Donners had not shown much interest. Perhaps the innate shrewdness of his own instincts in such matters already told him that, within a few decades, Moreland's conviction about students would fall badly out of date, an epoch not far distant when the sort of student Moreland adumbrated would be accepted as a matter of course. This Stourwater memory had scarcely time to formulate, dissolve, before the announcer's voice drew attention to a close-up of Widmerpool, now standing alone.

'Lord Widmerpool, newly installed chancellor, wishes to give his own comments on what happened.'

At first sight, so ghastly seemed Widmerpool's condition that it was a wonder he was alive, much less able to stand upright and address an audience. He had evidently been the victim of an atrocious assault. His wounds were appalling. Dark stains, apparently blood, covered the crown of his bald head (now capless), streaking down the side of his face, dripping from shoulder and sleeve of the gold embroidered robe. When he raised his hands, they too were smeared with the dark sticky marks of gore. Nevertheless, mangled as the fingers must have been to display this condition, he removed his bespattered spectacles. It was amazing that he had the strength to do so.

'Not the smallest resentment. Even glad this has taken place. Let me congratulate those two girls on being such excellent shots with the paint pot . . .'

All was explained. There were no wounds. The dark clots, at first seeming to flow from dreadful gashes, were no more than paint. Widmerpool was covered with paint. Paint spread all over him, shining in the sun, dripping off face and clothes, since it was not yet dry. He ignored altogether the inconceivable mess he was in. Now the origin of his condition was revealed he looked like a clown, a clown upon whom divine afflatus had suddenly descended. He was in a state of uncontrolled excitement, gesticulating wildly in a manner quite uncharacteristic of himself. It was like revivalist frenzy. Face gaunt, eyes sunk into the back of his head, he had lost all his former fleshiness. What Lenore Members had tried to convey was now apparent. He said a few words more. They were barely intelligible owing to excitement. It was noticeable that his delivery had absorbed perceptibly American intonations and technique, superimposed on the old hearty unction that had formerly marked his style. Before more could be assimilated, the scene, like the previous one, was wiped away, the announcer's professional tones taking over again, as the News moved on to other topics.

'That was livelier than the St John Clarke programme.'

'It certainly was.'

Setting aside the occasion—a very different one—when Glober had hit him after the Stevenses' musical party, the last time Widmerpool had suffered physical assault at all comparable with the paint-throwing was, so far as I knew, forty years before, the night of the Huntercombes' dance, when Barbara Goring had poured sugar over his head. More was to be noted in this parallel than that, on the one hand, both assaults were at the hands of young women; on the other, paint created a far more injurious deluge than castor sugar. The measure of the latest incident seemed to be the extent to which the years had taught Widmerpool to cope with aggressions of that kind. In many other respects, of course, the circumstances were far from identical. Widmerpool had been in love with Barbara Goring; for the girls who had thrown the paint—he had spoken of them as girls—there was no reason to suppose that he felt more than general approval of a politico-social intention on their part. Possibly love would follow, rather than precede, persecution at their hands. Yet even if it were argued that all the two attacks possessed in common was personal protest against Widmerpool himself, the fact remained that, while he had endured the earlier onslaught with unconcealed wretchedness, he had now learnt to convert such occasions—possibly always sexually gratifying—to good purpose where other ends were concerned.

What would have been the result, I wondered, had he been equipped with that ability forty years before? Would he have won the heart of Barbara Goring, proposed to her, been accepted, married, produced children by her? On the whole such a train of events seemed unlikely, apart from objections the Goring parents might have raised in days before Widmerpool had launched himself on a career. Probably nothing would have altered the fates of either Widmerpool or Barbara (whose seventeen-year-old granddaughter had recently achieved some notoriety by marrying a celebrated Pop star), and the paint-throwing incident, like the cascade of sugar, was merely part of the pattern of Widmerpool's life. It was not considered of sufficient importance to be reported in any newspaper. On running across L. O. Salvidge in London, I heard more of its details.

'I enjoyed your appearance in the St John Clarke programme.'

Salvidge, who had a glass eye—always impossible to tell which—laughed about the occasion. He seemed well satisfied with the figure he had cut.

'I was glad to have an opportunity to say what I thought about the old fraud. Did you watch the News that night, see the Quiggin twins throw red paint over the chancellor of their university?'

'It was the Quiggin twins?'

'The famous Amanda and Belinda. What a couple. I was talking about it to JG yesterday. At least I tried to, but he would not discuss it. He changed the subject to the Magnus Donners Prize. He's got a grievance that no book published by his firm has ever won the award. Who are you giving it to this year?'

'Nothing suitable has turned up at present. Something may appear in the autumn. Has JG's firm got anything special? We'll see it, no doubt, if they have. It's my last year on the Magnus Donners panel. Do you want to take my place there?'

'Not me.'

Both Salvidge's eyes looked equally glassy at the suggestion. That was no surprise. Almost as veteran a figure on literary prize committees as Mark Members, Salvidge always had a dozen such commissions on hand. They took up more time than might be supposed. I was glad of my own approaching release from the board of the Magnus Donners judges. This was my fourth and final year.

The origins of the Magnus Donners Memorial Prize went back a long way, in fact to the days when Sillery used to speculate about a project of Sir Magnus Donners to endow certain university scholarships for overseas students, young men drawn from places where the Company's interests were paramount. They were to be called Donners-Brebner Fellowships. Such a possibility naturally opened up a legitimate field for academic intrigue, Sillery in the forefront, if the fellowships were to take practical shape. Sillery (in rivalry, he lamented, with at least three other dons) made no secret of his aim to control the patronage. He had entangled in this matter Prince Theodoric (lately deceased in Canada, where his business ventures, after exile, had been reasonably successful), in those days always anxious to draw his country into closer contacts with Great Britain.

The Donners-Brebner Fellowships were referred to in Sillery's obituary notices (highly laudatory in tone, as recording a sole survivor of his own genus, who had missed his century only by a year or two), where it appeared that the project had been to some extent implemented before the outbreak of war in 1939. Post-war changes in the international situation prevented much question of the fellowships' revival in anything like their original form. Sir Magnus himself, anxious to re-establish a benefaction of a similar kind, seems to have been uncertain how best it should be reconstituted, leaving behind several contradictory memoranda on the subject. In practice, this fund seems to have been administered in a rather haphazard fashion after his death, a kind of all-purposes charitable trust in Donners-Brebner gift. That, any rate, was the version of the story propagated by his widow, Matilda Donners, when she first asked me to sit as one of the judges at the initiation of the Prize. That was four years before. Now—as I had told Salvidge—my term on the Prize committee was drawing to an end.

In Matilda's early days of widowhood it looked as if the memory of Sir Magnus was to be allowed to fade. She continued to circulate for some years in the world of politics and big business to which he had introduced her, to give occasional parties in rivalry with Rosie Stevens, more musically, less politically inclined, than herself. Latterly Matilda had not only narrowed down her circle of friends, but begun to talk of Sir Magnus again. She also moved to smaller premises. Sir Magnus had left her comfortably off, if in command of far smaller resources than formerly, bequeathing most of his considerable fortune to relations, and certain public benefactions. No doubt such matters had been gone into at the time of their marriage, Matilda being a practical person, one of the qualities Sir Magnus had certainly admired in her. Moreland, too, had greatly depended on that practical side of Matilda as a wife. In short, disappointment at having received less than expected at the demise of Sir Magnus was unlikely to have played any part in earlier policy that seemed to consign him to oblivion.

Then there was a change. Matilda began, so to speak, to play the part of Ariosto's swans, bringing the name of Donners—she had always referred to him by his surname—into the conversation. A drawing of him, by Wyndham Lewis, was resurrected in her sitting-room. She was reported to play the music he liked—*Parsifal*, for instance, Norman Chandler said—and to laugh about the way he would speak of having shed tears over the sufferings of the Chinese slavegirl in *Turandot*, no less when watching Ida Rubinstein in *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian*. Chandler remarked that, at one time, Matilda would never have referred to 'that side' of Sir Magnus. No doubt this new mood drew Matilda's attention to the more or less quiescent fund lying at Donners-Brebner. On investigation it appeared to be entirely suitable, anyway a proportion of it, for consecration to a memorial that would bear the name of its originator. One of the papers left on the file seemed even to envisage something of the sort. Matilda went to the directors of Donners-Brebner, with whom she had always kept up. They made no difficulties, taking the view that an award of that nature was not at all to be disregarded in terms of publicity.

Why Matilda waited not much less than fifteen years to commemorate Sir Magnus was never clear. Perhaps it was simply a single aspect of the general reconstruction of her life, desire for new things to occupy her as she grew older. Regarded as a *jolie laide* when young, Matilda would now have passed as a former 'beauty'. That was not undeserved. Relentless discipline had preserved her appearance, especially her figure. Once fair hair had been dyed a darker colour, a tone that suited the green eyes—a feature shared with Sir Magnus, though his eyes lacked her sleepy power—which had once captivated Moreland. A touch of 'stageyness' in Matilda's clothes was not out of keeping with her personality.

Another change had been a new inclination towards female friends. Matilda had always been on good terms with Isobel, other wives of men Moreland had known, but in those days, anyway ostensibly, she seemed to possess no female circle of her own. Now she had begun to show a taste for ladies high-powered as herself. They did not exactly take the place of men in her life, but the sexes were more evenly balanced. With men she had always been discreet. There had been no stories circulated about her when married to Sir Magnus. In widowhood there had been the brief affair with Odo Stevens, before his marriage to Rosie Manasch; that affair thought more to tease Rosie than because she specially liked Stevens. Hardly any other adventure had even been lightly attributed.

Some people believed Gibson Delavacquerie had been for a short time Matilda's lover. That was not my own opinion, although a closer relationship than that of friends was not entirely to be ruled out as a possibility. Matilda was, of course, appreciably the elder of the two. If there were anything in such gossip, its truth would have suggested a continued preference for the sort of man with whom her earlier life had been spent, rather than those who had surrounded her in middle years. She had certainly known Delavacquerie quite well before the Magnus Donners Prize was instituted.

His job—Delavacquerie was employed on the public relations side of Donners-Brebner—offered a good listening-post for Matilda to keep in touch with the affairs of the Company. Undoubtedly she liked him. That could very well have been all there was to the association.

This Delavacquerie connexion may well have played a part in the eventual decision to raise a memorial in literary form. Books were by no means the first interest of Sir Magnus. Notwithstanding Moreland's story that, as a young man, believing himself on the brink of an early grave, 'Donners had spoken of steeping himself in all that was best in half-a-dozen literatures', his patronage had always been directed in the main towards painting and music. According to Matilda various alternative forms of remembrance were put forward, a literary prize thought best, as easiest to administer. Delavacquerie may not only have influenced that conclusion, but, once the principle was established, carried weight as to the type of book to be encouraged.

In the end it was settled that the Prize (quite a handsome sum) should be presented annually for a biographical study dealing with (not necessarily written by) a British subject, male or female, born not earlier than the date of Sir Magnus's own birth. I think discretion was allowed to the judges, if the birth was reasonably close, the aim being to begin with the generation to which Sir Magnus himself belonged. Just how this choice was arrived at I do not know. It is worth bearing in mind that an official 'life' of Sir Magnus himself had not yet appeared. Possibly Matilda—or the Company—hoped that a suitable biographer might come to light through this constitution of the Prize. Any such writer would have to be equal to dealing with formidable perplexities, if the biography was to be attempted during the lifetime of its subject's widow; especially in the light of new freedoms of expression, nowadays to be expected, in the manner of the St John Clarke TV programme.

The possibility that a Donners biographer might be sought was borne out by the additional condition that preference would be given to works dealing with a man of affairs, even though representatives of the arts and sciences were also specifically mentioned in the terms of reference.

Delavacquerie, known to me only casually when Matilda opened up the question of the Magnus Donners committee, was then in his middle forties. He was peculiarly fitted to the rôle in which he found himself—that is to say a sort of unofficial secretary to the board of judges—having been one of the few, possibly the sole candidate, to have benefited by a Donners-Brebner fellowship, when these first came into being. This had brought him to an English university (he had somehow slipped through Sillery's fingers) just before the outbreak of war. During the war he had served, in the Middle East and India, with the Royal Signals; after leaving the army, working for a time in a shipping firm. No doubt earlier connexion with the Company, through the fellowship, played a part in ultimately securing him a job at Donners-Brebner. Although a British subject, Delavacquerie was of French descent, a family settled in the Caribbean for several generations. He would speak of that in his characteristically dry manner.

'They've been there a century and a half. An established family. You understand there are no good families. The island does not run to good families. The Gibsons were an established family too.'

Small, very dark, still bearing marks of French origins, Delavacquerie talked in a quick, harsh, oddly attractive voice. Between bouts of almost crippling inertia—according to himself—he was immensely energetic in all he did. We had met before, on and off, but became friends through the Magnus Donners Prize committee. By that time Delavacquerie had achieved some fame as a poet; fame, that is, over and above what he himself always called his 'colonial' affiliations. Matilda asserted, no doubt truly, that the Company was rather proud of employing in one of its departments a poet of Delavacquerie's distinction. She reported that a Donners-Brebner director had assured her that Delavacquerie displayed the same grasp of business matters that he certainly brought to literary criticism, on the comparatively rare occasions when he wrote articles or reviews, there being no easy means of measuring business ability against poetry. This same Donners-Brebner tycoon had added that Delavacquerie could have risen to a post of considerably greater responsibility in the Company had he wished. A relatively subordinate position, more congenial in the nature of its duties, tied him less to an office, allowing more time for his 'own work'. Moreland—not long before he died—had spoken appreciatively of Delavacquerie's poetry, in connexion with one of Moreland's favourite themes, the artist as businessman.

'I never pay my insurance policy,' Moreland said, 'without envisaging the documents going through the hands of Aubrey Beardsley and Kafka, before being laid on the desk of Wallace Stevens.'

Before we knew each other at all well, Delavacquerie mentioning army service in India, I asked whether he had ever come across Bagshaw or Trapnel, both of whom had served in the subcontinent in RAF public relations, Bagshaw as squadron-leader, Trapnel as orderly-room clerk. It was a long shot, no contacts had taken place, but Bagshaw, Delavacquerie said, had published one of his earlier poems in *Fission*, and Trapnel had been encountered in a London pub. Although I had read other Delavacquerie poems soon after that period, I had no recollection of that which had appeared when I had been 'doing the books' for the magazine. I had then liked his poetry in principle, without gaining more than a rough idea where he stood among the young emergent writers of the post-war era. Most of his early verse had been written in the army, most of it rhymed and scanned. Trapnel, prepared to lay down the law on poets and poetry, as much as any other branch of literature, a great commentator on his own contemporaries, had never mentioned Delavacquerie's name. At that period, before Delavacquerie's reputation began to take shape—kept busy earning a living—he was not often to be seen about. Trapnel, living in a kaleidoscope world of pub and party frequenters, must have forgotten their own meeting. Perhaps he had not taken in Delavacquerie's name.

'When I was working in the shipping firm I didn't know London at all well. I wanted to explore all its possibilities—and of course meet writers.'

Delavacquerie made a slight grimace when he said that.

'Somebody told me The Hero of Acre was a pub where you found artists and poets. I went along there one night. Trapnel was at the bar, with his beard, and swordstick mounted with the ivory skull. I thought him rather a Ninetyish figure, and was surprised when his work turned out to be good. He was about the only one in the pub to qualify as a writer at all. Even he had only published a few stories then. Still, to my colonial eyes, it was something that he looked the part, even the part as played fifty years before. I didn't talk to him that night, but on another occasion we discussed Apollinaire over a bitter, a drink I have never learned to like. Trapnel's dead, isn't he?'

'Died in the early nineteen-fifties.'

This conversation between Delavacquerie and myself had taken place several years before Matilda's invitation to join the Magnus Donners Prize committee, which at first I refused, on general grounds of reducing such commitments to a minimum. Matilda, explaining she wanted to start off with a panel known to her personally, was more pressing than expected. She added that she was determined to get as much fun out of the Prize as possible, one aspect of that being a committee made up of friends.

'One never knows how long one's going to last,' she said.

I still declined. Matilda added an inducement. It was a powerful one.

'I've found the photographs Donners took, when we all impersonated the Seven Deadly Sins at Stourwater in 1938. I'll show them to you, if you join the committee. Otherwise not.'

In supposing these documents from a bygone age would prove irresistible as the Sins themselves, Matilda was right. I accepted the bribe. With some people it might have been possible to refuse, then persuade them to produce the photographs in any case. Matilda was not one of those. The board met twice annually at a luncheon provided by the Company. The judges, as constituted in the first instance, were Dame Emily Brightman, Mark Members, and myself. Delavacquerie sat with us, representing the Company, supplying a link with Matilda, acting as secretary. He arranged for publishers to submit books (or proofs of forthcoming books), kept in touch with the press, undertook all the odd jobs required. These were the sort of duties in which he took comparative pleasure, carried out with notable efficiency. He did not himself vote on final decisions about works that came up for judgment, though he joined in discussions, his opinions always useful. He particularly enjoyed arguing with Emily Brightman (created DBE a couple of years before for her work on The Triads, and polemical study of Boethius), who would allow Delavacquerie more range of teasing than was her usual custom, though sometimes he might receive a sharp rebuke, if he went too far.

Members, on the other hand (once publicly admonished by Dame Emily for a slip about the Merovingians), was rather afraid of her. His inclusion was almost statutory in assembling a body of persons brought together to judge a literary award of any type, quite apart from his own long acquaintance with Matilda Donners. It was from this semi-official side of his life, rather than the verse and other writings, that he had come to know Matilda, whose interests had always been in the Theatre, rather than books. Members had been included in her parties when Sir Magnus was alive. Emily Brightman, in contrast, was a more recent acquisition, belonging to that sorority of distinguished ladies Matilda now seemed to seek out. It was clear, at the first of these Magnus Donners luncheons, that Emily Brightman (whom I had seen only once or twice since the Cultural Conference in Venice, where Pamela Widmerpool first met Gwinnett) had lost none of her energy. The unobtrusive smartness of her clothes also remained unaltered.

'I have a confession to make. It should be avowed in the Dostoevskian fashion on the knees. You will forgive me if I dispense with that. To kneel would cause too much stir in a restaurant of this type. During our Venetian experience, you will remember visiting Jacky Bragadin's palazzo—our host didn't long survive our visit, did he?—the incomparable Tiepolo ceiling? Candaules showing Gyges his naked wife? How it turned out that Lord Widmerpool—such an unattractive man—had done much the same thing, if not worse? You remember, of course. That poor little Lady Widmerpool. I took quite a fancy to her, in spite of her naughtinesses.'

Emily Brightman paused; at the thought of those perhaps.

'It turns out that I was scandalously misinformed, accordingly misleading, in supposing Gautier to have invented the name Nysia for Candaules's queen. The one he exhibited in so uncalled for a manner. Nysia was indeed the name of the nude lady in Tiepolo's picture. I came on the fact, quite by chance, last year, when I was reading in bed one night. She is categorically styled Nysia in the *New*

History of Ptolemy Chennus—first century, as you know, so respectably far back—and I was up half the night establishing the references. In fact I wandered about almost as lightly clad as Nysia herself. I hope there was no Gyges in the College at that hour. It was sweltering weather, I had not been able to sleep, and allowed myself a gin and tonic, with some ice in it, while I was doing so. I found that Niklaus of Damascus calls her Nysia, too, in his *Preparatory Exercises*. He also ridicules the notion of an oriental potentate of the Candaules type becoming enamoured of his own wife. I thought that showed the narrowness of Greek psychology in dealing with a subtle people like the Lydians. Another matter upon which Nicholas of Damascus —wasn't he Herod the Great's secretary?—throws doubt is the likelihood of the ladies of Sardis undressing before they went to bed. He may have a point there.'

'Perhaps the sheer originality of his queen undressing was what so enthralled Candaules,' said Members. 'I can never sufficiently regret having missed that Conference. Ada Leintwardine and Quentin Shuckerly talk of it to this day. What was the name of the American who got so involved with Kenneth Widmerpool's wife there?'

'Russell Gwinnett. An old friend of mine. He was put in an unfortunate position.'

Emily Brightman said that rather sharply. Members took the hint. I asked if she had seen anything of Gwinnett lately.

'Not a word from him personally. Another American friend, former colleague of both of us, said Russell was back in academic life again. The name of his college escapes me.

'Has he returned to the book he was writing about X. Trapnel?'

'There was no mention of what he was writing, if anything. I had myself always thought Trapnel, as a subject, a little lightweight. I hear, by the way, that Matilda Donners has some amusing photographs of the Seven Deadly Sins, in which you yourself figure. I must persuade her to produce them for me.'

Matilda had made good her promise by showing the photographs to Isobel and myself a few weeks before. The Eaton Square flat, where she lived (on the upper floors of a house next door to the former Walpole-Wilson residence, now an African embassy), was neither large, nor outstandingly luxurious, except for some of the drawings and small oil paintings. Matilda had sold the larger canvases bequeathed to herself. Apart from the high quality of what remained, the flat bore out that law which causes people to retain throughout life the same general characteristics in any place they inhabit. Matilda's Eaton Square flat at once called to mind the garret off the Gray's Inn Road, where she had lived when married to Moreland. The similarities of decoration may even have been deliberate. Moreland had certainly remained a little in love with Matilda until the end of his days. Something of the sort may have been reciprocally true of herself. Unlike Matilda's long silence about Sir Magnus, she had never been unwilling to speak of Moreland, often talking of their doings together, which seemed, some of them, happy in retrospect.

'Norman Chandler's coming to see the photographs. I thought he would enjoy the Sins. They belong to his period. Norman was always such a support to Hugh, when there was anything to do with the Theatre. The Theatre was never really Hugh's thing. He wasn't at all at ease there, even when he used to come round and see me after the performance. I particularly didn't want Norman to miss Hugh's splendid interpretation of Gluttony.'

'What's Norman directing now?'

'Polly Duport's new play. I haven't seen it yet. It sounds rather boring. Do you know her? She was here the other night. Polly's having a very worrying time. Her mother's married to a South American—more or less head of the government, I believe—and there are a lot of upheavals there. Here's Norman. Norman, my pet, how are you? We were just saying how famous you'd become. That new fringe makes you look younger than ever—like Claudette Colbert. And what a suit. Where did you get it?'

Chandler, whose air, even in later life, was of one dancing in a perpetual ballet, was not at all displeased by these comments on his personal appearance. He looked down critically at what he was wearing.

'This little number? It's from the Boutique of the Impenitent Bachelor—Vests & Transvests, we regular customers call the firm. The colour's named Pale Galilean. To tell the truth I can hardly sit down in these trousers.'

'Our brother-in-law, Dicky Umfraville, always refers to his tailor as Armpits & Crotch.'

'Their cutter must have moved over to the Boutique. How are you both? Oh, Isobel, I can't tell you how much I miss your uncle, Ted Jeavons. Watching the telly will never be the same without his comments. Still, with that piece of shrapnel, or whatever it was from the first war, inside him, he never thought he'd last as long as he did. Ted was always saying how surprised he was to be alive.'

Inhabiting flats, both of them, in what had formerly been the Jeavons house in South Kensington, Chandler and Jeavons had developed an odd friendship, one chiefly expressed in watching television together. Jeavons, who had always possessed romantic feelings about theatrical life, used to listen in silence, an expression of deep concentration on his face, while Chandler rattled on about actors, directors, producers, stage designers, most of whose names could have meant little or nothing to Jeavons. Umfraville—who always found Jeavons a bore—used to pretend there was a homosexual connexion between them, weaving elaborate fantasies in which they indulged in hair-raising orgies at the South Kensington house. Umfraville himself did not change much as the years advanced, spells of melancholy alternating with bursts of high spirits, the last latterly expressed by a rather good new impersonation of himself as an old-fashioned drug-fiend.

When Matilda spread out the photographs on a table the manner in which the actual photography 'dated' was immediately noticeable; their peculiarity partly due to the individual technique of Sir Magnus as photographer, efficient at everything he did, but altogether unversed in any approach to the camera prompted by art. This was especially true of his figure subjects. Painfully clear in outline (setting aside the superimposed exoticism of the actions portrayed), they might have been taken from the pages of a mail-order catalogue, the same suggestion of waxworks, in this case, rather sinister waxworks. Details of costume scrupulously distinct, the character of the models was scarcely at all transmitted. This method did not at all diminish the interest of the pictures themselves. Sir Magnus had remarked at the time that he had taken up photography with a view to depicting his own collections—china, furniture, armour—in the manner he himself wished them photographically recorded, something in which no professional photographer had ever satisfied him. One speculated whether—the Seven Deadly Sins pointing the way—he had later developed this hobby in a manner to include his own tastes as a voyeur. A certain harshness of technique would not necessarily have vitiated that sphere of interest. That Sir Magnus had actually introduced Widmerpool to the practices of which Pamela had so publicly accused her husband at Venice, was less likely, though there, too, photography, of a dubious intention, was alleged. Matilda set out the photographs, as if playing a game of Patience.

'So few of one's friends qualify for all the Sins. Quite a lot of people can offer six, then break down at the seventh.

They're full of Lust, Envy, Gluttony, Pride, Anger, Sloth—then fall down on Avarice. One knows plenty of good performers at Avarice, but they so often lack Gluttony or Sloth. Of course it helps if you're allowed to include drink, in place of food, for Gluttony.'

She picked up the picture of herself as Envy.

'It was unjust of Donners to make me take on Envy. I'm not at all an envious person.'

That was probably true, notwithstanding her green eyes. Matilda had never shown any strong signs of being envious. Then one thought of her rivalry with Rosie Stevens. Even that was scarcely Envy in the consuming sense that certain persons display the trait. It was competitive jealousy, something rather different, even if partaking of certain envious strains too. Matilda liked her friends to be successful, rather than the reverse. That in itself was a rare characteristic.

'I suppose Donners thought I was envious of that silly girl he was then having one of his fancies for. What is she called now? Her maiden name was Lady Anne Stepney. She's married to a Negro much younger than herself, rather a successful psychedelic painter. Donners knew at the time that Anne was conducting a romance with your friend Peter Templer. Do you remember? You and Isobel were staying at our cottage. This man, Peter Templer, picked us up in his car, and drove us over to Stourwater for dinner that night? There's Anne herself, as Anger, which wasn't bad. She had a filthy temper. Here she is again, with Isobel as Pride. That's not fair on Isobel either, anyway not the wrong sort of Pride. And Sloth's absurd for you, Nick. Look at all those books you've written.'

'Sloth means Accidie too. Feeling fed up with life. There are moments when I can put forward claims.'

'Hugh, too, I can assure you. Better ones than yours, I feel certain. But Hugh was so good as Gluttony, one wouldn't wish him doing anything else. Look at him.'

Even the lifeless renderings of Sir Magnus's photography had failed to lessen the magnificence of Moreland's Gluttony. He had climbed right on top of the dining-room table, where he was lying supported on one elbow, gripping the neck of a bottle of Kümmel. He had already upset a full glass of the liqueur—to the visible disquiet of Sir Magnus—the highlights of the sticky pool on the table's surface caught by the lens. Moreland, surrounded by fruit that had rolled from an overturned silver bowl, was laughing inordinately. The spilt liqueur glass recalled the story told by Mopsy Pontner (whom Moreland had himself a little fancied), her romp on another dining-room table with the American film producer, Louis Glober. That was a suitable inward reminiscence to lead on to the photographs of Templer as Lust; three in number, since he had insisted on representing the Sin's three ages, Youth, Middle Years, Senility.

'It was Senile Lust that so upset that unfortunate wife of his. She rushed out of the room. What was her name? Donners made her play Avarice. The poor little thing wasn't in the least avaricious. Probably very generous, if given a chance. Somebody had to do Avarice, as we were only seven all told. She might have seen that without kicking up such a to-do. Of course she was pretty well nuts by then. Peter Templer as a husband had sent her up the wall. Donners insisted she should go through with Avarice. That was Donners at his worst. He could be very sadistic, unless you stood up to him, then he might easily become masochistic. Betty—that's what she was called. She ought to have seen it was only a game, and numbers were short. I believe she had to be put away altogether for a time, but came out after her husband was killed, and had lots of proposals. You know how men adore mad women.'

'Women like mad men, too, Matty, you must admit that. Besides, she wasn't really mad. Did she accept any of the proposals?'

'She married a man in the Foreign Office, and became an ambassadress. They were very happy, I believe. He's retired now. Most of these pictures are pretty mediocre. Hugh's the only star.'

Chandler turned the pictures over.

'I think they're wonderful, Matty. What fun it all was in those days.'

Matilda made a face.

'Oh, it wasn't. Do you truly think that, Norman? I always felt it was dreadfully grim. I don't believe that was only because the war was going to happen. Do you remember that awful man Kenneth Widmerpool coming in wearing uniform? He ought to have played the eighth Sin—Humbug.'

I was a little surprised by the violence of Matilda's comment. So far as I knew Widmerpool had taken no particular part in her life, though she might have heard about him from Sir Magnus. She was, in any case, a woman who said—and did—unexpected things, a strangeness of character reflected by her marriages to Carolo, Moreland and Sir Magnus, even if the marriage to the violinist had been a very brief one.

'I think I rather like humbugs,' said Chandler. 'People like old Gossage, the music critic, he's always been quite a friend of mine.'

Matilda laughed.

'I mean something much above poor old Gossage's bumblings. I'm speaking of making claims to a degree of virtue, purity, anything you like to call it—morals, politics, the arts, any field you prefer—which the person concerned neither possesses, nor is seriously attempting to attain. They just flatter themselves they are like that. How solemn I'm getting. That sounds just like the speeches I used to make in my early days from behind the footlights. Tell Norman about the Magnus Donners Memorial Prize, Nick.'

She began to put the photographs away. I described the Prize to Chandler.

'My dear, you ought to link the Prize with the photographs. Do the Seven Deadly Sins in rotation. The book wins, which best enhances the Sin-of-the-Year.'

'Oh, Norman, I wish we could.'

That emendation would have added spice to the Magnus Donners Prize, which got off to an unspirited start, with a somewhat pedestrian biography of Sir Horrocks Rusby. A contemporary of Sir Magnus, this once celebrated advocate's life-story was the only book of that year falling within the terms required. The frontispiece, a florid portrait of Rusby in wig and gown, was from the brush of Isbister, foreshadowing the painter's later resurgence. The following year there were sufficient eligible candidates to make me regret ever having let myself in for so much additional reading of an unexciting kind. It was won with a lively study of a wartime commander, written by a military historian of repute. The third year's choice, reflecting a new mood of free expression, was of greater interest than its forerunners; a politician, public personality rather than statesman, chronicled by a journalist friend, who provided, in generous profusion, details of his subject's adventures (he had been homosexual), which would have remained unrecorded only a few years before. Emily Brightman made one of her pronouncements, when this book had been finally adopted for the Prize.

'In its vulgar way, a painstaking piece of work, although one must always remember—something often forgotten today—that because things are generally known, they are not necessarily the better for being written down, or publicly announced. Some are, some aren't. As in everything else, good sense, taste, art, all have their place. Saying you prefer to disregard art, taste, good sense, does not mean that those elements do not exist—it merely means you lack them yourself.'

On the fourth and final year of the panel, the existing committee was confronted with much the same situation as that of the first presentation of the award, except that then there had been at least one eligible book, if no very inspiring one. This year, as I had told Salvidge, nothing at all seemed available. For one reason or another every biography to appear, or billed to appear within the publishing period required, fell outside the Magnus Donners category. When I arrived at the table for the second annual meeting, Emily Brightman and Mark Members were discussing procedure for announcing that, this year, the Prize would not be presented. A minute or two later Delavacquerie came into the restaurant. He held under his arm what looked like the proof copy of a book. When he sat down Emily Brightman tried to take it from him. Delavacquerie resisted. He would not even let her see the title, though admitting he had found a possible entrant for the Prize.

'The publishers got in touch with me yesterday.'

'Who's it about?'

'I'd like to speak of a few things first, before we get on to the actual merits of the book. There are complications. Other copies of this proof are in the post to the private addresses of all members of the Magnus Donners committee. If you decide in favour, the publishers can get the book out within the appointed time. Let's order luncheon before we go into the various problems.'

Delavacquerie kept the proof copy hidden on his knee. He always gave the impression of knowing exactly what he wanted to say, how he was going to behave. Emily Brightman, aware that to show impatience would undermine the strength of her position, displayed self-control. Delavacquerie possessed several of her own characteristics, firmness, directness, grasp of whatever subject had to be considered.

If they opposed each other, she was prepared to accept him on equal terms as an adversary, by no means true of everyone. When food and drink had been ordered, Delavacquerie began to make his statement. Even at the outset this was a sufficiently startling one.

'You remember, a long time ago, the name came up at one of these meetings of the novelist, X. Trapnel, author of *Camel Ride to the Tomb*, *Dogs Have No Uncles*, and other works? He died in the nineteen-fifties. You knew him quite well, I think, Nick?'

Members broke in.

'I knew Trapnel well too. We all knew him. Did he leave a posthumous biography of somebody, which has just been discovered?'

'I never knew Trapnel,' said Emily Brightman. 'Not personally, that is. I'm always promising myself to read his books, but this must be—'

'Please,' said Delavacquerie.

Smiling, he held Emily Brightman in check.

'I'm sorry, Gibson, but I'm sure I know more about this subject than you do.'

Delavacquerie, still smiling, shook his head. He continued. In relation to Trapnel he was determined to clarify his own position before anything else was said.

'I met Trapnel himself only once, and that not for long, more than twenty years ago, but I believe him to be a good writer. We have a life of Trapnel here. His career was not altogether uneventful. This book is by an American professor, a doctoral dissertation, none the worse for that. I have read the book. I think you will like it.'

Emily Brightman was not to be held in any longer. She raised a fork threateningly, as if about to stab Delavacquerie, if he did not come quickly to the point. Members, too, was showing signs of wanting to ventilate his own Trapnel experiences, before things went much further. I myself felt the same impelling urge.

'Gibson, this book must be written by Russell Gwinnett.'

Delavacquerie, who, reasonably enough, had forgotten that Emily Brightman once announced herself an old friend of Gwinnett's, looked a little surprised that she should know the name of the biographer.

'Have the publishers sent your proof copy already, Emily?'

'Not yet, but I knew Russell Gwinnett was writing a life of Trapnel. So did Nicholas. We could have told you at once, Gibson, had we been allowed to speak. Russell is an old friend of mine. Nicholas, too, met him when we were in Venice. We talked of it at the first meeting of this committee. You could not have been attending, Gibson. You see you sometimes underrate our capabilities.'

Delavacquerie laughed. Before he could defend himself, Members pegged out his own claim.

'I don't know Gwinnett, but I knew Trapnel. You count as knowing a man reasonably well after he's borrowed five pounds off you. Is that incident mentioned? I hope so.'

If Delavacquerie considered Gwinnett's book good, the judgment was likely to be sound. I was less surprised to hear that Gwinnett's biography of Trapnel was well done, than that it had ever been completed at all. If the work was accomplished, Gwinnett was likely to have brought to it the powers he certainly possessed. Personally, I had doubted that the study would ever see light. Emily Brightman must have thought the same. She was greatly excited by the news. When they had both been teaching at the same women's college in America, in a sense Gwinnett had been a protégé of hers. She had always supported a belief in his abilities as a writer. How much she was prepared to face another, more enigmatic, even more sinister, side of his character, was less easy to assess.

'I told you Russell was an industrious young man, Nicholas. A capable one too. I suppose he can't be spoken of as young any longer. He must be well into his forties. At last it looks as if we've found someone for the Prize. There is no writer to whom I would rather award it than Russell. It's just what he needs to give him self-assurance, and what the Prize itself needs, to lift it out of the rut of the commonplace. Show me the proof at once, Gibson.'

Delavacquerie continued to withhold the proof copy.

'Not yet, Emily.'

'Gibson, you are intolerable. Don't be absurd. Hand it over immediately.'

'I'm prepared to be magnanimous about the fiver,' said Members. 'I could ill afford forfeiture of five pounds at the time, but we were all penniless writers together, and bygones shall be bygones. The point is whether the book is good.'

'The merits of Gwinnett's book are not so much the issue,' said Delavacquerie. 'The difficulty is quite another matter.'

'I know what you're going to put forward,' said Emily Brightman. 'Libel. Am I right? I can see a book of that sort might be libellous, but that is surely the publisher's affair. We shall have given the Prize before the row starts.'

'That is not exactly the problem. At least the publishers are not worried in a general way on that ground. They think the possibility of anything of the sort very remote. The libel, if any, would be in connexion with Trapnel's love affair with Pamela Widmerpool. As you know, she destroyed the manuscript of his last novel. That business was largely responsible for Trapnel's final débâcle.'

'An interesting legal point,' said Members. 'Is it libellous to write that someone's deceased wife was unfaithful to him? I always understood, in days when I myself worked in a publisher's office, that you can't libel the dead. That was one of the firmest foundations of the publishing profession. On the other hand, I suppose the surviving partner might consider himself libelled, as being put on record as a trompé'd husband. At the time I was speaking of, my ancient publishing days, there also existed the element Emily brought up, rather severely, at one of our meetings—good taste—but fortunately we don't have to bother about that now—even if it does platonically exist, as Emily assures us. Don't say it's good taste that makes you waver, Gibson. I believe you're frightened of Emily's disapproval.'

Members and Delavacquerie, outwardly well disposed towards each other, anyway conversationally, were not much in sympathy at base. Delavacquerie, formal as always, may all the same have revealed on some occasion his own sense of mutual disharmony. If so, Members was now getting his own back. Delavacquerie, recognizing that, smiled.

'You may be right, Mark. At the same time you will agree, I think, when I state the problem, that it is a rather special one. Meanwhile, let me release these proofs.'

He handed the bundle to Emily Brightman, who almost snatched it from his hands. She turned at once to the title-page. I read the layout over her arm.

DEATH'S-HEAD SWORDSMAN
The Life and Works of
X. TRAPNEL
by
RUSSELL GWINNETT

In due course the proofs came my way. Gwinnett's academic appointment, named at the beginning of the book, was held at an American college to be judged of fairly obscure status, though lately in the news, owing to exceptionally severe student troubles on its campus. On the page where a dedication might have stood, an epigraph was set.

My study's ornament, thou shell of death,
Once the bright face of my betrothèd lady.
The Revenger's Tragedy.

For those who knew anything of Gwinnett, or of Trapnel for that matter, the quotation was, to say the least, ambiguous. The longer the lines were considered, the more profuse in private meaning they seemed to become. Moreland, too, had been keen on the plays of Cyril Tourneur. He used often to quote a favourite image from one of them: '. . . and how quaintly he died, like a politician, in hugger-mugger, made no man acquainted with it . . .'

Tourneur, as Gwinnett himself, was obsessed with Death. The skull, carried by the actor, his 'study's ornament', was no doubt, in one sense, intended to strike the opening note of Gwinnett's book, his own 'study'. The couplet drew attention also to the melodramatic title (referring presumably to the death's-head, mentioned by Delavacquerie, on the top of Trapnel's sword-stick); but had it deeper meaning as well? If so, who was intended? The lines could be regarded as, say, dedication to the memory of Gwinnett's earlier girlfriend (at whose death he had been involved in some sort of scandal); alternatively, as allusion to Pamela Widmerpool herself. If the latter, were the words conceived as spoken by Trapnel, by Gwinnett, by both—or, indeed, by all Pamela's lovers? Even if ironical, they were appropriate enough. At least they defined the tone of the book. Then another thought came. Not only was the quotation about a skull, the title of Tourneur's play had also to be considered. It was called *The Revenger's Tragedy*. Did revenge play some part in writing the book? If so, Gwinnett's revenge on whom? Trapnel? Pamela? Widmerpool? There were too many questions to sort out at that moment. Delavacquerie allowed everyone to examine the proofs as long as they wished, before he brought out the information he was holding in reserve.

'With regard to libel,' said Emily Brightman. 'I see that neither Lord Widmerpool, nor his late wife, is named in what is evidently a very full index. I am, by the way, hearing all sorts of strange stories about Lord Widmerpool's behaviour as a university chancellor. He seems to have the oddest ideas how the duties of that office should be carried out.'

I, too, had noticed the omission of the names of the Widmerpools, husband and wife, from the book's index. That did not mean that their identities were necessarily unrecognizable in the text. Members protested at all this talk about libel.

'I can't see that we need be punctilious about the susceptibilities of Lord Widmerpool, whatever Emily feels as to maintaining standards of good taste. Especially as she herself now draws attention to his much advertised broadmindedness, in various recent statements made by him, on the subject of students at his own university.'

This gave Delavacquerie the opportunity he was waiting for to produce an effective climax to what he had been saying.

'What you put forward, Mark, is quite true. Only last week I was watching a programme of Lord Widmerpool's dealing with protest, counterculture, alternative societies, all the things that he is now interested in. That does not entirely meet our problem, which is a rather more delicate one. The fact is that Lord Widmerpool acts as one of the trustees of the fund from which the Magnus Donners Memorial Prize derives.'

This piece of information naturally made a considerable impression. None of the committee came out with an immediate response. My own first thought was how on earth Widmerpool could have come to occupy such a position in relation to this literary prize, or any other. He might be planning to write a book, but, after all, he had been talking of doing that from his earliest days. More than this was needed as explanation. Who could have been insane enough to have made him trustee of the Magnus Donners Prize? Then, when Delavacquerie continued, the reason became plain.

'Lord Widmerpool, in his early business life, was for quite a long time associated with Donners-Brebner. He did many miscellaneous jobs for Sir Magnus himself. At one time he might almost have been called Sir Magnus's right-hand man, so I've been told, though I've never known Lord Widmerpool personally, only seen him at meetings.'

'The term jackal has been used,' said Members.

Delavacquerie ignored the comment. He was always determined that the formalities should be observed.

'Putting in work on organizing this fund for the Donners-Brebner Fellowships was one of the tasks allotted. In that capacity, as benefiting from them myself, I might even be considered in his debt. For some reason when the Prize was, so to speak, detached from the general sum, Lord Widmerpool's name remained as a trustee.'

Even Members agreed that a ticklish problem was posed. Any hypothetical question of libel sank into the background, compared with the propriety of awarding a substantial monetary prize, administered—at least in theory—by Widmerpool himself, to an author, who had been one of his wife's lovers, and written the biography of another man, of whom she had also been the mistress. Besides, Gwinnett had not merely been Pamela's lover, he was considered by some to be at least the indirect cause of her death; even if she herself had chosen that to be so. After quite a long pause, Emily Brightman spoke.

'I feel dreadfully sure that I am going to vote for Russell getting the Prize, but I do agree that we are faced with a very delicate situation.'

Delavacquerie, who had no doubt given a good deal of thought to the perplexity which he knew would confront the panel, appeared quite prepared for its attitude to be one of irresolution.

'The first thing to do is for the committee to read the book, decide whether or not you want the Prize to be given to Professor Gwinnett. If you do, I am prepared to take the next step myself. I will approach Lord Widmerpool in person, and ask him where he stands on the matter. It will no doubt be necessary for him to read *Death's-head Swordsman* too, before he can make up his mind.'

Members showed uneasiness about that. I felt a little doubtful myself. It seemed going out of the way to meet trouble.

'But Kenneth Widmerpool may forbid publication. What shall we do then? Why should we be bullied by him? Surely it would be better to leave Widmerpool alone. What can he do?'

Delavacquerie was firm.

'The question to some extent involves the Company. The directors may not care tuppence what Widmerpool feels in the matter, but they would not wish attention to be drawn to the fact that he is still connected with the Company to that extent, and at the same time objects to publication. I should like to get Lord Widmerpool's attitude clearly stated, if I have to consult them. His name could be quietly removed. All sorts of things might be done. They can be gone into, when we know his own views. To remove his name right away, for instance, might induce trouble, rather than curtail it.'

That sounded reasonable. Members withdrew his objection. What had worried him, he said, was thought that the award could turn on Widmerpool's whim. In other respects, the idea that the committee's choice might cause a stir greatly pleased Members, who always enjoyed conflict.

'This is a courageous offer, Gibson,' said Emily Brightman.

Delavacquerie laughed.

'In not knowing Lord Widmerpool personally, I have the advantage of ignorance. That is sometimes a useful weapon. I am perhaps not so foolhardy as you all seem to think. There are aspects of the Trapnel story with which, in his latest frame of mind, Lord Widmerpool might even welcome association. I mean Trapnel the despised and rejected—insomuch as Trapnel was despised and rejected.'

I felt confidence in Delavacquerie's judgment, and could grasp some of what he meant. Nevertheless his train of thought was not wholly clear.

'But even the new Widmerpool will hardly stomach such an association with Gwinnett, will he?'

'We'll see. I may be wrong. It's worth a try.'

Delavacquerie was giving nothing away at this stage. During what remained of the meeting no matter of consequence was discussed. *Death's-head Swordsman* had first to be read. That was the next step. Luncheon came to an end. Emily Brightman said she was on her way to the British Museum. Members was going to his hairdresser, before attending another literary prize committee later that afternoon. After saying goodbye to the others, Delavacquerie and I set off for Fleet Street.

'How do you propose to tackle Widmerpool?'

Delavacquerie's manner changed a little from its carefully screened air employed at the table.

'Tell me, Nicholas, did not Pamela Widmerpool take an overdose that she might be available to the necrophilic professor?'

'That was how things looked at the time. She may have decided to do herself in anyway.'

'But it might be said that Gwinnett—by, perhaps only indirectly, being the cause of her end—avenged Trapnel for destruction of his novel, and consequent downfall?'

'You could look at it that way.'

'In a sense Gwinnett represents Widmerpool's revenge on Pamela too?'

'That also occurred to me. *The Revenger's Tragedy*. All the same, the point is surely not going to be easy to put, as man-to-man, when you confront Widmerpool?'

'Nevertheless, I shall bear it in mind.'

'I never thought Gwinnett would get the book finished. He gave up academic life when all the trouble happened. I last heard of him teaching water-skiing.'

'A promising profession for a man keen on Death?'

'I don't think Gwinnett does away with his girls. He is not a murderer. He just loves where Death is. The subject enraptures him. Emily Brightman says there was an earlier incident of his breaking into a mortuary, where a dead love of his lay.'

Delavacquerie thought for a moment.

'I can understand the obsession, like most others. People love where Beauty is, where Money is, where Power is—why not where Death is? An American poet said Death is the Mother of Beauty. No, I was being perhaps unduly secretive at lunch. I'll tell you. I have a special line on Lord Widmerpool. My son is at the university of which he is the chancellor.'

I knew Delavacquerie's wife had died ten or fifteen years before. I had never met her. They had come across each other in England, the marriage, so far as I knew, a happy one. Delavacquerie sometimes spoke of his wife. The son he had never before mentioned.

'In the ordinary way, of course, Etienne would scarcely know who was the chancellor of the university. Lord Widmerpool, as we were saying at lunch, has for some little time been laying stress on his own closeness to the younger generation, and its upheavals. You may have seen his letters —always signed nowadays "Ken Widmerpool", rather than just "Widmerpool", as a peer of the realm—a matey approach habitually brought into play so far as students of the university are concerned. He has made his house a centre for what might be called the more difficult cases.'

'Was your son involved in the Quiggin twins' paint-throwing?'

Delavacquerie laughed at the suggestion.

'On the contrary, Etienne is a hard-working boy, who wants to get a good economics degree, but naturally he does the things his own contemporaries do up to a point—knows all about them, I mean, even if he isn't the paint-throwing type. He has talked a lot about Lord Widmerpool. Quite a personality cult has been established there. Lord Widmerpool has made himself a powerful figure in the student world—which, I need hardly remind you, is by no means entirely made up of students.'

'You think your knowledge of Widmerpool's latest stance is such as to persuade him to create no difficulties about Gwinnett's book?'

'It is my own self-esteem that prompts me to attempt this. That is what I am like. I want to come back to the Magnus Donners Prize committee, and inform them that Lord Widmerpool is perfectly agreeable to *Death's-head Swordsman* receiving the award—that is, if you and the rest of the panel wish the book to be chosen.'

This statement of his own feelings in the matter was very typical of Delavacquerie; to admit ambitions of a kind not necessarily to be expected from a poet, anyway the poet of popular imagination. By the time we had this conversation the habit had grown up of our lunching together in London at fairly regular intervals (quite apart from the Magnus Donners meetings), so that I was already familiar with a side of him that was competitive in a manner he rather liked to emphasize. Then he came out with something for which I was not at all prepared.

'Isn't a girl called Fiona Cutts some sort of a relation of yours?'

'A niece.'

'She used to be a friend of Etienne's.'

'Lately?'

'A year or two ago. For a short time she and Etienne saw quite a lot of each other—I mean enough for me to have met her too. A nice girl. I think in the end she found Etienne too humdrum, though they got on well for a while.'

'Did they meet with the odd crowd Fiona is now going round with?'

'No, not at all. At some musical get-together, I think. The thing broke up when this other business started.'

Fiona's friendship with Etienne Delavacquerie had never percolated down through the family grapevine. There was no particular reason why it should. Even Fiona's parents were unlikely to keep track of all their daughter's current boyfriends. It was a pity Susan and Roddy Cutts had never known about this apparently reliable young man. They would have felt relieved, anyway for a short period of time. Delavacquerie, also regretting the termination of the relationship, was probably in ignorance of the extent to which Fiona could show herself a handful. I asked if he knew about Scorpio Murtlock.

'I knew she was now mixed up with some mystic cult. I didn't know Murtlock had anything to do with her. I thought he was a queer.'

'Hard to say.'

'All I know about Murtlock is that Quentin Shuckerly picked him up somewhere ages ago. Shuckerly, expecting an easy lay, put Murtlock up in his flat. Shuckerly can be quite tough in such matters—that former intellectual black boyfriend of his used to call him the Narcissus of the Nigger—but his toughness, or his narcissism, didn't stand up to Murtlock's. Shuckerly had to leave the country to get Murtlock out of his flat. A new book of Shuckerly poems was held up in publication in consequence. I wouldn't have thought Murtlock a wise young man to get mixed up with. Etienne never told me that.'

Delavacquerie looked quite disturbed. Here our ways had to part.

'I should like to bug your conversation with Widmerpool, anyway your opening gambit.'

Delavacquerie made a dramatic gesture.

'I shall take the bull by the horns—adopt the directness of the CIA man and the Cuban defector.'

'What was that?'

'He asked him a question.'

'Which was?'

'You know how it is in Havana in the Early Warning?'

Delavacquerie waved goodbye. I went on towards the paper, to get a book for review. In the anxiety he had shown about his son's abandoned love affair—and Fiona's own involvement with Murtlock—Delavacquerie had displayed more feeling than he usually revealed. It suggested that Etienne Delavacquerie had been fairly hard hit when Fiona went off. I was interested that Delavacquerie himself had met her, and would have liked to hear more of his views on that subject. There had been no opportunity. In any case the friendships of later life, in contrast with those negotiated before thirty, are apt to be burdened with reservations, constraints, inhibitions. Probably thirty was placing the watershed too late for the age when both parties begin more or less to know (at least think they know) what the other is talking about; as opposed to those earlier friendships—not unlike love affairs, with all sexual element removed—which can exist with scarcely an interest in common, mutual misunderstanding of character and motive all but absolute.

In earlier days, given our comparative intellectual intimacy, there would have been no embarrassment in enquiring about Delavacquerie's own sexual arrangements. The question would have been an aspect of being friends. In fact, Delavacquerie himself would almost certainly have issued some sort of statement of his own on the matter, a handout likely to have been given early priority, when we were first getting to know one another. That was why the rumoured brush with Matilda remained altogether blurred in outline. There was no doubt that Delavacquerie liked women, got on well with them. His poetry showed that. If he possessed any steady company—hard to believe he did not—the lady herself never seemed to appear with him in public.

Thinking of the information now accumulating about Scorpio Murtlock, an incident that had taken place a few years before came to mind. It might or might not be Murtlock this time, the principle was the same. The occasion also marked the last time I had set eyes on an old acquaintance, Sunny Farebrother. I was in London only for the day. Entering a comparatively empty compartment on a tube train, I saw Farebrother sitting at the far end. Wearing a black overcoat and bowler hat, both ancient as his wartime uniforms, he was as usual holding himself very upright. He did not look like a man verging on eighty. White moustache neatly trimmed, he could have passed for middle sixties. In one sense a figure conspicuously of the past in turnout, there was also something about him that was extremely up-to-date, not to say brisk. He was smiling to himself. I took the vacant seat next to him.

'Hullo, Sunny.'

Farebrother's face at once lost its smile. Instead, it assumed an expression of rueful compassion. It was the face he had put on when Widmerpool, then a major on the staff, seemed likely to be sacked from Divisional Headquarters. Farebrother, an old enemy, had dropped in to announce that fact.

'Nicholas, how splendid to meet again after all these years. You find me on my way back from a sad occasion. I am returning from Kensal Green Cemetery. The last tribute to an old friend. One of these fellows I'd known for a mighty long time. Life will never be quite the same again without him. We didn't always hit it off together—but, my goodness, Nicholas, he was someone known to you too. I've just been to Jimmy Stripling's funeral. Poor old Jimmy. You must remember him. You and I stayed at the Templers', a hundred years ago, when Jimmy was there. He was the old man's son-in-law in those days. Tall chap, hair parted in the middle, keen on motor-racing. I always remember how Jimmy, and some of the rest of the house-party, tried to play a trick on me, after we'd come back from a ball, and I had gone up to bed. Poor old Jimmy hoped to put a po in my hatbox. I was too sharp for him.'

Farebrother shook his head in sadness at the folly of human nature, folly so abjectly displayed by Jimmy Stripling in hoping to outwit Farebrother in a matter of that sort. I saw now that a black tie added to the sombre note struck by the rest of his clothes.

'Jimmy and I used to do a lot of business together in our early City days. He always pretended we didn't get on well. Then, poor old boy, he gave up the City—he was in Lloyd's, hadn't done too badly there, and elsewhere—gave up his motor-racing, got a divorce from Peter Templer's sister, and began mixing himself up with all sorts of strange goings-on that couldn't have been at all good for the nerves. Old Jimmy was a highly strung beggar in his way. Took up with a strange lady, who told fortunes. Occultism, all that.

Not a good thing. Bad thing, in fact. The last time I saw him, only a few years ago, he was driving along Piccadilly in a car that could have been fifty years old, if it was a day. Jimmy must have lost all his money. His cars were once his pride and joy. Always had the latest model before anyone else. Now he was grinding along in this old crock. I could have wept at seeing Jimmy reduced to an old tin can like that.'

Farebrother, a habit of his when he told almost any story, suddenly lowered his voice, at the same time looking round to see if we were likely to be overheard, though no one else was sitting at our end of the compartment.

'It was even worse than that, I fear. There weren't many at the funeral but those who were looked a rum lot, to say the least. I got into conversation with one of the few mourners who was respectably dressed. Turned out he was a member of Lloyd's, like Jimmy, though he hadn't seen him for a long time. Do you know what had happened? When that fortune-telling lady of Jimmy's was gathered in, he took up with a *boy*. Would you have believed it? Jimmy may have behaved like a crackpot at times, but no one ever guessed he had *those* tastes. This bloke I talked to told me he'd heard that a lot of undesirables used to live off Jimmy towards the end. I don't think he'd have invented the tale on account of the funny types at the funeral. Jimmy's boy was there. In fact he was more or less running the show. He wore a sort of coloured robe, hair not much short of his shoulders. Good-looking lad in his way, if you'd cleaned him up a bit. Funnily enough, I didn't at all take against him, little as I'm drawn to that type as a rule. Even something I rather liked, if you can believe that. He had an air of efficiency. That always gets me. It was a cremation, and this young fellow showed himself perfectly capable of taking charge. All these strange types in their robes sang a sort of dirge for Jimmy at the close of the proceedings.'

'Perhaps it was the efficiency Jimmy Stripling liked?'

'I hope you're right, Nicholas. I hadn't thought of that. Jimmy just needed somebody to look after him in his old age. I expect that was it. We all need that. I see I've been uncharitable. I'm glad I went to the funeral, all the same. I make a point of going to funerals and memorial services, sad as they are, because you always meet a lot of people at them you haven't seen for years, and that often comes in useful later. Jimmy's was the exception. I never expect to set eyes on mourners like his again, Kensal Green, or anywhere else.'

The train was approaching my station.

'How are you yourself, Sunny?'

'Top-hole form, top-hole. Saw my vet last week. Said he'd never inspected a fitter man of my age. As you probably know, Nicholas, I'm a widower now.'

'I didn't. I'm sorry to hear—'

'Three years ago. A wonderful woman, Geraldine. Marvellous manager. Knew just where to save. Never had any money of her own, left a sum small but by no means to be disregarded. A wonderful woman. Happy years together. Fragrant memories. Yes, I'm in the same little place in the country. I get along somehow. Everyone round about is very kind and helpful. You and your wife must come and see my roses. I can always manage a cup of tea. Bless you, Nicholas, bless you . . .'

As I walked along the platform towards the Exit staircase the train moved on past me. I saw Farebrother once more through the window as the pace increased. He was still sitting bolt upright, and had begun to smile again. On the visit to which he had himself referred, the time when Stripling's practical joke had fallen so flat, Peter Templer had pronounced a judgment on Farebrother. It remained a valid one.

'He's a downy old bird.'

3

IRRITATED BY WHAT HE JUDGED the 'impacted clichés' of some review, Trapnel had once spoken his own opinions on the art of biography.

'People think because a novel's invented, it isn't true. Exactly the reverse is the case. Because a novel's invented, it is true. Biography and memoirs can never be wholly true, since they can't include every conceivable circumstance of what happened. The novel can do that. The novelist himself lays it down. His decision is binding. The biographer, even at his highest and best, can be only tentative, empirical. The autobiographer, for his part, is imprisoned in his own egotism. He must always be suspect. In contrast with the other two, the novelist is a god, creating his man, making him breathe and walk. The man, created in his own image, provides information about the god. In a sense you know more about Balzac and Dickens from their novels, than Rousseau and Casanova from their Confessions.'

'But novelists can be as egotistical as any other sort of writer. Their sheer narcissism often makes them altogether unreadable. A novelist may inescapably create all his characters in his own image, but the reader can believe in them, without necessarily accepting their creator's judgment on them. You might see a sinister strain in Bob Cratchit, conventionality in Stavrogin, delicacy in Molly Bloom. Besides, the very concept of a character in a novel—in real life too—is under attack.'

'What you say, Nick, strengthens my contention that only a novel can imply certain truths impossible to state by exact definition. Biography and autobiography are forced to attempt exact definition. In doing so truth goes astray. The novelist is more serious—if that is the word.'

'Surely biographers and memoir-writers often do no more than imply things they chronicle, or put them forward as uncertain. A novelist is subjective, and selective, all the time. The others have certain facts forced on them, whether they like it or not. Besides, some of the very worst novelists are the most consciously serious ones.'

'Of course a novelist is *serious* only if he is a good novelist. You mention Molly Bloom. She offers an example of what I am saying. Obviously her sexual musings—and her husband's—derive from the author, to the extent that he invented them. Such descriptions would have been a thousand times less convincing, if attributed to Stephen Dedalus—let alone to Joyce himself. Their strength lies in existence within the imaginary personalities of the Blooms. That such traits are much diminished, when given to a hero, is even to some extent exemplified in *Ulysses*. It may be acceptable to read of Bloom tossing off. A blow by blow account of the author doing so is hardly conceivable as interesting. Perhaps, at the base of it all, is the popular confusion of self-pity with compassion. What is effective is art, not what is "true"—using the term in inverted commas.'

'Like Pilate.'

'Unfortunately Pilate wasn't a novelist.'

'Or even a memoir-writer.'

'Didn't Petronius serve as a magistrate in some distant part of the Roman Empire? Think if the case had come up before him. Perhaps Petronius was a different period.'

The *Satyricon* was the only classical work ever freely quoted by Trapnel. He would often refer to it. I recalled his views on biography, reading Gwinnett's—found on return home—and wondered how far Trapnel would have regarded this example as proving his point. That a biography of Trapnel should have been written at all was surprising enough, an eventuality beyond all guessing for those to whom he had been no more than another necessitous phantom at the bar, to stand or be stood a half pint of bitter. Now, by a process every bit as magical as any mutations on the astral plane claimed by Dr Trelawney, there would be casual readers to find entertainment in the chronicle of Trapnel's days, professional critics adding to their reputation by analysis of his style, academics rummaging for nuggets among the Trapnel remains. It seemed unlikely that much was left over. Gwinnett had done a thorough job.

I had been friends with Trapnel only a few years, but in those years witnessed some of his most characteristic attitudes and performances. Here was a good instance of later trimmings that throw light on an already known story. Gwinnett had not only recorded the routine material well, he had dealt judiciously with much else of general interest at that immediately post-war period; one not specially easy to handle, especially for an American by no means steeped in English life. Prudently, Gwinnett had not always accepted Trapnel (given to self-fantasy) at his own estimation. The final disastrous spill (worse than any on the racecourse by his jockey father)—that is to say Trapnel's infatuation with Pamela Widmerpool—had been treated with an altogether unexpected subtlety. Gwinnett had once implied that his own involvement with Pamela might impair objectivity, but only those who knew of that already were likely to recognize the extent to which author identified himself with subject. I wrote to Delavacquerie recommending that *Death's-head Swordsman* should receive the year's Magnus Donners Memorial Prize. He replied that, Emily Brightman and Mark Members being in agreement, he himself would, as arranged, approach Widmerpool. If Widmerpool objected to our choice, we should have to think again. In due course, Delavacquerie reported back on this matter. His letters, like his speech, always possessed a touch of formality.

'There are to be no difficulties for the judges from that quarter. Lord Widmerpool's assurances justify me in my own eyes. You would laugh at the professional pleasure I take in being able to write this, the quiet satisfaction I find in my own skill at negotiation. To tell the truth no negotiation had to take place. Lord Widmerpool informed me straightaway that he did not care a fart—that was his unexpected phrase—what was said about him in Professor Gwinnett's book, either by name or anonymously. He gave no reason for this, but was evidently speaking without reservation of any kind. At first he said he did not even wish to see a copy of *Death's-head Swordsman*, as he held all conventional writings of our day in hearty contempt, but, thinking it best to do so, I persuaded him to accept a proof. It seemed to me that would put the committee of judges in a stronger position. Lord Widmerpool said that, if he had time, he would look at the book. Nothing he found there would make any difference to what he had already told me. That allays all fears as to the propriety of the award. Have you seen Lord Widmerpool lately? He is greatly altered from what I remember of him, though I only knew him by sight. Perhaps the American continent has had that effect. As you know, I regard the Western Hemisphere as a potent force on all who are brought in contact with its influences, whether or not they were born or live there—and of course I do not merely mean the US. Possibly I was right in my assessment of how Lord Widmerpool would react towards Professor Gwinnett's book. At present I cannot be sure whether my triumph—if it may so be called—was owed to that assessment. Lord Widmerpool made one small condition. It will amuse you. I will tell you about it when we next lunch together—next week, if you are in London. I have kept Matilda in touch with all these developments.'

The news of Widmerpool's indifference to whatever Gwinnett might have written, unanticipated in its comprehensive disdain of the whole Trapnel—and Gwinnett—story, certainly made the position of the Prize committee easier. It looked as if the publishers had already cleared the matter with Widmerpool. They seemed to have no fear of legal proceedings, and Delavacquerie's letter gave the impression that his interview might not have provided Widmerpool's first awareness of the book. Even so, without this sanction, there could have been embarrassments owed to the Donners-Brebner connexion. I wrote to Gwinnett (with whom I had not corresponded since his Spanish interlude), addressing the letter to the English Department of the American college named at the beginning of his book.

The recipient of the Magnus Donners Prize was given dinner at the expense of the Company. A selection of writers, publishers, literary editors, columnists, anyone else deemed helpful to publicity in the circumstances, was invited. Speeches were made. It was not an evening-dress affair. Convened in a suite of rooms on the upper floor of a restaurant much used for such occasions, the party was usually held in the early months of the year following that for which the book had been chosen. As a function, the Magnus Donners Memorial Prize dinner was just what might be expected, a business gathering, rather than a social one. Delavacquerie, who had its arranging, saw that food and drink were never less than tolerable. When he and I next met for one of our luncheons together I asked what had been Widmerpool's condition for showing so easygoing an attitude.

'That he should himself be invited to the dinner.'

'Did he make the request ironically?'

'Not in the least.'

As a public figure of a sort, although one fallen into comparative obscurity, issue of an invitation to Widmerpool would in no way run counter to the general pattern of guests; even if his presence, owing to the particular circumstances, might strike a bizarre note. It was likely that a large proportion of those present would be too young to have heard—anyway too young to take much interest in—the scandals of ten years before.

'No doubt Widmerpool can be sent a card. You were right in thinking the stipulation would amuse me.'

'You haven't heard it all yet.'

'What else?'

'He wants to bring two guests.'

'Donners-Brebner can presumably extend their hospitality that far.'

'Of course.'

'Who are to be Widmerpool's guests?'

'Whom do you think?'

The answer was not so easy as first appeared. Whom would Widmerpool ask? I made several guesses at personalities of rather his own kind, figures to be judged useful in one practical sphere or another. In putting forward these names, I became aware how little I now knew of Widmerpool's latest orientations and ambitions. Delavacquerie shook his head, smiling at the wrongness of such speculation.

'I told you Lord Widmerpool had greatly changed. Let me give you a clue. Two ladies.'

I put forward a life peeress and an actress, neither in their first youth.

'Not so elderly.'

'I give it up.'

'The Quiggin twins.'

'The girls who threw paint over him?'

'The same.'

'But—is he having an affair with both of them?'

Delavacquerie laughed. He was pleased with the effect of the information he had given.

'Not, I feel fairly sure, in any physical sense, although I gather he has no objection to girls who frequent his place—boys too, Etienne assures me—being good to look at. If the weather is warm, undressing is encouraged. I doubt if he contemplates sleeping with either sex. You know Widmerpool is not far from making himself into a Holy Man these days, certainly a much venerated one in his own circle.'

'What will Gwinnett think of this, if he comes to the dinner himself? I imagine it is quite possible he will. Have you heard from him about getting the Prize? I wrote a line of congratulation, but have had no reply.'

That Gwinnett had not replied was no surprise. It did not at all diverge from the accustomed Gwinnett manner of going on. If anything, lack of an answer suggested that Gwinnett's harassing London experiences had left him unchanged.

'Professor Gwinnett wrote to me, as secretary of the Prize committee, to say he would take pleasure in travelling over here to receive the Prize in person.'

'That will add to the drama of the dinner.'

'He said he was on the point of visiting this country in any case. He would speed up his plans.'

'Was Gwinnett pleased his book was chosen?'

'Pleased—far from overwhelmed. He wrote a few conventional phrases, saying he was gratified, adding that he would turn up for the dinner, if I would let him know time and place. No more. He was not at all effusive. In fact, from my own experience of Americans, his appreciation was restrained to the point of being brusque.'

'That's his line.'

The publishers issued *Death's-head Swordsman* just in time to be eligible for the Prize, though not at an advantageous moment to receive much attention from reviewers. That was inevitable in the circumstances. Such notices as appeared were favourable, but still few in number by the time of the Magnus Donners dinner, which took place, as usual, in the New Year.

'I'm asking the committee to come early,' said Delavacquerie. 'It's going to be rather an exceptional affair this year. Last-minute problems may arise.'

When I arrived he was moving about the dining-room, checking that seating was correct. Emily Brightman and Mark Members had not yet turned up.

'Professor Gwinnett is on Matilda's right, of course, and I've put Isobel on his other side. Emily Brightman thought it might look too much as if she had been set to keep an eye on him, if she were next door. Emily is sitting next to you, Nick, and a Donners-Brebner director's wife on the other side. Let me see, Mrs—'

The winner of the Prize was always beside Matilda Donners, at a long table, which included judges, representatives of the Company, and wives of these. At the end of dinner Delavacquerie's duty was to say a few words about the Prize itself. One of the judges' panel then introduced the recipient, and spoke of his book. Members, a compulsive public speaker, had been easily persuaded to undertake this duty. Brevity would not be attained, but it was more than possible that, having known Trapnel personally, he would in any case have risen to his feet. To tell the story of the borrowed five pounds would be tempting. Members had once before 'said a few words', after the scheduled speeches were at an end, followed by Alaric Kydd, who also felt that a speech was owed from him. Kydd had been expatriate for some years now, so there was no risk of that tonight. Delavacquerie took a last look round the tables.

'I've placed Lord Widmerpool and the Miss Quiggins out of the way of the winner of the Prize and the judges. In the far corner of the room by the other door. I think that is wise, don't you? A quiet table. Elderly reviewers and their wives or boyfriends. No young journalists. That's just being on the safe side.'

'I doubt if the present generation of young journalists remember about Gwinnett's connexion with Widmerpool. They may recall that the Quiggin twins threw paint over him. Even that's back last summer, and ancient history. What sort of form is Gwinnett himself in?'

'I haven't seen him.'

'Didn't he call you up on arrival?'

'I've heard nothing from him since his reply to my second letter. I suggested we should make contact before this dinner. He answered that he had all the information he needed. He would just turn up at the appointed time.'

'Where's he staying?'

'I don't even know that. I offered to fix him up with an hotel. He said he'd make his own arrangements.'

'He's being very Gwinnett-like. I hope he will turn up tonight. On second thoughts, it might be better if he did not appear. We can easily go through the motions of awarding the Prize *in absentia*. The presence of the author is not required for voicing correct sentiments about his book. Various potential embarrassments might be avoided without Gwinnett himself.'

'Gwinnett will be here all right. He writes the letter of a man of purpose.'

I agreed with that view. Gwinnett was, without doubt, a man of purpose. Before we could discuss the matter further Emily Brightman came in, followed a moment later by Members. She was dressed with care for her rôle of judge, a long garment, whitish, tufted, a medal hanging from her neck that suggested a stylish parody of Murtlock's medallion. Delavacquerie fingered this ornament questioningly.

'Coptic, Gibson. I should have thought a person of your erudition would have recognized its provenance immediately. Is Lenore coming tonight, Mark?'

'Lenore was very sad at not being able to attend. She had to dash over to Boston again.'

'Congratulations on your own award.'

Members bowed. He was in a good humour. Emily Brightman referred to the poetry prize he had just received—nothing so liberal in amount as the Magnus Donners, but acceptable—for his *Collected Poems*, a volume which brought together all his verse from *Iron Aspidistra* (1923) to *H-Bomb Eclogue* (1966), the latter, one of the few poems Members had produced of late years.

'Thank you, Emily.'

'You have heard that the Quiggin twins are to be here tonight?'

'Rather hard on JG and Ada, who are also coming. They've done their best for those girls. The only reward is that they throw paint over Kenneth Widmerpool, and then turn up with him at their parents' parties.'

The disapproval with which Members spoke did not conceal a touch of excitement. If the Quiggin twins were to be present there was no knowing what might not happen. The room began to fill. L. O. Salvidge, an old supporter of Trapnel's (he had taken some trouble to give *Death's-head Swordsman* a send-off review), brought a new wife, his fourth. Wearing very long shiny black boots, much blue round the eyes, she was a good deal younger than her predecessors. They were followed by Bernard Shernmaker, who, in contrast with Salvidge, had always remained unmarried. Shernmaker, by not reviewing Gwinnett's book had still avoided committing himself about Trapnel. He was in not at all a good temper, in fact seemed in the depths of rage and despair. If looks were anything to go by, he was never going to write a notice of *Death's-head Swordsman*. Members, as an old acquaintance, did not allow Shernmaker's joyless façade to modify his own consciously jocular greeting.

'Hullo, Bernard. Have you heard the Quiggin twins are coming tonight? What do you think about that?'

Shernmaker's face contorted horribly. Nightmares of boredom and melancholy oozed from him, infecting all the social atmosphere round about. Somebody put a drink in his hand. Tension relaxed a little. A moment later the Quiggin parents appeared. Ada, as customary with her, was making the best of things. If she knew about her daughters attending the party with Widmerpool, she was determined to carry the situation off at this stage as natural enough. The probability was that she did not yet know the twins were to be present. Fifty in sight, Ada had kept her looks remarkably well. She began to profess immense enthusiasm at the prospect of meeting Gwinnett again.

'Is he here yet? I scarcely took him in at all, when we were all in Venice that time. I long to have another look. Fancy Pamela, of all people, going to such lengths for a man.'

'Gwinnett hasn't arrived yet.'

'Now that he's won the Magnus Donners, JG is furious we never signed him up for the Trapnel biography. I suggested that at the time. JG wasn't in the least interested. He said books about recently dead writers were dead ducks. He's specially angry because L. O. Salvidge gave it such a good notice. I told him that was only because there's nothing about at this time of year. JG's not only cross on account of none of our books ever winning the Magnus Donners, but he's got a bad throat too. It makes him full of *Angst*, worries, regrets of all sorts. He mustn't stay late.'

Quiggin was certainly looking sorry for himself. Giving off an exhalation of cold-cures, he was wrinkling his high forehead irritably. Contrary to Ada's words, he showed little or no interest in who might, or might not, have won the Prize, brushing off Evadne Clapham, when she tried to get his opinion about the selection this time. Evadne Clapham herself had recently made something of a comeback with *Cain's Jawbone* (her thirty-fifth novel), a story that returned to the style which had first made her name.

'The title of Mr Gwinnett's book is curiously like that of my own last novel, JG. Do you think he could have had time to be influenced by reading it? I'm so anxious to meet him. There's something I *must* tell him in confidence about Trappy.'

Quiggin, offering no opinion on book-titles, restated his own position.

'I oughtn't to have come tonight. I'm feeling rotten.'

'Do you think Kenneth Widmerpool knows Mr Gwinnett is in London?' Ada remarked.

That gave Members his chance.

'Hadn't you heard Widmerpool's coming tonight, Ada? He's bringing Amanda and Belinda.'

Members could not conceal all surprise at his luck in being able to announce that to the twins' parents. Ada controlled herself, but looked extremely put out. The information was altogether too much for her husband. Quiggin and Members might be on good terms these days, even so, there were limits to what Quiggin was prepared to take from his old friend. He received this disclosure as if it were a simple display of spite on the part of Members, whose genial tone did not entirely discount that proposition. Quiggin, pasty-faced from his indisposition, went red. He gave way to a violent fit of coughing. When this seizure was at an end, he burst out, in the middle of the sentence his voice rising to a near screech.

'Amanda and Belinda are coming to this dinner?'

Members was not prepared for his words to have had so violent an effect. He now spoke soothingly.

'Kenneth Widmerpool simply asked if he could bring them. There seemed no objection.'

'But why the buggery is Widmerpool coming himself?'

'He was just invited.'

Members said that disingenuously, as if inviting Widmerpool was the most natural thing in the world. In one sense it might be, but not within existing circumstances. Quiggin was too cross to think that out.

'Why the bloody hell didn't you tell us before, Mark? I didn't realize all the thing with Widmerpool and the twins was still going on. Anyway why should they want to turn up at a party like this?'

Ada intervened. Even if the announcement were just as irritating for herself, she was better able to conceal annoyance.

'Oh, do shut up about the girls, JG. They're all right. We know about their seeing a lot of Widmerpool. No harm in that. They joke about it themselves. After all he's chancellor of their bloody university. If anybody's got a right to be friends with them, he has. They might easily have been sent down, even these days, if it hadn't been for him. Why shouldn't they come and hear who's won the Prize. Do have some sense. Why, hullo, Evadne. Congratulations on *Cain's Jawbone*. I haven't read it yet, but it's on my list. Hullo, Quentin. What news on the cultural front? I enjoyed your piece on Musil, Bernard. So did JG. Have you read the Gwinnett book?'

Isobel arrived. She and I were talking with Salvidge, and his new wife, when Delavacquerie came up. He brought with him a smallish bald thick-set man, wearing a dark suit of international cut, and somewhat unEnglish tie.

'Here's Professor Gwinnett, Nick.'

Delavacquerie, rather justly, said that a little reprovingly, as if I might have been expected, if not to mark down Gwinnett's entry into the room, at least to show quicker reaction, when brought face to face with him in person. Whatever Delavacquerie's right to take that line, I should have been quite unaware who the man in the dark suit might be, without this specific statement of identity. It was lucky I had not been close to the door when Gwinnett entered the room. So far as I was concerned, he was unrecognizable. Since Venice, a drastic transformation had taken place. Gwinnett held out his hand. He did not speak or smile.

'Hullo, Russell.'

'Good to see you, Nicholas.'

'You got my letter?'

'Thanks for your letter, and congratulations. I didn't reply. I was pretty sure I'd be seeing you, after what Mr Delavacquerie told me.'

'It was only meant as a line to say how much I'd enjoyed the book, Russell. Delighted it won the Prize. Also glad to see you over here again. You haven't met Isobel. You're sitting next to each other at dinner.'

Giving her a long searching look, Gwinnett took Isobel's hand. He remained unsmiling. When I had last seen him, his appearance seemed young for his age, then middle thirties. Now, in middle forties, he might have been considered older than that. He had also added to his personality some not at once definable characteristics, a greater compactness than before. Perhaps that impression was due only to a changed exterior. All physical slightness was gone. Gwinnett was positively heavy now in build. He had shaved off the thin line of moustache, and was totally bald. Such hair as might have remained above his ears had been rigorously clipped away. Below were allowed two short strips of whisker. The shaven skull—which made one think at once of his book's title—conferred a tougher look than formerly. He had always something of the professional gymnast. The additional fleshiness might have been that of a retired lightweight boxer or karate instructor. Pale blue lenses, once worn in his spectacles, had been exchanged for large rimless circles of glass girdered with steel.

'I've heard a lot about you, Mr Gwinnett.'

Gwinnett slightly inclined his head. He wholly accepted Isobel must have heard a lot about him, that others in the room might have heard a lot about him too. Such was what his manner suggested. It was surprising how little to be regarded as authentic was available even now. The Pamela Widmerpool episode apart, he was scarcely less enigmatic than when I had first sat next to him at one of the luncheons of the Venice conference, and we had talked of the Sleaford Veronese. Delavacquerie returned, bringing with him Emily Brightman and Members, the last of whom had not previously met Gwinnett. Old friend as she was, Emily Brightman had observed Gwinnett's arrival no more than myself. She, too, may have found him unrecognizable. If so, she covered that by the warmth of greeting when she took his hand. I think, in her way, she was much attached to him. If she felt doubts about some of the complexities of Gwinnett's nature, she put into practice her belief that certain matters, even if known to be true, are not necessarily the better for being said aloud.

'How are you, Russell? Why have you never written and told me about yourself for all these years? Wasn't it nice that we were able to give you the Prize? You have produced a work to deserve it. How long are you remaining in this country?'

'Just a week, Emily. I'll be back again next year. I've got research to do over here.'

'Another great work?'

'I guess so.'

'What's the subject. Or is that a secret?'

'No secret at all—*The Gothic Symbolism of Mortality in the Texture of Jacobean Stagecraft.*'

Gwinnett, always capable of bringing off a surprise, did so this time. Neither Emily Brightman nor I were quite prepared for the title of his new book.

'Some people—I think you among them, Emily—judged X. Trapnel a little lightweight as a theme. I do not think so myself, but that has been suggested. I decided to look around for a new focus. I see the Jacobean project as in some ways an extension, rather than change, of subject matter. Trapnel had much in common with those playwrights.'

This offered yet another reason for the epigraph introducing *Death's-head Swordsman*. Gwinnett had been speaking with the enthusiasm that would suddenly, though rarely, come into his voice. Members, who had no reason to be greatly interested in Gwinnett's academic enterprises, strayed off to examine the new Mrs Salvidge. There was a pause. Even Emily Brightman seemed to have no immediate comment to make on the Jacobean dramatists. Gwinnett had the characteristic of imposing silences. He did so now. I broke it with a piece of seventeenth-century pedantry that seemed at least an alternative to this speechlessness.

'Beaumont, the dramatist, was a kind of first-cousin of my own old friend, Robert Burton of the *Anatomy of Melancholy.*'

'Sure.'

Gwinnett spoke as if every schoolboy knew that. Emily Brightman, abandoning seventeenth-century scholarship, asked where he was staying in London. Gwinnett named an hotel.

'Wait, I'll write that down.'

She took an address-book from her bag. Either the name conveyed nothing, or Emily Brightman was showing more then ever her refusal to find human behaviour, notably Gwinnett's, at all out of the ordinary, anyway when his was removed from the purely academic sphere. I was not sure I should myself have been equally capable of concealing the least flicker of recognition at the name. Gwinnett had chosen to visit again the down-at-heel hostelry in the St Pancras neighbourhood, where he had spent the night—her last—with Pamela Widmerpool. He drawled the address in his usual slow unemphasized scarcely audible tone. Emily Brightman's impassivity in face of this taste for returning to old haunts, however gruesome their associations, could have been due as much to forgetfulness as to pride in accepting Gwinnett's peculiarities. Nevertheless, she changed the subject again.

'Now tell me of your other doings, Russell. I don't know much about your college, beyond reading in the papers that it had been suffering from campus disturbances. Sum up the root of the trouble. What is the teaching like there?'

Gwinnett began speaking of his academic life. Emily Brightman, listening with professional interest, made an occasional comment. Delavacquerie, who was now standing by in silence, drew me aside. He had perhaps been waiting for a suitable opportunity to do that.

'As soon as Professor Gwinnett arrived I informed him that Lord Widmerpool was attending the dinner.'

'How did he take that?'

'He just acknowledged the information.'

'There's no necessity for them to meet.'

'Unless one of them feels the challenge.'

'Widmerpool probably wants to do no more than re-examine Gwinnett. He barely met him when we were in Venice. Widmerpool is not at all observant where individuals are concerned. Also, he had plenty of other things to think about at the time. It would be reasonable to have developed a curiosity about Gwinnett, after what happened, even if this is not a particularly sensitive way of taking another look at him.'

'Didn't they see each other at the inquest?'

'How are such enquiries arranged? Perhaps they did. All I know is that Gwinnett was exonerated from all blame. I find it more extraordinary that Widmerpool should choose to bring the Quiggin twins, rather than that he should wish to gaze at Gwinnett.'

'Aren't the girls just a way of showing off?'

Delavacquerie put on an interrogative expression that was entirely French. He was probably right. Commonplace vanity was the explanation. Widmerpool felt satisfaction, as a man of his age, in appearing with a pair of girls, who, if no great beauties, were lively and notorious. They could be a spur to his own exhibitionism, if not his masochism.

'I see Evadne Clapham making towards us. She tells me she has something vital to convey to Professor Gwinnett about Trapnel. Can Trapnel have slept with her? One never knows. It might be best to get the introduction over before dinner.'

Delavacquerie went off. By now Matilda had arrived. As queen of the assembly, she had got herself up even more theatrically than usual, a sort of ruff, purple and transparent, making her look as if she were going to play Lady Macbeth; an appearance striking the right note in the light of Gwinnett's new literary preoccupations. When Delavacquerie presented him to her this seemed to go well. Matilda must often have visited New York and Washington with Sir Magnus, and Gwinnett showed none of the moodiness of which he could be capable, refusal to indulge in any conversational trivialities. By the time dinner was announced the two of them gave the appearance of chatting together quite amicably. There was no sign yet of Widmerpool, nor the Quiggin twins. They would presumably all arrive together. As Delavacquerie had said, I found myself between Emily Brightman, and the wife of a Donners-Brebner director; the latter, a rather worried middle-aged lady, had put on all her best clothes, and most of her jewellery, as protection, when venturing into what she evidently regarded as a world threatening perils of every kind. We did not make much contact until the soup plates were being cleared away.

'I'm afraid I haven't read any of your books. I believe you write books, don't you? I hope you won't mind that.'

I was in process of picking out one of the several routine replies designed to bridge this not at all uncommon conversational opening—a phrase that at once generously accepts the speaker's candour in confessing the omission, while emphasizing the infinite unimportance of any such solicitude on that particular point—when need to make any reply at all was averted by a matter of much greater interest to both of us. This was entry into the room of Widmerpool and the Quiggin twins. My neighbour's attention was caught simultaneously with my own, though no doubt for different reasons. Widmerpool led the party of three, Amanda and Belinda following a short distance behind. As they came up the room most of the talk at the tables died down, while people stopped eating to stare.

'Do tell me about that man and the two girls. I'm sure I ought to know who they are. Isn't it a famous author, and his two daughters? He's probably a close friend of yours, and you will laugh at my ignorance.'

In the circumstances the supposition of the director's lady was not altogether unreasonable. If you thought of authors as a grubby lot, a tenable standpoint, Widmerpool certainly filled the bill; while the age of his companions in relation to his own might well have been that even of grandfather and granddaughters. Since I had known him as a schoolboy, Widmerpool had been not much less than famous for looking ineptly dressed, a trait that remained with him throughout life, including his army uniforms. At the same time—whether too big, too small, oddly cut, strangely patterned—his garments had hitherto always represented, even at his most revolutionary period, the essence of stolid conventionality as their aim. They had never been chosen, in the first instance, with the object of calling attention to himself. Now all was altered. There had been a complete change of policy. He wore the same old dark grey suit—one felt sure it was the same one—but underneath was a scarlet high-necked sweater.

'As a matter of fact he's not an author, though I believe he's writing a book. He's called Lord Widmerpool.'

'Not *the* Lord Widmerpool?'

'There's only one, so far as I know.'

'But I've seen him on television. He didn't look like that.'

'Perhaps he was well made-up. In any case he's said to have changed a good deal lately. I haven't seen him for a long time myself. He's certainly changed since I last saw him.'

Her bewilderment was understandable.

'Are the girls his daughters?'

'No—he's never had any children.'

'Who are they then? They look rather sweet. Are they twins? I love their wearing dirty old jeans at this party.'

'They're the twin daughters of J. G. Quiggin, the publisher, and his novelist wife, Ada Leintwardine. Their parents are sitting over there at the table opposite. J. G. Quiggin's the bald man, helping himself to vegetables, his wife the lady with her hair piled up rather high.'

'I believe I've read something by Ada Leintwardine—*The Bitch—The Bitches*—something like that. I know bitches came into the title.'

'*The Bitch Pack meets on Wednesday.*'

'That's it. I don't remember much about it. Are the girls with Lord Widmerpool, or are they just joining their parents?'

'They're with him.'

'Are they his girlfriends?'

The party was evidently coming up to expectations.

'He's chancellor of their university. They threw paint over him last summer. I don't know how close the relationship is apart from that.'

'Those two little things threw paint over him?'

'Yes.'

'Didn't he mind?'

'Apparently not.'

'And now they're all friends?'

'That's what it looks like.'

'What do you think about the Permissive Society?'

Widmerpool had entered the dining-room with the air of Stonewall Jackson riding into Frederick, that is to say glaring round, as if on the alert for flags representing the Wrong Side. Amanda and Belinda, apart from looking as ready for a square meal as the rebel horde itself seemed otherwise less sure of their ground, sullen, even rather hangdog. Their getup, admired by my neighbour, was identical. As companions for Widmerpool they belonged, broadly speaking, to the tradition of Gypsy Jones, so far as physical appearance was concerned. (A couple of lines had announced, not long before, the death of 'Lady Craggs, widow of Sir Howard Craggs, suddenly in Czechoslovakia'; and I had made up my mind to ask Bagshaw, when next seen, if he knew anything of Gypsy's end.) This Gypsy Jones resemblance gave a certain authenticity to the twins' Widmerpool connexion. Their bearing that evening, on the other hand, had none of her aggressive self-confidence. It more approximated to that of Baby Wentworth (also deceased the previous year, at Montego Bay, having just married a relatively rich Greek), when, as his discontented mistress, Baby entered a room in the company of Sir Magnus Donners. In the case of the Quiggin twins, as Delavacquerie had observed, sexual relations with Widmerpool highly improbable, the girls may have been embarrassed by merely appearing in front of this sort of public as his guests. If so, why did they accompany him? Perhaps there was a small gratifying element of exhibitionism for them too; in that a meeting of true minds. Emily Brightman allowed a murmur to escape her.

'I hope those young ladies are going to behave.'

Delavacquerie, already on the look out and seeing action required, had risen at once from his seat, when the Widmerpool party came in. Now he led them to the table indicated earlier, where three chairs remained unoccupied. The Donners-Brebner lady lost interest after they disappeared.

'What do you think about Vietnam?'

Widmerpool and the twins once settled at their table, dinner passed off without further notable incident. Isobel reported later that Gwinnett had given no outward sign of noticing Widmerpool's arrival. Possibly he had not even penetrated the disguise of the red sweater. That would have been reasonable enough. Alternatively, Gwinnett's indifference could have been feigned, a line he chose to take, or, quite simply, expression of what he genuinely felt. Neither with Isobel, nor Matilda, did he display any of his occasional bouts of refusing to talk. He had, Isobel said, continued to abstain from alcohol.

'What do you think of Enoch?' asked the Donners-Brebner lady.

The time came for speeches. Delavacquerie said his usual short introductory word. He was followed by Members, who settled down to what sounded like the gist of an undelivered lecture on The Novel; English, French, Russian;

notably American, in compliment to Gwinnett, and recognition of the American Novel's influence on Trapnel's style. Members went on, also at some length, to consider Trapnel as an archetypal figure of our time. The final reference to his own gone-for-ever five pounds was received with much relieved laughter.

'Was the last speaker a famous writer too?'

'A famous poet.'

Members seemed owed this description, within the context of the question. Gwinnett followed. He did not speak for long. In fact, without almost impugning the compliment of the award, he could hardly have been more brief. He said that he had admired Trapnel's work since first reading a short story found in an American magazine, taken immediate steps to discover what else he had written, in due course formed the ambition to write about Trapnel himself. His great regret, Gwinnett said, was never to have met Trapnel in the flesh.

'I called my book *Death's-head Swordsman*, because X. Trapnel's sword-stick symbolized the way he faced the world. The book's epigraph—spoken as you will recall, by an actor holding a skull in his hands—emphasizes that Death, as well as Life, can have its beauty.

'Whether our death be good
Or bad, it is not death, but life that tries.
He lived well: therefore, questionless, well dies.'

Gwinnett stopped. He sat down. The audience, myself included, supposing he was going to elaborate the meaning of the quotation, draw some analogy, waited to clap. Whatever significance he attached to the lines, they remained unexpounded. After the moment of uncertainty some applause was given. Emily Brightman whispered approval.

'Good, didn't you think? I impressed on Russell not to be prosy.'

Conversation became general. In a minute or two people would begin to move from their seats—a few were doing so already—and the party break up. I turned over in my mind the question of seeing, or not seeing, Gwinnett, while he remained in England. Now that his work on Trapnel was at an end we had no special tie, although in an odd way I had always felt well disposed towards him, even if his presence imposed a certain strain. The matter was likely to lie in Gwinnett's hands rather than mine, and in any case, he was only to stay a week. It could be put off until research brought him over here again.

'In the end we decided against the Bahamas,' said the director's lady.

At the far end of the dining-room a guest at one of the tables had begun to talk in an unusually loud voice, probably some author, publisher or reviewer, who had taken too much to drink. There had been enough on supply, scarcely an amount to justify anything spectacular in the way of intoxication. Whoever was responsible for making so much row had probably arrived tipsy, or, during the time available, consumed an exceptional number of pre-dinner drinks. Members, for instance—who put away more than he used—was rather red in the face, no more than that. Conceivably, the noise was simply one of those penetrative conversational voices with devastating carrying power. Then a thumping on the table with a fork or spoon indicated a call for silence. Somebody else wanted to make a speech. There was going to be another unplanned oration, probably on the lines of Alaric Kydd's tribute to the memory of the homosexual politician, whose biography had received the Prize that year.

'Look—Lord Widmerpool is going to speak. He was awfully good when I heard him on telly. He talked of all sorts of things I didn't know about in the most interesting way. He's not at all conventional, you know. In fact he said he hated all conventions. The American was rather dull, wasn't he?'

The moment inevitably recalled that when, at a reunion dinner of Le Bas's Old Boys, Widmerpool had risen to give his views on the current financial situation. I had seen little or nothing of his later career as a public man, so this occasion could have been far from unique. Even if he made a practice nowadays of impromptu speaking, the present gathering was an extraordinary one to choose to draw attention to himself.

'Magnus Donners Prize winner, judges and guests, there is more than one reason why I am addressing you tonight without invitation.'

The parallel with the Old Boy dinner underlined the changes taken place in Widmerpool's oratory. In former days a basic self-assurance had been tempered with hesitancy of manner, partly due to thickness of utterance, partly to consciousness of being on uneasy terms with his contemporaries. All suggestion of unsureness, of irresolution, was gone. When a sentence was brought out too quickly, one word, rasping over the next in a torrent of excited assertion, the meaning might become blurred, but, on the whole, the diction had become more effective with practice, and a changed accentuation.

'I address you in the first place as the once old friend and business colleague of the late Magnus Donners himself, the man we commemorate tonight by the award of the Prize named after him, and by the dinner we have just eaten. In spite of this, no more than a few words have been spoken of Donners, as public man or private individual. In certain respects that is justified. Donners represented in his public life all that I most abhor. Let me at once go on record as expressing this sentiment towards him. All that I hold most pernicious characterized Donners, and his doings, in many different ways, and in many parts of the world. Nevertheless

Donners put me in charge, many years ago, of the sources from which the monies derive that make up the amount of the Prize, and pay for our dinner tonight. That, as I say, was many years ago. I do not wish to speak more of my own work than that. It was hard work, work scrupulously done. I make these introductory remarks only to convince you that I have strong claims to be given a hearing.'

Widmerpool paused. He gazed round. The room was quite silent, except for the Quiggin twins, who, paying no attention whatever to Widmerpool's words, were muttering and giggling together. No one could blame them for that. It looked as if we were in for a longish harangue. Quiggin, from a table over the way, kept an eye on his daughters. On the other hand, Ada seemed riveted by Widmerpool himself. Half smiling, she sat staring at him, possibly musing how extraordinary that Pamela Flitton, her old friend, should once have been his wife. Matilda was watching Widmerpool too. Her face had assumed a look of conventional stage surprise, one appropriate to an actress, no longer young, playing a quizzical rôle in comedy or farce. This expression remained unchanged throughout Widmerpool's strictures on Sir Magnus. The dark profile of Delavacquerie, grave, firm, rather sad in repose, gave nothing away. Nor did Gwinnett, either by look or movement, show any reaction. Gwinnett might have been listening to the most banal of congratulatory addresses, delivered by the official representative of some academic body. Widmerpool passed his hand inside the neck of his sweater. He was working himself up.

'We are often told we must establish with certainty the values of the society in which we live. That is a right and proper ambition, one to be laid down without reticence as to yea or nay. Let me say at once what I stand for myself. I stand for the dictatorship of free men, and the catalysis of social, physical and spiritual revolution. I claim the right to do so in the name of contemporary counterculture, no less than in my status as trustee of the fund of which I have already spoken. But—let me make this very plain—neither of these claims do I regard as paramount. I have yet another that altogether overrides the second, and expresses in an intrinsic and individual formula a point of contact to be looked upon as the veritable hub of the first.'

Widmerpool again stopped speaking. He was sweating hard, though the night was far from warm. He took a long drink of water. No one interrupted—as some of the more impatient had done in the course of Alaric Kydd's extempore harangue—probably kept silent from sheer surprise. Widmerpool also managed to give the impression he was coming on to something that might be worth hearing. In fact the Donners-Brebner director's wife had been to some extent justified in her assessment.

'There are persons here tonight aware that I am myself referred to—even if not by name—in the biography that has received this year's Magnus Donners Memorial award, the work we have come together to celebrate at this dinner. For the benefit of those not already in possession of that information—those who do not know that, under the cloak of a specious anonymity, the story of my own married life is there recorded—I take the opportunity to announce that fact. I was the husband of the woman who destroyed the wretched author Trapnel's manuscript book—or whatever it was of his literary work that she destroyed—one of the steps on the downfall of Trapnel, and of herself.'

To describe as somewhat horrified the silence that continued to exist throughout the dining-room would be no undue exaggeration. These words were far more than the committee had bargained for. Delavacquerie especially must at the moment be feeling that, I thought, though in a sense Widmerpool's line was the one Delavacquerie himself had predicted; even if infinitely more aggressive. There was no way of stopping Widmerpool. He would have to be heard to the end.

'Some of you—not, I hope, the younger section of my audience—may be surprised at my drawing attention to my own case in playing a part—that of the so-called betrayed husband—once looked upon as discreditable and derisory. I go further than merely proclaiming that fact to you all. I take pride in ridiculing what is—or rather was—absurdly called honour, respectability, law, order, obedience, custom, rule, hierarchy, precept, regulation, all that is insidiously imposed by the morally, ideologically, and spiritually naked, and politically bankrupt, on those they have oppressed and do oppress. I am grateful to the author of this book—the title of which for the moment escapes me—for bringing home to so large an audience the irrelevance of such concepts in this day and age, by giving me opportunity to express at a gathering like ours, the wrongness of the way we live, the wrongness of marriage, the wrongness of money, the wrongness of education, the wrongness of government, the wrongness of the manner we treat kids like these.'

Widmerpool extended his hand in the direction of Amanda and Belinda. They were still conferring together. Neither took any notice of this reference to themselves. Perhaps they were unaware of it.

'I have brought these two children tonight by special request on my own part, and for a good reason. They are the couple who threw paint over me in my capacity as university chancellor. It was the right thing to do. It was the only thing to do. I was taking part in a piece of pompous and meaningless ceremonial, which my own good sense, and social opinions, should have taught me to avoid. I am now eternally glad that I did not avoid that. I learnt a lesson. Even now there are marks of red paint on my body, that may remain until my dying day, as memorial to a weak spirit. The entirely commendable act of Amanda and

Belinda brought to the surface many half-formulated ideas already in my mind. Crystallized them. These children are right to have abandoned the idea that they can get somewhere without violence. Festering diseases need sharp surgery. These kids were articulate in their own way, and, in a different manner, the book by Professor—Professor—this book, the one that has won the Prize, has crystallized my views—'

Quiggin was not taking Widmerpool's speech at all well. If he had been looking in poor health at the start of the evening, he now appeared almost at the end of his tether with his cold, and the unlooked for imposition of this flow of revolutionary principles. Ada, too, had begun to show signs of stress. Then Quiggin's expression suddenly changed. From sourness, irritability, air of being out of sorts, the features became distorted with alarm. He had noticed something about Widmerpool, so it seemed, that disturbed him out of all proportion to the words spoken, many of which he must often have heard before, even if exceptional in the present circumstances. I turned towards Widmerpool's table to see what the cause of this anxiety might be. The movement was too late. Whatever preparations Quiggin apprehended had by then passed into the sphere of active operation. There was a loud crackling explosion, like fireworks going off in an enclosed space, followed by a terrific bang. Widmerpool's table was enveloped in a dark cloud that recalled 'laying down smoke' in army exercises. Within half a second all that end of the room was hidden in thick fumes, some of which reached as far as the judges' table. At the same time a perfectly awful smell descended.

'I knew it would be a mistake to allow those girls in. I have some experience.'

Emily Brightman's voice was calm. Academic administration had accustomed her to such things as were taking place.

The smell that swept through the room was of stupefying nastiness. When the smoke cleared away—which for some reason it did quite quickly, the smell, in contrast, dilating in volume and foulness—the Quiggin twins had disappeared. They must have made a quick exit through the door at that end of the dining-room. A few wisps of blue smoke hung round Widmerpool himself, like a penumbra, where he still stood upright at the table. He seemed as unprepared as anyone else present for these discharges. His mouth continued to open and close. Either no words came out, or they could be heard no longer at this distance on account of the general turmoil made by people rising from their seats in an effort to escape the nauseating reek. The last I saw of the Donners-Brebner lady was a backview hurrying down the room, handkerchief raised to face. Emily Brightman, puckering her nostrils, fanned herself with a menu.

'This compares with the Mutilation of the Hermae. Fortunately Russell is used to the antics of students. He is always self-possessed in trying situations. I told you that Lord Widmerpool had become very strange. No one showed much interest in that information at the time.'

Delavacquerie was the first to reach Gwinnett to make some sort of an apology for what had happened. He was followed by others, including the Quiggin parents. Gwinnett himself was behaving as if fire-crackers, artificial smoke, stinkbombs, were all normal adjuncts of any literary prize-giving, in London, or anywhere else. Matilda, too, was taking it all quietly. The scene may even have appealed a little to her own adventurous side.

'Here's the maître d'hotel,' she said. 'We shall probably be asked to hold the party in another restaurant next year.'

The origin of all this tumult—Widmerpool and his speech, more precisely, Widmerpool and his guests—had been for the moment forgotten in the general confusion.

Now Widmerpool himself appeared in the crowd clustering round Gwinnett. He was in a state of almost uncontrollable excitement, eyes gleaming through his spectacles, hands making spasmodic jerky movements.

'That was a Happening, if you like. Amanda and Belinda don't do things by halves. I wouldn't have missed that for a cool million—I mean had money meant anything to me these days.'

He made for Gwinnett, whom Evadne Clapham had at last managed to pin down; Delavacquerie having moved away to speak with Matilda. Widmerpool—something of a feat—elbowed Evadne Clapham aside. He faced Gwinnett. They did not shake hands.

'Professor Gwinnett—at last I recall the name—I hope you did not mind what I said in my speech.'

'No, Lord Widmerpool, I did not mind.'

'Not at all?'

'Not at all.'

'You are probably familiar with its trend.'

'I am.'

'You have heard some of those concepts ventilated in academic circles?'

'I have.'

'Are you staying in this country?'

'Just a week.'

'I should like to see you. Where are you staying?'

Gwinnett expressed no view as to whether or not he himself wished to renew such acquaintance as already experienced with Widmerpool. He simply gave the name of his hotel. Widmerpool, who had taken out a pencil, was about to write the address on the back of a menu picked up from the table. He showed immediate signs of recognizing the place, which he must almost certainly have been required to enter in the course of clearing up his wife's affairs. His mouth twitched. Having gone thus far in making overtures to Gwinnett, expressly stating that he would like to see more of him while he was in England, he firmly went through with noting down the information given. The hotel, macabre as the choice might be, was a minor matter, it might be supposed, compared with the general wish to consort with Gwinnett himself.

'Will you have time to visit me, Professor Gwinnett—I should like you, as an academic, to inspect my little community in the country? There are young people there you might enjoy meeting. I flatter myself I have bridged the age-gap with success—and in a manner that could be of interest in connexion with your own students. It was a problem to which I gave special attention when I was in the USA.'

Gwinnett said nothing. His silence was altogether uncommitted. It carried neither approval and acceptance, nor disapproval and rejection. His own position was absolutely neutral so far as outward gesture was concerned. It recalled a little his treatment in Venice of Glober, the film tycoon. Widmerpool tore off half the menu he held, and wrote on it his own address.

'Here you are. Let me know, if you have a moment to come down. I shall leave here now, as I do not propose to stay any longer than necessary at a bourgeois gathering of a sort deeply repugnant to me. I came only to state in public certain things I deeply feel, and this seemed an ideal occasion for stating. I did not guess my words would be reinforced by militant action. So much the better. Why it took place, I myself do not know. Perhaps because you yourself—the winner of the Prize—are of American nationality, a citizen of the United States. If so, you will understand, Professor, that it was called for by your country's policies, not your own book, and will recognize a gesture of cultural paranoia, from representatives of Youth, in which nothing the least personal is intended.'

Widmerpool grinned unpleasantly for a second, then turned away. He did not say goodbye to Matilda, Delavacquerie, myself, nor anyone else. In fact he now seemed not only unaware that other persons were present, but altogether insensible to the smell, hardly at all abated in frightfulness. The transcendent beauty of the performance put on by the Quiggin twins alone absorbed him; as it were, levitated him into a world of almost absolute moral and political bliss. Deep in thought, he walked slowly down the room, now rapidly emptying.

4

In days when uncle giles had been (to borrow the expressive idiom of Dr Trelawney) a restless soul wandering the vast surfaces of the Earth, it had seemed extraordinary that a man of his age—by no means what I now considered venerable—should apparently regard his life as full of incident, take his own doings with such desperate seriousness. These arbitrarily accepted conjectures of one's earlier years—to the effect that nothing of the slightest interest happens to people, who, for reasons best known to themselves, have chosen to grow old—were not wholly borne out by observation of one's contemporaries, nor even to some degree by personal experience. Widmerpool was certainly a case in point. The backwash of the Magnus Donners dinner tended, naturally enough, to emphasize the action of the Quiggin twins, rather than Widmerpool's own performance that night, but, after all, Amanda and Belinda would never have had opportunity to break up the party, if Widmerpool had not negotiated the invitation.

Widmerpool himself had explained in the clearest terms, at the time, his reasons for taking the course he had, including the wish to be accompanied by the Quiggin twins, but not everyone was able to comprehend his latest standpoint. There were even found those to echo the conclusion of Lenore Members that he had become 'mentally disturbed.'

Then the answer dawned on me. Widmerpool was Orlando. The parallel with Ariosto's story might not be exact at every point, its analogy even partake of parody, but here was Widmerpool, for years leading what he certainly regarded himself as the Heroic Life, deserted by his Angelica, not for one but a thousand (in Widmerpool's eyes) nonentities. If Pamela lacked some of Angelica's qualities, Angelica, too, had sometimes drunk at enchanted fountains that excited violent passions. It was the consequence of this situation that seemed so apposite; the signs Widmerpool was showing, at least morally speaking, of stripping himself naked like Orlando, taking to the woods, in the same manner dropping out. It remained to be seen whether Widmerpool would find an Astolpho.

Later that spring there was another small reminder of Ariosto, this time in connexion with the Mage beginning to fly; in short, Scorpio Murtlock—perhaps annually incarnate at this season as a vernal demigod—whose name appeared in a newspaper paragraph. It reported some sort of a row that had taken place in the neighbourhood of the megalithic site to which the caravan had been travelling just about a year before. Whether the same party, or other members of the cult, had been in that area all the time was not clear. Only Murtlock was mentioned by name. I did not know whether Fiona still belonged to his community, enquiries about her doings from her parents being a delicate matter. The local inhabitants seemed to have objected to ceremonies, performed in and about the neolithic site, by Murtlock and his followers. The police were reported as undertaking investigations. Murtlock himself was represented as making vigorous protest against alleged persecution of the group for their beliefs. That was the sole reference to the incident at the time, anyway the only one I saw.

In a writer's life, as time shortens, work tends to predominate, among other things resulting in a reduction of attendance at large conjunctions of people. In relation to work itself there are arguments against this change of rhythm. An affair like the Magnus Donners dinner might be exceptional in what it had provided, but even assemblages of a calmer nature staved off that reclusion which seems to offer increasing attractions, keeping one in some sort of circulation, in a position to hear the latest news. Such jaunts prevented a repletion of ideas, mulled over constantly in the mind, wholly taking the place of experience. Thinking—as General Conyers used to insist—damages feeling. No doubt he had got the idea from a book. That did not make it less valid. Something can get lost, especially in the arts, by thinking too much, which sometimes confuses the instinct for what ought to go down on paper.

These professional reflexions, at best subjective, at worst intolerably tedious, are pretext for inclusion of yet another public dinner; though my life was far from consisting in a succession of such functions. When an invitation arrived for the Royal Academy banquet the phrase conjured up a tempting vision of former days: forgotten Victorian RAs, their names once a household word; vast canvases in vaster gilt frames; 'society' portraits of famous beauties and eminent statesmen; enigmatic Problem Pictures: fashionable crowds; a whole aesthetic and social cosmos with a myth of its own. The institution that had welcomed Isbister, excluded Mr Deacon, had now undergone a deathbed conversion to Modernism. Yet was the Academy on its deathbed? The reality of the occasion—as opposed to such reveries—had by no means discarded all vestige of the old tradition. If the pictures hanging on the now whitewashed walls might be called temperately avant-garde in treatment, a reassuring suspicion remained that techniques, long sunk in oblivion, were to be found tucked away in obscure corners. The company, too, was no less traditional, minor royalty likely to be present, not to mention a member of the Cabinet—possibly the Prime Minister himself—making, at this relatively free and easy party, a speech that could touch on some grave matter of policy.

The suggestion thus given of a kind of carnival, devoted to the theme of Past and Present, was heightened by the contrasted attire of the guests. White ties and black tail-coats, orders and decorations, mingled with dinner-jackets, the intermittent everyday suit. The last were rare. Those who despised evening-dress usually adopted an out-and-out knock-about-the-studio garb, accompanied by beard and flowing hair. The odd thing was that the appearance of these rebels against convention—alienated against a background of stiff white shirts, coloured ribands, sparkling stars and crosses—made the rebels themselves seem as much survivors from an early nineteenth-century romantic bohemianism, as swallow-tailed coats and medals recalled the glittering receptions of the same era.

The seating plan showed my own place between an actor and a clergyman, both professions to strike the right archetypal note for an evening of that sort. The actor (who had performed a rather notable Shallow the previous year) was now playing in an Ibsen revival, of which Polly Duport was the star. The clergyman's name—the Revd Canon Paul Fenneau—familiar, was not immediately placeable. A likely guess would be that he was incumbent of a London parish, a parson known for active work in some charitable sphere, possibly even the preservation of ancient buildings. Celebrity in such fields could have brought him to the dinner that night. The last possibility might also explain the faintly scholarly associations, not necessarily theological, that the name set in motion.

A crowd of guests was already collected by the bar in the gallery beyond the circular central hall. Members was there, talking to Smethyck (recently retired from the directorship of his gallery), both of them, Members especially, giving the impression that they intended to make a mildly uproarious evening of it. The flushed cheeks of Members enclosed by fluffy white hair and thick whiskers, contrasted with Smethyck's longer thinner whiskers, and elegantly shaped grey corkscrew curls, increased the prevailing atmosphere of Victorian jollification. Both were wearing white ties, an order round the neck. I had not seen Members since the Magnus Donners dinner, nor should we meet in future in that connexion, the panel of judges having been reconstituted. He was still taking immense pleasure in the scenes there enacted.

'I've been telling Michael about the Quiggin twins. Do you know he had never heard of them? What do you think of that for an Ivory Tower?'

Smethyck smoothed his curls and smiled, gratified at the implications of existing in gloriously rarefied atmosphere.

'True, I live entirely out of the world these days, Mark. How should I know of such things as stinkbombs?'

'I may have done some indiscreet things in my time,' said Members. 'I've never fathered any children. That's notwithstanding a few false alarms. Poor old JG. The great apostle of revolt in the days of our youth. Do you remember Sillers calling him our young Marat? Marat never had to bring up twins. What a couple.

Dids't thou give all to thy daughters?
And art thou come to this?

It won't be long before JG's out on Hampstead Heath asking that of passers-by.'

Smethyck pedantically demurred, thereby somewhat impugning his claim to know nothing of contemporary life.

'In Lear's case it was the father seeking an alternative society. The girls supported the Establishment. They're my favourite heroines in literature, as a matter of fact.'

Members accepted correction.

'Lindsay Bagshaw told me the other day that he regarded himself as a satisfied Lear. Since his wife died, he divides his time between his daughters' households, and says their food is not at all bad.'

'Your friend Bagshaw must be temperamentally equipped to accept the compromises that Lear rejected,' said Smethyck. 'I do not know him—'

He had evidently heard as much as he wanted about the Magnus Donners dinner, and moved away to speak with a well-known cartoonist. Members continued to brood on the Quiggin twins and their activities.

'Do you think Widmerpool arranged it all, to get his own back on Gwinnett?'

'Widmerpool was as surprised as anyone when the bang went off.'

'That's what's being generally said. I wondered whether it was true. He's here tonight.'

'Widmerpool?'

'Looking even scruffier than at the Magnus Donners. What does it all mean dressing like that? Do you think he will make another speech off the cuff?'

Members, speaking as one in a position to deplore slovenliness of dress, fingered the cross at his throat. A life peeress, also connected with the world of culture, passed at that moment, and he buttonholed her. A moment later Widmerpool came into sight at the far end of the gallery. He was prowling about by himself, speaking to no one. Members had called him scruffy, but his disarray, such as it was, did not greatly differ from that of the Magnus Donners evening. He was still wearing the old suit and red polo jumper, though closer contact might have revealed the last as unwashed since the earlier occasion. Widmerpool's appearance afforded an example of the curiously absorbent nature of the RA party. At almost any other public dinner the getup would have looked out of place. Here, clothes and all, he was unified with fellow guests. Those who did not know him already might easily have supposed they saw before them a professional painter, old and seedy—Widmerpool looked decidedly more than his later sixties—who had emerged momentarily, from some dilapidated artists' colony, to make an annual appearance at a function to which countless years as an obscure contributor had earned him the prescriptive right of invitation. In this semi-disguise, seen at long range, he could be pictured pottering about with an easel, in front of a row of tumbledown whimsically painted shacks lying along the seashore. Widmerpool moved out of sight. I did not see him again until we went into dinner, when he reappeared sitting a short way up the table on the other side from my own.

The clergyman, Canon Fenneau, was already engaged in conversation with the Regius Professor on his left, when I sat down. The actor and I talked. I had not seen the Ibsen production in which he was playing, but I told him that I had met Polly Duport, and knew Norman Chandler, who had directed a play in which my neighbour had acted not long before. Talk about the Theatre took us through the first course. The actor spoke of Molnar, a dramatist known to me from reading, on the whole, rather than seeing on a stage.

'Molnar must be about due for a revival.'

The actor agreed.

'Somebody was saying that the other day. Who was it? I know. It was after the performance last week. Polly Duport's friend with the French name. He's a writer of some sort, I believe. He thought Molnar an undervalued playwright in this country. What is he called? I've met him once or twice, when he's come to pick her up.'

'I wouldn't know. I don't know her at all well.'

'A French name. De-la-something. Delavacquerie? Could it be that?'

'There's a poet called Gibson Delavacquerie.'

'That's the chap. I remember Polly calling him Gibson. Small and dark. They're two of the nicest people.'

I heard no more about this revelation—it graded as a revelation—because someone on the far side of the table distracted the actor's attention by saying how much he had enjoyed the Ibsen. Almost simultaneously a voice from my other flank, soft, carefully articulated, almost wheedling, spoke gently.

'We met a long time ago. You will not remember me. I'm Paul Fenneau.'

Smooth, plump, grey curls (rather like Smethyck's, in neat waves), pink cheeks, Canon Fenneau stretched out a hand below the level of the table. It seemed rather unnecessary to shake hands at this late juncture, but I took it. The palm surprised by its firm even rough surface, electric vibrations. I had to admit he was right about my not remembering him.

'At a tea-party of Sillery's. I should place it in the year 1924. I may be in error about the date. I am bad at dates. They are so meaningless.'

For some reason Canon Fenneau made me feel a little uneasy. His voice might be soft, it was also coercive. He had small eyes, a large loose mouth, the lips thick, a somewhat receding chin. The eyes were the main feature. They were unusual eyes, not only almost unnaturally small, but vague, moist, dreamy, the eyes of a medium. His cherubic side, increased by a long slightly uptilted nose, was a little too good to be true, with eyes like that. In the manner in which he gave you all his attention there was a taste for mastery.

'In those days I was a frightened freshman from an obscure college. I can't tell you how impressed I was by the august company gathered in Sillery's room—if I rightly remember the afternoon we met. I didn't dare open my mouth. There was Mark Members, for instance, whom I noticed you talking with before dinner. I'd never seen a large-as-life poet in the flesh before. How I envied Mark for the fuss Sillers made of him. I remember Sillers pinched his neck. I'd have given the world in those days to have my neck pinched by Sillers. Then there was the famous Bill Truscott. Truscott, already working London, so tall, so distinguished, a figure entirely beyond my purview in the undergraduate world I frequented.'

Fenneau sighed, and smiled. It was hard to believe he had ever been frightened of anybody. I still had no recollection of meeting him, even while he recalled that particular tea-party of Sillery's; which, for various reasons, had made a strong impression on myself too. Fenneau could easily have been one of several undergraduates present, who were—and remained—unknown to me; though no doubt introduced at the time, Sillery being keen on introductions. Subsequent silence about Fenneau on Sillery's part would indicate not so much Fenneau's own pretensions to obscurity—Sillery rather liked to glory in the obscurity of some of his favourites—as cause given that afternoon, or at a later period, for Sillerian disapproval. Fenneau was probably one of the young men passed briskly through the Sillery machine, and found wanting; tried out once, never reprocessed. So far as being speechless went, Sillery did not necessarily mind that. The occasional speechless guest could be a useful foil. Some of his own pupils in that genre were quite often at the tea-parties. They set off more ebullient personalities. I hoped Fenneau would not produce embarrassing reminiscences of my own undergraduate behaviour at Sillery's, or elsewhere in the University.

'Did you often go to Sillery's?'

'Very few times after the first visit. I was not encouraged to pay too frequent calls. Just the necessary tribute from time to time. Rendering unto Sillers the things which were Sillers'. My claims could not have been less high, even for pennies that bore, so to speak, Sillery's own image and superscription.'

He smiled again, making, with a morsel of bread, a gesture indicative of extreme humility.

'Claims on Sillers?'

'Rather his claims on myself. My late father was an English chaplain on the Riviera. For a number of reasons Sillers found useful a South of France contact of that kind. Besides, my father was a personal friend of the Bishop of Gibraltar, a prelacy to attract the regard of Sillers, owing to the farflung nature of the diocese.'

'I can see that.'

'But my manner of talking about Sillers sounds most ungenerous. I would not speak a word against him. He did me, as a poor student, kindnesses on more than one occasion, although he could never reconcile himself to some of my interests.'

'You mean Sillery did not like you going into the Church?'

Fenneau smiled discreetly.

'Sillery had no objection to the Church—no objection to any Church—as such. He liked to have friends of all sorts, even clergymen. He did not at all mind my living in an undergraduate underworld, the *bas fond* of the University. The underworld, too, had its uses for Sillers—witness J. G. Quiggin, who attended that same historic tea-party.'

'You know Quiggin?'

'I do not often see JG these days. For a time—after meeting at Sillery's—we became quite close friends.'

Canon Fenneau made a sound that was not much short of a giggle, then continued.

'Like Sillers, JG found some of my interests ill advised. Socially unacceptable to Sillers, they were politically decadent to JG. Hopelessly unprogressive. JG wanted everyone he knew to be interested in politics in those days. He was a keen Marxist, you may remember. I have never liked politics.'

'May I ask what are these interests of yours that arouse so much antipathy?'

Fenneau smiled, this time gravely. He did not speak for a moment. His small watery eyes gazed at me. There was a touch of melodrama in the look.

'Alchemy.'

'The Philosopher's Stone? Turning base metal into gold?'

'I prefer to say more in the sense of turning Man from earthly impurity to heavenly perfection. It is a conception that has always gripped me—naturally in a manner not to run counter to my cloth. Some knowledge of such matters can indeed stand a priest in good stead.'

He spoke the last sentence a little archly. The reason for his name's familiarity was now revealed. Fenneau's signature would appear from time to time under reviews of books about Hermetic Philosophy, the Rosicrucians, Witchcraft, works that dealt with what might be called the scholarly end of Magic. His own outward physical characteristics—not in themselves exceptional ones in priests of any creed—were, more than in most ecclesiastics, those to be associated with the practice of occultism; fleshiness of body allied to a misty look in the eye. Dr Trelawney and Mrs Erdleigh, hierophants of other mysteries, were both exemplars of that same physical type, in spite of what was no doubt a minor matter, difference of sex. These preoccupations of Fenneau's would explain the faintly uncomfortable sensations his proximity generated. He seemed to convey, especially when he fixed his stare, that he hoped, without making too much fuss about it, to hypnotize his interlocutor; at the very least to read what was in his mind. That, too, was a trait not unknown among conventional priests of all denominations. Canon Fenneau, clearly not at all conventional, possessed the characteristic in a marked degree.

'Do you still see Mark Members?'

'Not for a long time until this evening. We have never entirely lost touch, although Mark—unlike JG—considered me less than the dust beneath his chariot wheels, when we were undergraduates. Years ago I was able to help him. He carelessly wrote somewhere that Goethe mentions Paracelsus in *Faust*, a slip confusing Paracelsus with Nostradamus. Mark was attacked on that account by a rather unpleasant personage, of whom you will certainly have heard, who called himself Dr Trelawney.'

'I've even met him.'

'I assisted Mark in rebutting these aggressions by pointing out that Trelawney's long and abstruse letter on the subject darkened counsel. I added that, even if Paracelsus supposed every substance to be made up of mercury, sulphur, and salt, mercury was only one of the elements. Trelawney recognized the warning.'

'What was the warning?'

'Mercury is conceived in alchemy as hermaphroditic. Trelawney was at that time engaged in certain practices to which he did not wish attention to be drawn. He sheered off.'

Fenneau's features had taken on a menacing expression. Dr Trelawney had evidently found an adversary worthy of crossing swords; perhaps, more appropriately, crossing divining rods. I retailed some of my own Trelawney contacts, beginning with the Doctor and his disciples running past the Stonehurst gate.

'That too? How very interesting. May I say that you bear out a deeply held conviction of mine as to the repetitive contacts of certain individual souls in the earthly lives of other individual souls.'

Fenneau again fixed his eyes on me. He gave the impression of a scientist who has found a useful specimen, if not a noticeably rare one. His stare was preferably not to be endured for too long. He may have been aware of that himself, because he immediately dropped this disturbing inspection. Perhaps he had settled to his own satisfaction whatever was in his mind. I took the initiative.

'Nietzsche thought individual experiences were recurrent, though he put it rather differently. But what did you mean by saying "that too"?'

'I was astonished to hear that as a child you should have known Trelawney.'

'Only by sight. I did not meet him till years later. It is true that, as a child, he haunted my imagination—at times rather more than I liked. Haunting the imagination was the closest we came to acquaintance at that early period.'

'Haunters of the imagination have already come close to the imagination's owner. From that early intimacy would you give any credence to the claim of Scorpio Murtlock that in him—Scorpio—Trelawney has returned in the flesh? Some proclaim that as well as Scorpio himself.'

The question was asked this time very quietly, put forward in this unemphatic manner, I think, deliberately to startle. In fact there can be little doubt that Canon Fenneau had such a motive in view. I took the enquiry as matter-of-factly as possible, while accepting its unexpectedness as an impressive conversational broadside. It would have been bad manners to admit less.

'You know Murtlock too?'

'Since he was quite a little boy.'

Fenneau spoke reflectively, almost sentimentally.

'What was he like as a child?'

'A beautiful little boy. Quite exceptionally so. And *very* intelligent. He was called Leslie then.'

Fenneau smiled at the contrast between Murtlock's nomenclature, past and present.

'You still see him?'

'From time to time. I have been seeing something of him recently. That was why I was aware he would be known to you. You may have read about certain antagonisms Scorpio was encountering. I believe a good deal never got into the papers. In consequence of this rumpus there was some talk of a television programme about the cult—one of the series *After Strange Gods*, in which Lindsay Bagshaw recently made a comeback, but perhaps you don't watch television—and I was approached as a possible compère. I had to say that I had long been a friend of Scorpio's, but could not publicly associate myself, even as a commentator, with his system, if it can be so called. Mr Bagshaw himself came to see me. It transpired, in the course of conversation, that Scorpio had visited you in the country.'

'That was produced as a reference?

'Mr Bagshaw seemed to think it a good one.'

I did not often see Bagshaw these days, but made a mental note to take the matter up with him, if we ran across each other.

'Murtlock was one of your flock in his young days?'

That was an effort to set the helm, so far as Fenneau was concerned, in a more professionally clerical direction; not exactly a call to order, so much as a plea for better defined premises for discussion of Murtlock's goings-on. If I were to be brought in by Bagshaw as a sort of reference for Murtlock's respectability—on the strength of allowing the caravan to be put up for one night—I had a right to be told more about Murtlock. That he had been a pretty little boy might be a straightforward explanation for extending patronage to him, but, anyway as a clergyman, it seemed up to Fenneau to provide a less sensuous basis for their early association together. After further biographical background was given, enquiries could proceed as to whether Fenneau himself had set Murtlock on the path to become a mage. Fenneau was in no way unwilling to elaborate the picture.

'Scorpio once sang in my choir. That was when I was in south London. His parents kept a newspaper shop. As ever in these cases, there was an interesting heredity. Both mother and father belonged to a small fanatical religious sect, but I won't go into that now. It was with great difficulty that I secured their son for the choir. I should never have done so, had Leslie himself not insisted on joining. His will was stronger than theirs.'

'Did you yourself introduce him to what might, in general terms, be called alchemy?'

'On the contrary, Scorpio—Leslie as he was then—already possessed remarkable gifts of a kinetic kind. As you certainly know, there has been of late years a great revival of interest in what can only be called, in many cases, the Black Arts, I fear. It was quite by chance that Scorpio's natural leanings fell within a province with which I had long concerned myself. Mystical studies—my Bishop agrees—can be unexpectedly valuable in combating the undesirable in that field.'

Fenneau's mouth went a little tight again at mention of his Bishop, the eyes taking on a harder, less misty surface. It was permissible to feel that the Bishop himself—elements of exorcism perhaps out of easy reach at that moment—could have agreed, not least from trepidation at prospect of being transformed into a toad, or confined for a thousand years within a hollow oak.

'What happened to Murtlock after he left your choir?'

'A success story, even if a strange one. After singing so delightfully—I wish you could have heard his solo:

> Now we are come to the sun's hour of rest,
> The lights of evening round us shine.

—Leslie won a scholarship at a choir-school. He was doing splendidly there. Then a most unfortunate thing happened. It was quite out of the ordinary. He developed a most unhappy influence over the choirmaster. Influence is a weak word in the circumstances.'

'You mean—'

Fenneau smiled primly this time.

'That is certainly what one might expect. There had been trouble of that sort earlier. Leslie was quite a little boy then, hardly old enough to understand. The man was not convicted—I think rightly—as there was a possibility that Leslie had—well—invented the whole thing, but, as people said at the time, no smoke without fire. That unhappy possibility did not arise with the choirmaster. I knew him personally, a man of blameless life. There are, of course, men of blameless life, who yield to sudden temptation—lead us not into Thames Station, as the choirboys are said to have prayed—and there is no question but Leslie was an unusually handsome boy. No one could fail to notice that. Not that he wasn't a boy with remarkable qualities other than physical ones. At the same time I am satisfied that not a hint of improper conduct took place on the part of the choirmaster.'

The thought extended the smile of Fenneau's long mouth into ogreish proportions. He moved quickly from the prim to the blunt.

'Not even pawing. Leslie assured me himself.'

'Murtlock gave the impression of being tough when I met him. I should have thought he would be as tough about sex, as about anything else.'

'You are right. Let me speak plainly. Leslie—Scorpio by now—is tough. That does not mean he is necessarily badly behaved in matters of sex. I have always thought him not primarily interested in sex. What he seeks is moral authority.'

'Mightn't he use sex to gain moral authority?'

Fenneau gave me an odd look.

'That is another matter. Possibly he might. I can only say that all who had anything to do with the choirmaster affair agreed that sex—in any commonplace use of the word—did not come into it. At the same time, having known Leslie from his earliest years, I was not altogether surprised at what happened. I felt sure something of the sort would take place sooner or later. I knew it would grieve me.'

'Had he ever tried to impose his moral authority in your own case?'

I thought Fenneau deserved the question. He showed no disposition to resent or sidestep it. When he spoke he gazed into the distance beyond me.

'Fortunately I knew how to handle the gifts Leslie had been granted.'

'How did the choir-school story end?'

'Most tragically. The choirmaster was going to be a difficult man to replace. Good men are always at a premium, let alone good schoolmasters. Leslie—or should I already call him Scorpio?—was leaving at the end of the following term to take up another scholarship. He had done nothing against the rules. Every effort was made to persuade the choirmaster to exert his own will sufficiently to contend with the few months that remained. It was no good. His will had altogether gone. He was in too demoralized a state to stay on. He wished to be relieved of his appointment without delay.'

'The choirmaster left, Murtlock remained?'

'That was so. The unfortunate man took a job at another school, in quite a different part of the country. He was thought to be doing well there. Alas, just before the opening of the summer term, the poor fellow was found drowned in the swimming-pool.'

Fenneau sighed.

'What's Murtlock's present position, over and above people objecting to what he does at prehistoric monuments? How far does he model himself on Trelawney? When he stayed with us he appeared to have indulged in nothing worse than burning laurel leaves, and scenting a bucket with camphor.'

'Camphor? I am glad to hear of that. Camphor traditionally preserves chastity. With regard to Trelawney, I hope Scorpio has purged away the more unpleasant side. Harmony is the watchword. Harmony, as such, is not to be disapproved. I fear things are not always allowed to rest there. An element of Gnosticism emphasizes the duality of austerity and licence, abasement as a source of power, also elements akin to the worship of Mithras, where the initiate climbed through seven gates, or up seven ascending steps, imagery of the soul's ascent through the spheres of the Planets—as Eugenius Philalethes says—hearing secret harmonies.'

'I remember Trelawney's friend, Mrs Erdleigh, quoting that. Did you know her?'

'Myra Erdleigh was ubiquitous.'

Toasts and speeches began to take place. When these were over, lighting a cigar, Fenneau began to speak of Gnosticism, and the Mithraic mysteries. I was relating how Kipling's Song to Mithras had so much puzzled my former Company Commander, Rowland Gwatkin (whose obituary, recently printed in the Regimental Magazine, said he had taken an active interest in Territorial and ex-Service organizations to the end), when, several seats opposite having been vacated by guests rising to relieve themselves, or stroll round the pictures, Widmerpool moved down to one of these empty chairs. I had forgotten all about him, even the possibility put forward by Members that another unscheduled speech of Widmerpool's might take place. Close up, he looked even more like a down-at-heel artist than at a distance. The scarlet sweater was torn and dirty. Nodding to me, he addressed himself to Fenneau.

'Canon Fenneau, I think?'

'Your servant.'

Fenneau said that like a djinn rising vaporously from an unsealed bottle.

'May I introduce myself? My name is Widmerpool—Ken Widmerpool. I am called by some Lord Widmerpool. Don't bother about the Lord. It is irrelevant. We have never met, Canon. I am no churchgoer nowadays, though once I served my turn as a churchman.'

Hoping to disengage myself from whatever business Widmerpool had with Fenneau—impossible to imagine what that could be—I was about to make off, having myself planned to do a lightning tour of the pictures, in search of interesting specimens from the past. Widmerpool delayed this.

'Nick Jenkins here will vouch for my credentials. We've known each other more years than I like to think. Canon Fenneau, I have a request to make.'

Fenneau watched Widmerpool with the eye of a croupier, fixed on the spinning roulette wheel, ready to deal with any number that might turn up, in this case none endowed with power to break the bank, whatever sum put on, at whatever odds.

'Let me say at once, Lord Widmerpool, that it is supererogatory to tell me about yourself. You are, if I may say so, too famous for that to be necessary.'

Widmerpool accepted this definition without demur.

'All the same don't keep on Lord-Widmerpooling me, Canon. Ken will do.'

Fenneau smiled deprecatingly, making no reciprocal request that he should be called Paul. Widmerpool seemed a little uncertain how to proceed. He drummed on the tablecloth with his knuckles.

'I could not help hearing snatches of your conversation during dinner. You were speaking of someone in whom I am interested. I had, in fact, made enquiries, and learnt already that this personage was known to you, Canon.'

Fenneau raised his almost non-existent eyebrows, and set his hands together as if in prayer. Widmerpool had perhaps hoped to be helped out in what he wanted to say. If so, he was disappointed.

'This young man Scorp Murtlock.'

'Ah, yes?'

'I am interested in him.'

'Scorpio is an interesting young man.'

Widmerpool, seeing he was to get no assistance, became somewhat more hectoring in manner.

'I am not—to speak plainly—attracted by mumbo-jumbo. What concern me, on the contrary, are the social aspects of Murtlock's community, if so to be called. Its importance as a vehicle of dissent. I read about his persecution by the police. That set me to making enquiries. I found—from certain young people with whom I am already in touch—that there was a clear case of injustice that ought to be taken up in law.'

'If you listened to our conversation, Lord Widmerpool, you will by now be aware that I have already confessed myself, at this very table, as something of an amateur of mumbo-jumbo. Believe me, Lord Widmerpool, mumbo-jumbo has its place in this world of ours. Make no mistake about that.'

Fenneau spoke mildly. Widmerpool recognized the underlying firmness. He modified his tone.

'You may be right, Canon. I was not thinking along quite those lines. What I mean is that mumbo-jumbo has never played any part in my own life. I am—even now with my greatly changed views—a man of affairs, somebody who wants to get things done, and, since I want to get things done, let us move to more concrete matters. Young Murtlock, living much of his time in a caravan, is not an altogether easy person to contact. My informant—who had himself had some truck with him—said that he, Murtlock, sometimes visited you. I thought that perhaps a meeting, or at least the forwarding of a letter, could be arranged through your good self. What struck me about Scorp Murtlock—as I understand he is usually called—was his vigorous sense of rebellion. He is a genuinely rebellious personality. They are rarer than you might think, even today. He seems to have been treated scandalously, indeed *ultra vires*. His way of life, in certain details, may not be my own, but I am in sympathy with his determination to revolt. Would you be with me, Canon?'

Fenneau was not committed so easily.

'If you meet Scorpio, Lord Widmerpool, you will find he holds no less strong views on laws that he himself regards as binding, than is his desire to break the bonds that he feels fetter those laws.'

'That is just what I mean. He seems the prototype of what has become a positive obsession with me, that is to say the necessity to uproot bourgeois values, more especially bourgeois values in connexion with legality. On top of that I am told that young Scorp has a most attractive personality.'

'Scorpio's personality can be very attractive.'

Fenneau showed a few teeth when he said that.

'As you may know, I hold a certain academic appointment. A number of the young people with whom I am brought in contact have made my house something of a centre. I might almost use the word commune. Do you think that Scorp Murtlock would pay me a visit?'

'That is something on which I cannot pronounce with certainty, Lord Widmerpool.'

Fenneau placed his fingers together again, this time the hands a little apart, in a conventionally parsonic position. He repeated his statement.

'No. I cannot be sure of that. For one thing I am myself uncertain of Scorpio's precise whereabouts at the moment.'

'They could no doubt be ascertained.'

'I could make enquiries.'

'I am sure you could run him to earth.'

'Do you really wish me to do so? I should issue a warning. Charming as Scorpio can be in certain moods, he has what can only be called a darker side too. I cannot advise contact with him to anyone not well versed in the mysteries in which he traffics—not always then.'

Fenneau spoke the words with profound gravity. Widmerpool showed no sign whatever of noticing this change of tone. He did not laugh, because he rarely laughed, but he made little or no attempt to hide the fact that he found this warning absurd. For some reason he was absolutely set on getting Murtlock into his clutches.

'I think I can assert, by this time, that I am something of an expert on the ways of young people at least as tricky to handle as Master Murtlock. As I said earlier, I should like to add him and his followers—if only temporarily—to our own community, anyway persuade him to come and see us. There is something about him that I have greatly taken to. It may be his refusal to compromise. The question is only whether or not you yourself will be able to bring us together.'

'Was there any particular aspect, in the difficulties Scorpio was having with the local people, that you found of interest—ones that I could tell him about, if we were to meet in the near future?'

Widmerpool hesitated.

'I understand there was some rather absurd complaint about nudity, which Murtlock sensibly answered by pointing out that, in the past, stripping to the skin was accepted as a sign of humility and poverty.'

'That worship should take place unclothed—in the manner of Adam—was a familiar heresy in the Middle Ages. If Scorpio practised such rites, they are ones which I cannot approve.'

Fenneau spoke severely. Widmerpool must have felt that he had got on to the wrong tack. He quickly abandoned what seemed to have become a delicate subject.

'That was just one of the points, Canon, just one of the points. It may even have been untrue. May I assume then that, if I send a letter through your good self, young Murtlock will get it sooner or later?'

'If you really wish that, Lord Widmerpool, but I advise against.'

'In spite of your advice.'

'Then I will do my best.'

Widmerpool made a gesture of thanks. He withdrew. He rightly saw that further conversation might harm rather than forward his aims. Fenneau asked one of the waiters whether it would be possible to have another cigar. He sat back in his chair.

'That was interesting.'

'You dealt with Widmerpool almost as if you were prepared for his approach.'

'To those familiar with the rhythm of living there are few surprises in this world. Not only is Lord Widmerpool anxious to meet Scorpio, Scorpio has already spoken of his intention to make himself known to Lord Widmerpool.'

'You kept that dark.'

'For a number of reasons I judged it best. I am by no means satisfied that their conjunction is desirable. At the same time, what happened tonight convinces me that no purpose is served by refusal to collaborate in transmission of a message. Other more powerful forces are on the march. *Che sarà sarà.*

'Why should Murtlock wish to meet Widmerpool?'

'Scorpio's plans are not often crystal clear.'

'He can hardly hope to bring Widmerpool into his cult.'

'There may be more material considerations. Scorpio is not unpractical in worldly matters. You have probably noticed that.'

'You mean Widmerpool's place might provide a convenient temporary base?'

'That is possible.'

'Which would make putting up with Widmerpool himself worth while?'

'To gain mastery is also one of Scorpio's aims.'

'Power?'

'The goal of the Alchemists.'

'Perhaps a mutual attraction in those terms?'

'We live in a world in which much remains—and must remain—unrevealed.'

Fenneau looked at his watch.

'I think I shall have to be wending my way homeward. We have had a most pleasant talk. Ah, yes. Something else. I expect that, in your profession, a lot of books pass through your hands for which you have little or no use, review copies and the like. Books of all kinds flow into a writer's daily life. Do please remember some of them for my Christmas bazaar. I will send you a reminder nearer the season. Let me have your address. Write it down here. Goodnight, goodnight.'

5

To be told something that comes as a surprise, then find everyone has known about it for ages, is no uncommon experience. The remarks on the subject of Delavacquerie and Polly Duport, dropped by the actor at the Royal Academy dinner, were a case in point. Mere chance must have been the cause of having heard nothing of this close association. It had been going on for some little time, and there appeared to be no secret about their relationship. Mention of it cropped up again, not long after, in some quite other connexion. All the same, although we continued to meet at comparatively regular intervals, Delavacquerie himself never brought up the matter. When he did so, that was about a year later than this first indication that they even knew each other.

During that year, among many other events in one's life, two things happened that could have suggested achievement of the mutually desired meeting between Widmerpool and Murtlock. The month of both indications was roughly dated as December, by the arrival of Canon Fenneau's reminder about books for his bazaar, and the fact that, when Greening and I ran across each other in London, we were doing our Christmas shopping. Neither event positively brought home the Widmerpool/Murtlock alliance at the time. The first of these was the bare announcement in the paper that Widmerpool, having resigned the chancellorship of the university, was to be replaced by some other more or less appropriate figure. After his various public pronouncements there seemed nothing particularly notable in Widmerpool preferring to disembarrass himself of official duties of any sort whatsoever.

Greening's information was rather another matter. It should have given a clue. We met in the gift department of some big shop. Greening, who had been badly wounded in the Italian campaign, had a limp, but was otherwise going strong. He had been ADC to the General at the Divisional Headquarters on which we had both served in the early part of the war; later rejoined his regiment, and, it had been rumoured, died of wounds. He looked older, of course, but his habit of employing a kind of schoolboy slang that seemed to predate his own generation had not changed. He still blushed easily. He said he was a forestry consultant, married, with three children. We talked in a desultory way of the time when we had soldiered together.

'Do you remember the DAAG at that HQ?'

'Widmerpool?'

'That's the chap. Major Widmerpool. Rather a shit.'

'Of course I remember him.'

'He was always getting my goat, but what I thought was really bloody awful about him was the way he behaved to an old drunk called Bithel, who commanded the Mobile Laundry.'

'I remember Bithel too.'

'Bithel had to be shot out, the old boy had to go all right, but Widmerpool boasted in the Mess about his own efficiency in getting rid of Bithel, and how Bithel had broken down, when told he'd got to go. It may have happened, but we didn't all want to hear about it from Widmerpool.'

'If it's any consolation, Widmerpool's become very odd himself now.'

'You know that already? I was coming on to that. He's gone round the bend. Nothing less.'

'You've seen him?'

'I was looking at some timber—woodland off my usual beat—and was told an extraordinary story by the johnny I was dealing with. Widmerpool—it must be the same bugger, from what he said—runs a kind of—well, I don't know what the hell to call it—sort of colony for odds and sods, not far away from the property I was inspecting. Widmerpool's place has been going for a year or two—a kind of rest-home for layabouts—but lately things have considerably hotted up, my client said. A new lot had arrived who wore even stranger togs, and went in for even gaudier monkey-tricks. This chap talked of Widmerpool as having made himself a sort of Holy Man. Not bad going after starting as a DAAG.'

Greening, unable to paraphrase the narrative of the owner of the woodland, could produce no revelation beyond that. Nevertheless the account of Widmerpool had evidently made a strong impression on him. I don't think the possibility of the new arrivals being Murtlock's adherents occurred to me at the time. If that had been at all conveyed, the conclusion would have been that Murtlock had been absorbed into Widmerpool's larger organization. In short, what Greening spoke of seemed little more than what had been initially outlined some time before by Delavacquerie's son. Greening began to collect his parcels.

'Well, I must go on my way rejoicing. Nice to have had a chin-wag. Best for the Festive Season. I'm determined not to eat too much plum pudding this year.'

When, Christmas over, I next saw Delavacquerie, it was well into the New Year. He gave news of Gwinnett being in London again.

'I thought him rather standoffish when he was over here before. This time he got in touch with me at once. In his own remote way he was very friendly.'

'Has he returned to that gruesome dump in St Pancras?'

'I picked him up there the other day, and we lunched at the buffet at King's Cross Station.'

'How's he getting on with *Gothic Symbols, etc*?'

'I think it will be rather good. The Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists happen to be a subject of mine too. In fact I was able to assist in a minor way by taking him to a Jacobean play that's rarely staged. It's ascribed to Fletcher. *The Humorous Lieutenant*, not particularly gothic, nor full of mortality, but Gwinnett seemed glad to have an opportunity to see it.'

Without reading the notices very carefully, I had grasped that a play of that name was being given a limited run of a few weeks at a theatre where such productions once in a way found a home. An energetic young director (more influential in that line than Norman Chandler) had been responsible for the revival of this decidedly obscure comedy, interest in it, so Delavacquerie now said, having been to to some extent aroused by himself.

'I once toyed with the idea of calling my own collected war poems *The Humorous Lieutenant*, from this play. Then I thought the title would be misunderstood, even ironically.'

'Why was he humorous?'

'He wasn't, in the modern sense, not a jokey subaltern, but moody and melancholy in the Elizabethan meaning of humorous—one of your Robert Burton types. The Lieutenant had reason to be. He was suffering from a go of the pox. Having a dose made him unusually brave, fighting being less of a strain than sitting about in camp feeling like hell. One sees the point. When he was cured all the Lieutenant's courage left him.'

'How did you persuade them to put the play on?'

'I infiltrated the idea through Polly Duport, who is rather a friend of mine. She thought she'd like to play Celia, though a bit old for the part of a young girl.'

This was Delavacquerie's first mention of Polly Duport. There was some parallel with the way in which Moreland had first produced Matilda, when she had been playing in *The Duchess of Malfi*. I was quite unable to tell whether this casual method of introducing the name was deliberate, or Delavacquerie supposed I had always known about the association. Clinging to privacy was characteristic of both of them. Apparent secrecy might be partly explained by the shut-in nature of Polly Duport's life of the Theatre, scarcely at all cutting across Delavacquerie's two-fold existence, divided between poetry and public relations.

'I believe you've met Polly?'

'I haven't seen her for ages. I used to know her parents—who are divorced of course.'

I did not add that, when we were young, I had been in love with Polly Duport's mother. There seemed no moral obligation to reveal that, in the light of Delavacquerie having kept quiet for so long about her daughter; an example of the limitations, mentioned before, set round about the friendships of later life.

'You knew both Polly's parents? It is almost unprecedented to have met the two of them. I myself have never seen either, though Polly spends a lot of time looking after her father, who has been very ill. She's marvellously good about him. He never sounds very agreeable. Her mother—as you probably know—was married to that South American political figure who was murdered by terrorists the other day.'

'Poor Colonel Flores? Was he murdered?'

'Wasn't he a general? He was machine-gunned from behind an advertisement hoarding, so Polly told me. It wasn't given much space in the English papers. I didn't see it reported myself. He was retired by then. It was bad luck.'

I felt sorry about Colonel Flores, a master of charm, even if other qualities may have played a part in his rise to power. Delavacquerie returned to the subject of Gwinnett and the play.

'He seemed to enjoy it a great deal. I had never seen Gwinnett like that before. He became quite talkative afterwards, when we all had supper together.'

'What's it about?'

'A King falls in love with his son's girlfriend—that's Celia, played by Polly—while the son himself is away at the wars. When the son returns, his father says the girl is dead. The King has really hidden Celia, and is trying to seduce her. As he has no success, he decides to administer a love potion. Unfortunately the love potion is drunk by the Humorous Lieutenant. In consequence the Lieutenant falls in love with the King, instead of Celia doing so.'

'Did the Lieutenant's exaggerated sense of humour cause him to drink the love philtre?'

'It was accidental. He had been knocked out in a fight, and someone, thinking a bowl of wine was lying handy, gave him the love philtre as a pick-me-up. The incident is quite funny, but really has nothing to do with the play—like so many things that happen to oneself. As a neurotic figure, the Lieutenant is perhaps not altogether unlike Gwinnett.'

'Possibly Gwinnett too should drink a love philtre?'

'Gwinnett is going to risk much stronger treatment than that. Do you remember that Lord Widmerpool, after making that speech at the Magnus Donners, asked Gwinnett to come and see him? Widmerpool has returned to the charge, as to a visit, and Gwinnett is going to go.'

'That sounds a little grisly.'

'Precisely why Gwinnett is going to do it. He wishes to have the experience. Widmerpool's situation has recently become more than ever extraordinary. From being, in a comparatively quiet way, an encourager of dissidents and dropouts, the recent addition to his community of Scorpio Murtlock, the young man we talked about some little time ago, has greatly developed its potential. Murtlock provides a charismatic element, and apparently Widmerpool thinks there are immense power possibilities in the cult. He's got enough money to back it, anyway for the moment.'

'But surely it's Murtlock's cult, not Widmerpool's.'

'We shall see. Gwinnett thinks that a struggle for power is taking place. That is one of the things that interests him. Gwinnett's angle on all this is that the cult, with its rites and hierarchies, is all as near as you can get nowadays to the gothicism of which he is himself writing. He has seen something of the semi-mystic dropout groups of his own country, but feels this one offers a more Jacobean setting, through certain of its special characteristics.'

'Does Gwinnett approve or disapprove? I expect he doesn't show his hand?'

'On the contrary, Gwinnett disapproves. He talked quite a lot about his disapproval. As I understand it, one of the tenets of the cult is that Harmony, Power, Death, are all more or less synonymous—not Desire and Death, like Shakespeare. Gwinnett disapproves of Death being, so to speak, removed from the romantic associations of Love—his own approach, with which his book deals—to be prostituted to the vulgar purposes of Power—pseudo-magical power at that. At the same time he wants to examine the processes as closely as possible.'

'Some might think it insensitive of Gwinnett, in the circumstances, to visit Widmerpool, even in the interests of seventeenth-century scholarship.'

'On that question Widmerpool himself has made his own standpoint unambiguously clear by going out of his way to invite Gwinnett to come and see him. You said that Gwinnett, when writing about Trapnel, saw himself as Trapnel. Now Gwinnett, writing about gothic Jacobean plays, sees himself as a character in one of them. I regret to say that I shall not be in England when Gwinnett pays his visit to Widmerpool, and therefore won't hear how things went—that is, if Gwinnett chooses to tell me.'

'You're taking a holiday?'

'Polly and I may be going to get married. We've known each other for a long time now. In the light of the way we both earn a living, neither of us liked the idea of being under the same roof. We might be changing that now. She's coming to have a look at my Creole relations.'

Delavacquerie raised his eyebrows, as if that were going to be an unpredictable undertaking. I said some of the things you say when a friend of Delavacquerie's age announces impending marriage. He laughed, and shook his head. All the same, he seemed very pleased with the prospect. So far as I knew anything of Polly Duport, she seemed a nice girl.

'We shall see, we shall see. That is why we are visiting the Antilles.'

During the next month or so I did not go to London. Over and above the claims of 'work'—put forward earlier as taking an increasing stranglehold—attention was required for various local matters; the chief of these—and most tedious—the quarry question.

One of the neighbouring quarries (not that recalling the outlines of Mr Deacon's picture) was attempting encroachment, as mentioned earlier, in the area of The Devil's Fingers. The matter at issue had begun with the quarrying firm (using a farmer as 'front', at purchase of the land) acquiring about seventy agricultural acres along the line of the ridge on which the archaeological site stood. The firm was seeking permission from the Planning Authority to extend in the direction of the monument. Among other projects, if this were allowed, was creation of a 'tip', for quarry waste, above the stream near The Devil's Fingers; the waters of the brook to be channelled beneath by means of a culvert. If local opposition to workings being allowed so near the remains of the Stone Age sepulchre could be shown to be sufficiently strong, a Government Enquiry was likely to be held, to settle a matter now come to a head, after dragging on for three if not four years.

The quarry-owners were offering undertakings as to 'landscaping' and 'shelter belts', to demonstrate which an outdoor meeting had been arranged. Men carrying flags would be posted at various spots round about, indicating both the proposed extension of the workings, and related localities of tree-plantation. The assembly point for those concerned, timed at nine o'clock in the morning in order to minimize dislocation of the day's work, was a gap in the hedge running along a side road, not far from the scene of action. A stile led across the fields to the rising ground on which The Devil's Fingers stood, within a copse of elder trees.

'Quite a good turnout of people,' said Isobel. 'I'm glad to see Mrs Salter has shown up. She won't stand any nonsense from anyone.'

The previous night had been hot and muggy, a feeling of electricity in the atmosphere. The day, still loaded with electrical currents, warm, was uncertain in weather, bright and cloudy in patches. Cars were parked against gates, or up narrow grass lanes. All sorts were present, representatives of the quarry, officials from local authorities, members of one or two societies devoted to historical research or nature preservation, a respectable handful of private individuals, who were there only because they took an interest in the neighbourhood. Mrs Salter, noted by Isobel, was in charge of the Nature Trust. A vigorous middle-aged lady in sweater and trousers, whitehaired and weatherbeaten, she carried a specially designed pruning-hook, a badge of office from which she was never parted.

'Who are the three by the stile?'

'Quarry directors. Mr Aldredge and Mr Gollop. I don't know who the midget is.'

The small energetic henchman with Mr Aldredge and Mr Gollop, almost as if he were shouting the odds, began to pour out a flow of technicalities on the subject of landscaping and arboriculture. Mr Aldredge, pinched in feature, with a pious expression, seemed at pains to prove that no mere hatred of the human race as such—so he gave the impression of feeling himself accused—caused him to pursue a policy of wholesale erosion and pollution. He denied those imputations pathetically. Mr Gollop, younger, aggressive, would have none of this need to justify himself or his firm. Instead, he spoke in a harsh rasping voice about the nation's need for nonskid surfacing on its motorways and arterial roads.

'I shall not make for Mr Todman immediately,' said Isobel. 'I shall choose my moment.'

Mr Todman was from the Planning Authority. Upstanding and hearty, he had not entirely relinquished a military bearing that dated from employment during the war on some aspect of constructing The Mulberry. That had been the vital experience of his life. He had never forgotten it. He had the air of a general, and brought a young aide-de-camp with him. Mr Todman was talking to another key figure in the operation, Mr Tudor, Clerk of the Rural District Council. Mr Tudor's appearance and demeanour were in complete contrast with Mr Todman's. Mr Tudor, appropriately enough, possessed a profile that recalled his shared surname with Henry VII, the same thoughtful shrewdness, if necessary, ruthlessness; the latter, should the interests of the RDC be threatened.

'I can't remember the name of the suntanned, rather sad figure, who looks like a Twenties film star making a comeback.'

'Mr Goldney. He's retired from the Political Service in Africa, now secretary of the archaeological society.'

There were quite a lot of others, too, most of whom I did not know by sight. The thicket of The Devil's Fingers was not to be seen from the stile. We set off across the first field. It was plough, rather heavy going. Mr Aldredge, the quarryman putting up a policy of appeasement, addressed himself to Mrs Salter, with whom he had probably had passages of arms before.

'Looks like being a nice Midsummer's Day. We deserve some decent weather at this time of year. We haven't seen much so far.'

Mrs Salter shook her head. She was not to be lulled into an optimistic approach to the weather, least of all by an adversary in the cause of conservation.

'It will turn to rain in the afternoon, if not before. Mark my words. It always does in these parts at this time of year.'

Mr Gollop, the pugnacious quarryman, took the opportunity, a good one, to draw attention to rural imperfections unconnected with his own industry.

'We quarry people get shot at sometimes for the fumes we're said to cause. It strikes me that's nothing to what's being inflicted on us all at this moment by the factory farms.'

The smell through which we were advancing certainly rivalled anything perpetrated by the Quiggin twins. Mrs Salter, brushing away this side issue, went into action.

'It's not so much the fumes you people cause as the dust. The rain doesn't wash it away. The leaves are covered with a white paste all the year round. After they've had a lot of that, the trees die.'

Mr Tudor, a man of finesse, must have thought this conversation too acrimonious in tone for good diplomacy. He had steered the Council through troubled waters before, was determined to do so this time.

'We do receive occasional complaints about intensive farming odours, Mr Gollop, just like those we get from time to time regarding your own industry. The Council looks on animal by-products as the worst offenders, even if poultry and pig-keepers cannot be held altogether blameless, and some of the silage too can be unpleasing to the nostrils. The air will be fresher, I hope, when we are over the next field. There's a lovely view, by the way, from the top of the ridge.'

Individual members of the party being concerned with different aspects of what was proposed, the group began to string out in all directions. Isobel, discussing with Mr Goldney the contrasted advantages of stone walls and hedges, a tactical feint, would quickly disengage herself, when opportunity arose, to obtain a good position to command the ear of Mr Todman, the figure likely to be most influential in the outcome of the morning's doings. Somebody, who had not joined the party at its point of departure by the stile, was now coming across the fields from the west. When he drew level this turned out to be Mr Gauntlett. He would usually appear on any occasion of this kind. Today he was wearing an orchid in his buttonhole.

'Good morning, Mr Gauntlett.'

'Morning, Mr Jenkins. Beautiful one too just now, tho' t'won't last.'

'That's what Mrs Salter says.'

'Not where the clouds do lie, nor the manner the rooks be flying.'

Mr Gauntlett's professional rusticity did not entirely cloak his faintly military air, which was in complete contrast with Mr Todman's soldierliness. Mr Todman suggested modern scientific warfare; Mr Gauntlett, military levies of Shakespearean days, or earlier.

'How are you keeping, Mr Gauntlett? Haven't seen you for a long while.'

'Ah, I can't grumble. There was a sad thing last week. Old Daisy died. She was a bad old girl, but she'd been with me a long time. I'll miss her.'

'I remember you were looking for her—it must have been two years ago or more—when those strange young people came to see us in their caravan.'

Still feeling rather self-conscious about being caught by Mr Gauntlett with the caravan party, I said that with implied apology. Mr Gauntlett brushed anything of the sort aside.

'Daisy was just where your young friend said. She'd whelped, and there was one pup left alive. It were a good guess on his part.'

'So he was right?'

'It were a good guess. A very good guess. He must know the ways o' dogs. Well, what are we going to be shown this morning, Mr Jenkins?'

'I wonder. There's quite a fair lot of people have come to see. It means local interest in preventing what the quarry want to do.'

Mr Gauntlett laughed at some amusing thought of his own in this connexion. When he voiced that thought the meaning was not immediately clear.

'Ernie Dunch won't be joining us today.'

'He won't?'

There was nothing very surprising about this piece of information. It looked as if Mr Gauntlett had cut across the fields from Dunch's farm, which was out to the west from where we were walking. Mr Dunch farmed the meadow on which The Devil's Fingers stood. He was not the farmer who had acted as figurehead in purchase by the quarry of the neighbouring fields, his land running only to the summit of the ridge, but his own attitude to quarry development was looked upon as unreliable by those who preferred some restriction to be set on the spread of quarry workings. Dunch was unlikely to bother much about what infringements might be taking place on territory with scenic or historical claims. Idle curiosity could have brought him to the meeting, nothing more. He would be no great loss. For some reason Mr Gauntlett found the fact immensely droll that Mr Dunch would not be present.

'Ernie Dunch didn't feel up to coming,' he repeated.

'I don't expect Mr Dunch cares much, one way or the other, what the quarry does.'

'Nay, I don't think 'tis that. Last Tuesday I heard Ernie saying he'd be out with us all today, to know what was happening nextdoor to him. I said I'd drop in, and we'd go together. I thought I'd see, that way, Ernie did come.'

Mr Gauntlett laughed to himself.

'That's natural enough, since the quarry would extend quite close to his own land. I'm glad he feels himself concerned. What's wrong with Mr Dunch?'

Obviously, from Mr Gauntlett's manner, that question was meant to be asked. He had a story he wanted to tell. I was not particularly interested myself why Dunch had made his decision to stay away.

'Ernie's quite a young fellow.'

'So I've been told. I don't know him personally.'

'Two-and-thirty. Three-and-thirty maybe.'

Mr Gauntlett pondered. We plodded on through the heavy furrows. Mr Gauntlett, having presumably settled in his own mind, within a few days, the date of Ernie Dunch's birth, changed his tone to the rather special one in which he would relate local history and legend.

'I'll warrant you've heard tell stories of The Fingers, Mr Jenkins?'

'You've told me quite a few yourself, Mr Gauntlett—the Stones going down to the brook to drink. That's what we want to make sure they're still able to do. Not be forced to burrow under a lot of quarry waste, before they can quench their thirst. I should think the Stones would revenge themselves on the quarry if anything of the sort is allowed to happen.'

'Aye, I shouldn't wonder. I shouldn't wonder.'

'Smash up the culvert, when the cock crows at midnight.'

'Ah.'

I hoped for a new legend from Mr Gauntlett. He seemed in the mood. They always came out unexpectedly. That was part of Mr Gauntlett's technique as a story-teller. He cleared his throat.

'I've heard tales o' The Fingers since I was a nipper. All the same, it comes like a surprise when young folks believe such things, now they're glued to the television all day long.'

Mr Gauntlett watched television a good deal himself. At least he seemed always familiar with every programme.

'I'm pleased to hear young people do still believe in such stories.'

'Ah, so am I, Mr Jenkins, so am I. That's true. It's a surprise all the same.'

I thought perhaps Mr Gauntlett needed a little encouragement.

'I was asked by a young man—the one who told you where to find Daisy—if the Stones bled when a knife was thrust in them at Hallowe'en, or some such season of the year.

'I've heard tell the elder trees round about The Fingers do bleed, and other strange tales. I can promise you one thing, Mr Jenkins, in Ernie Dunch's grandfather's day, old Seth Dunch, a cow calved in the dusk o' the evening up there one spring. Old Seth Dunch wouldn't venture into The Fingers thicket after dark, nor send a man up there neither—for no one o' the men for that matter would ha' gone—until it were plain daylight the following morning. Grandson's the same as grandfather, so t'appears.'

'If Ernie Dunch is afraid of The Fingers, he ought to take more trouble about seeing they're preserved in decent surroundings.'

Mr Gauntlett laughed again. He did not comment on the conservational aspect. Instead, he returned to young Mr Dunch's health.

'Ernie's not himself today. He's staying indoors. Going to do his accounts, he says.'

'Accounts make a bad day for all of us. You've just been seeing him, Mr Gauntlett, have you?'

I could not make out what Mr Gauntlett was driving at.

'Looked in on the farm, as I said I would, on the way up. I thought Ernie ought to come to the meeting, seeing we were going through his own fields, but he wouldn't stir.'

'Just wanted to tot up his accounts?'

'Said he wasn't going out today.'

'Has he got flu?'

'Ernie's poorly. That's plain. Never seen a young fellow in such a taking.'

Mr Gauntlett found Ernie Dunch's reason for not turning up excessively funny, then, pulling himself together, resumed his more usual style of ironical gravity.

'Seems Ernie went out after dark last night to shoot rabbits from the Land Rover.'

Rabbit-shooting from a Land Rover at night was a recognized sport. The car was driven slowly over the grass, headlights full on, the rabbits, mesmerized by the glare of the lamps, scuttling across the broad shaft of light. The driver would then pull up, take his gun, and pick them off in this field of fire.

'Did he have an accident? Tractors are always turning over, but I'd have thought a Land Rover ought to be all right for any reasonable sort of field.'

'No, not an accident, Mr Jenkins. I'll tell you what Ernie said, just as he said it. He passed through several o' these fields, till he got just about, I'd judge, where we are now, or a bit further. He was coming up to the start o' the meadow where The Fingers lie, so Ernie said, in sight o' the elder copse—and what do you think Ernie saw there, Mr Jenkins?'

'The Devil himself.'

'Not far short o' that, according to Ernie.'

Again Mr Gauntlett found difficulty in keeping back his laughter.

'What happened?'

'Ernie hadn't had no luck with the rabbits so far. There didn't seem none o' them about. Then, as soon as he drove into the big meadow, he noticed a nasty light round The Fingers. It seemed to come in flashes like summer lightning.'

'Nasty?'

'That's what Ernie called it.'

'Probably was summer lightning. We've had quite a bit of that. Or his own headlights reflected on something.'

'He said he was sure it wasn't the car's lamps, or the moonlight. Unearthly, he said. It didn't seem a natural light.'

'When did he see the Devil?'

'Four o' them there were.'

'Four devils? What form did they take?'

'Dancing in and out o' the elder trees, and between the Stones, it looked like, turning shoulder to shoulder t'ords each other, taking hold o'arms, shaking their heads from side to side.'

'How did he know they were devils?'

'They had horns.'

'He probably saw some horned sheep. There are a flock of them round about here.'

'It was horns like deer. High ones.'

'How were they dressed?'

'They weren't dressed, 'cording to Ernie.'

'They were naked?'

'Ernie swears they were naked as the day they were born —if they were human, and were born.'

'Men or women?'

'Ernie couldn't properly see.'

'Can't he tell?'

Mr Gauntlett gave up any attempt to restrain the heartiness of his laughter. When that stopped he agreed that Ernie Dunch's sophistication might well fall short of being able to distinguish between the sexes.

'Appearing and disappearing they were, Ernie said, and there might ha' been more than four, though he didn't stop long to look. He figured there might ha' been two male, and two female, at least, but sometimes it seemed more, sometimes less, one of 'em a real awful one, but, such was the state he was in hisself, he was uncertain o' the numbers. Even in his own home, when he was telling the tale—Mrs Dunch and me nigh him—Ernie began to shake. He said he didn't go any nearer to The Fingers, once he saw what he saw, just swivelled the Land Rover round as quick as might be, and made for the farm. He said to me 'twas a wonder he didn't turn the Land Rover the wrong way up on the run back, banging through the tussocks o' grass and furrows o' ploughland. His forewheel did catch in one rut, but he managed to right the wheel again. Mrs Dunch says he was more dead than alive, when he got back. She says she never saw him like that before. Ernie swears he don't know how he did it.'

'He thought they were supernatural beings?'

'I don't know what Ernie thought—that the Devil had come to take him away.'

'They must have been some jokers.'

'You tell Ernie Dunch they were jokers, Mr Jenkins.'

'If they'd been the genuine ghosts of The Fingers there'd only have been two of them.'

'Ernie may have seen double. He wasn't at all positive about the numbers. All he was positive about was that he wouldn't go up there again that night for a thousand pounds.'

'This happened last night as ever is?'

'St John's Eve.'

Mr Gauntlett, always an artist in effects, mentioned the date quite quietly.

'So it was.'

'Mrs Dunch reminded Ernie o' that herself.'

'What did Mrs Dunch think?'

'Told Ernie it was the last time she'd let him out after dark with the Land Rover. She said she'd never spent such a night. Every time the young owls hooted, Ernie would give a great jump in the bed.'

'What do you think yourself, Mr Gauntlett?'

Mr Gauntlett shook his head. He was not going to commit himself, however much prepared to laugh at Ernie Dunch about such a matter.

'Ernie looked done up. That's true enough. Not at all hisself.'

'Would you be prepared to visit The Devil's Fingers, Mr Gauntlett, say at midnight on Hallowe'en?'

Mr Gauntlett looked sly.

'Don't know about Hallowe'en, when it might be chilly, but I wouldn't say I'd not been on that same down on a summer night as a lad—nor all that far from The Fingers—and never took no harm from it.'

Mr Gauntlett smiled in reminiscence.

'You must have struck a quiet night, Mr Gauntlett.'

'Well, it were pretty quiet some o' the time. Some o' the time it were very quiet.'

Mr Gauntlett did not enlarge on the memory. It sounded a pleasant enough one. At that moment Mr Tudor appeared beside us. I don't think Mr Gauntlett had more to say, either about Ernie Dunch's experiences at The Devil's Fingers, or his own in the same neighbourhood. He now transferred his attention to Mr Tudor. Mr Tudor either wanted to ask Mr Gauntlett's advice, as a local sage of some standing, or the two of them had been hatching a plot, before the meeting, which now required to be carried a stage further. They moved off together towards the easterly fork of the ridge. I pushed on alone.

This final field, plough when Isobel and I had visited the place several years before, was now rough pasture. In their individual efforts to obtain an overall picture of what would be the effect on the landscape of the various proposals, the assembled company had become increasingly spread out. Several were studying maps, making notes as they tried to estimate the position of proposed new constructions and plantations represented by the markers with their different coloured flags. Mrs Salter, pruning-hook under one arm, writing in a little book, was furthest in advance. Now, she fell back with the rest to gain perspective. I found myself alone in that part of the field. Over to the east, the direction where Mr Gauntlett and Mr Tudor had disappeared together, lay the workings of the quarry scheduled by its owners for expansion. High chutes, sloping steeply down from small cabins that looked like the turrets of watchtowers, rose out of an untidy jumble of corrugated iron sheds and lofty mounds of crushed limestone. The sun, still shining between dark clouds that had blown up, caught the reflection on the windscreens of rows of parked cars and trucks. To the west, over by Ernie Dunch's farm, still more clouds were drifting up, in confirmation of knowledgeable forecasts that the day would end in rain.

The scene in the fields round about resembled a TEWT —Tactical Exercise Without Troops—such as were held in the army, groups of figures poring over maps, writing in notebooks, gazing out over the countryside. My own guilty feelings, on such occasions, came back to me, those sudden awarenesses at military exercises of the kind that, instead of properly concentrating on tactical features, I was musing on pictorial or historical aspects of the landscape; what the place had seen in the past; how certain painters would deal with its physical features. That was just what was happening now. Instead of trying to comprehend in a practical manner the quarrymen's proposals, I was concentrating on The Devil's Fingers themselves.

The elder thicket was flowering, blossom like hoar frost, a faint sprinkling of brownish red, powdered over the green and white ivy-strangled tree-trunks, gnarled and twisted, as in an Arthur Rackham goblin-haunted illustration. In winter, the Stones would have been visible from this point. Now they were hidden by the ragged untidy elders. The trees might well have been cleared away, leaving The Fingers on the skyline. Possibly the quasi-magical repute attributed to elderberries—the mysterious bleedings of which Mr Gauntlett spoke—had something to do with their preservation.

I was mistaken in supposing Mrs Salter the foremost of our party, that none of the others had pressed so far as the elder thicket. That was what I had decided to do myself, a small luxury, before bending the mind to practical problems. Somebody else from the morning's expedition must have had the same idea; got well ahead at the start, then moved on at high speed across the big field. Now he was slowly returning towards the rest of us. I did not know him by sight. The dark suit probably meant an official. Most of the other representatives of local authorities had moved off to the right and left by now, or withdrawn again some way to the rear. As this figure emerged from the elder trees, advanced down the hill, I felt pretty sure he had not been among those collected earlier at the stile. He must be a stray visitor, a tourist, even professional archaeologist, who had hoped to avoid sightseers by picking a comparatively early hour to visit the monument. Usually there was no one to be seen for miles, except possibly a farmer herding cows or driving a tractor. This man could not have chosen a worse morning for having the place to himself.

He did seem a little taken aback by the crowd of people fanned out across the landscape, the markers on the higher ground, their coloured flags looking like little pockets of resistance in a battle. He paused, contemplated the scene, then continued to walk swiftly, almost painfully, down the slope. There was something dazed, stunned, about his demeanour. The dark suit, bald head, spectacles, looked for some reason fantastically out of place in these surroundings, notwithstanding the fact that others present were bespectacled, bald, dark-suited.

'Russell?'

'Hi, Nicholas.'

Gwinnett was far less astonished than myself. In fact he did not seem surprised at all. He was carrying under his arm what looked like a large black notebook, equipment that had at first assimilated him with other note-takers in the fields round about.

'I was told you live near here, Nicholas.'

'Fairly near.'

'What's going on?'

He managed to establish a situation in which I, rather than he, found it necessary to give an explanation for being on that spot at that moment. I tried to summarize briefly for him the problem of the quarry and The Devil's Fingers. Gwinnett nodded. He made some technically abstruse comment on quarrying. In spite of outward calmness he was not looking at all well. This was very noticeable at close quarters. Gwinnett's appearance was ghastly, as if he had drunk too much, been up all night, or—on further inspection—slept on the ground in his clothes. The dark suit was covered in dust and scraps of grass. His shoes, too, were caked with mud. He brought with him even greater disquiet than usual; a general sense of insecurity increased by the skies above becoming all at once increasingly dark.

'Have you been visiting The Devil's Fingers?'

'Yeah.'

'You're staying near here?'

'Not far.'

'With friends?'

'No.'

He named an inn at a small town a few miles distant. It appeared from what he said that he was alone there.

'I didn't know you were interested in prehistoric stuff—or has this something to do with your Jacobean dramatists?'

Gwinnett, as was often his habit, did not answer at once. He seemed to be examining his own case, either for a clue as to what had indeed happened to him, or, already knowing that, in an effort to decide how much to reveal.

'I've lost my way. Just now I came up the same path, as well as I could remember it. I don't know how to get down to the road from here.'

'You've been to The Devil's Fingers before?'

'We came up on foot last night. I couldn't sleep when I got back. I thought I'd drive out here again. Make more notes on the spot. It's because I'm tired I've forgotten the path down, I guess.'

'You've got a car with you?'

'It's parked in a gully off the road. Beside some old cars that have been dumped there. I took the steep path up the hill. It stops after a while. That's why I can't find the place.'

'You were here last night?'

'Some of the night.'

His manner was odd even for Gwinnett. He talked like a man in a dream. It occurred to me that he was recovering from a drug. The suspicion was as likely to be unfounded as earlier ones, in Venice, that he was a homosexual, or a reclaimed drunk.

'Were you one of the party dancing round The Devil's Fingers last night?'

Gwinnett laughed aloud at that. He did not often laugh. To do so was the measure of the state he was in. His laughter was the reverse of reassuring.

'Why? Were they seen? How do you know about that?'

'They were seen.'

'I wasn't one of the dancers. I was there.'

'What the hell was going on?'

'The stag-mask dance.'

'Who was performing?'

'Scorp Murtlock and his crowd.'

'Are they at your pub too?'

'They're on their own. In a caravan. Those taking part in the rites travelled together. Scorp thought that necessary. I met them near here. We came up to the place together.'

'Who were the rest of the party?'

'Ken Widmerpool, two girls—Fiona and Rusty—a boy called Barnabas.'

'Was Widmerpool in charge?'

'No, Scorp was in charge. That was what the row was about.'

'There was a row?'

Gwinnett puckered up his face, as if he was not sure he had spoken correctly. Then he confirmed there had been a row. A bad row, he said. Its details still seemed unclear in his mind.

'Did Widmerpool dance?'

'When the rite required that.'

'Naked?'

'Some of the time.'

'Why only some of the time?'

'Ken was mostly recording.'

'How do you mean—recording?'

'Sound and pictures. It was a shame things went wrong. I guess that was bound to happen between those two.'

The flashes of light seen by Ernie Dunch were now explained. Gwinnett seemed to find the operation, in which he had himself been anyway to some extent engaged, less out of the ordinary, less regrettable, than the fact that some untoward incident had marred the proceedings.

'Russell, what was all this about? Why were you there? Why was Widmerpool there? I can just understand Murtlock and his crew going on in that sort of way—one's reading about such things every day in the paper—but what on earth were you and Widmerpool playing at?'

Gwinnett's features took on an expression part obstinate, part bewildered. It was a look he had assumed before, when asked to be more explicit about something he had said or done. No doubt his present state added to this impression of being half stunned, a condition genuinely present; if not the result of a drug, then fatigue allied to enormously heightened nervous tension. Again, seeming to consider how best to justify his own standpoint, he did not answer for a moment or two.

'Gibson Delavacquerie said you'd seen something of the Widmerpool set-up, the commune, or whatever he runs. He said Murtlock had joined up with it. Murtlock seems to have taken over.'

Delavacquerie's name appeared for some reason to bring relief to Gwinnett. His manner became a trifle less tense.

'I like Delavacquerie.'

'You probably know he's abroad at the moment.'

'He told me he was going. I talked to him about seeing

Ken Widmerpool again, but I didn't tell Delavacquerie the whole story. When Ken sent me a letter after the Magnus Donners Prize presentation last year I said I just didn't have time, which was true. Anyhow I wasn't that anxious to see him. I thought he'd forget about it this time, though I may have mentioned I was coming over again. I don't know how he found out I was in London. I hadn't told anyone here I was coming over. I only was in touch with Gibson after I arrived. Then someone called me up, and said he was speaking for Ken, who had a young friend—and master—whom he wanted me to meet.'

'Master?'

'It was Scorp himself telephoning, I guess. I hadn't met him then. That was how it started. While he was speaking—and I've wondered whether Scorp didn't somehow put the idea in my head—it came to me in a flash that I'd often thought these weirdos linked up with the early seventeenth-century gothicism I was writing about. Here was an opportunity not to throw away. I was right.'

'It was worth it?'

'Sure.'

This was much the way Gwinnett had talked of his Trapnel researches.

'As soon as I went down there, I knew my hunch was right. Ken was altogether different from the man he had been the year before. He was crazy about Scorp, and Scorp's ideas. It was Scorp's wish that I should be present at the rites they were planning. A summoning. Scorp thought my being there might even make better vibrations, if I didn't take part.'

Gwinnett stopped. He passed his hand over a face of light yellowish colour. He looked uncommonly ill.

'Scorp said these rites can't be performed with any hope of success, if those taking part are in a normal state of mind and body. I haven't had anything to eat or drink myself now for thirty-six hours. I didn't want to miss the chance of a lifetime, to see played out in the flesh all the things I'd been going over and over in my mind for months—like Tourneur's scene in the charnel house.'

'What were they trying to do?'

'The idea was to summon up a dead man called Trelawney.'

'How far did they get?'

Gwinnett gave a slight shudder. He was detached, yet far from calm, perhaps no more than his normal state, now aggravated by near collapse.

'They got no further than the fight between Ken and Scorp.'

Gwinnett's use of these abbreviated first-names gave a certain additional grotesqueness to what was already a sufficiently grotesque narrative.

'Did they have a scrap during the rite?'

'In the middle of it.'

'The horned dance?'

'No—during the sexual invocations that followed.'

'What did those consist of?'

'Scorp said that—among the ones taking part in the rite—they should have been all with all, each with each, within the sacred circle. I was a short way apart. Not in the circle. Scorp thought that best.'

Gwinnett again put up his hand to his head. He looked as if he might faint. Then he seemed to recover himself. Heavy spots of rain were beginning to fall.

'Did everyone in the circle achieve sexual relations with everyone else?'

'If they could.'

'Were they all up to it?'

'Only Scorp.'

'He must be a remarkable young man.'

'It wasn't for pleasure. This was an invocation. Scorp was the summoner. He said it would have been far more likely to be successful had it been four times four.'

'Not Widmerpool?'

'That was the quarrel.'

'What was?'

'It had something to do with the union of opposites. I don't know enough about the rite to say exactly what happened. Ken was gashed with a knife. That was part of the ritual, but it got out of hand. There was some sort of struggle for power. After a while Scorp and the others managed to revive Ken. By then it was too late to complete the rites. Scorp said the ceremony must be abandoned. It wasn't easy to get Ken back over the fields, and down the hill. As well as doing the recording—it was all wrecked when he fell—he'd been concentrating the will. He'd been giving it all he had. He wasn't left with much will to get back to the caravan.'

'And they just let you take notes?'

'Scorp didn't mind that. He even urged me to.'

Gwinnett spoke as if that permission surprised him as much as it might surprise anyone else. He took the black notebook from under his arm, and began to turn its pages. They were full of small spidery handwriting.

'Listen to this. When I first went to Ken Widmerpool's place, and met Scorp, I was reminded of something I read not long before in one of the plays by Beaumont and Fletcher I'd been studying. I couldn't remember just what the passage said. When I got back I hunted it up, and wrote the lines down.'

Gwinnett's hand shook a little while he held the notebook in front of him, but he managed to read out what was written there.

'Take heed! this is your mother's scorpion,
That carries stings ev'n in his tears, whose soul

Is a rank poison thorough; touch not at him;
If you do, you're gone, if you'd twenty lives.
I knew him for a roguish boy
When he would poison dogs, and keep tame toads;
He lay with his mother, and infected her,
And now she begs i' th' hospital, with a patch
Of velvet where her nose stood, like the queen of spades,
And all her teeth in her purse. The devil and
This fellow are so near, 'tis not yet known
Which is the ev'ler animal.'

'Scorpio Murtlock to the life.'

'He did shed tears during the rite. They poured down his cheeks. That was just before he gashed Ken.'

'The familiar contemporary slur of our own day gains force of imagery in additionally giving your mother a dose.'

'The kid in the play was the prototype maybe. Scorp's in the same league.'

'The girl called Fiona is a niece of ours.'

Gwinnett seemed taken aback at that. The information must have started him off on a new train of thought.

'I don't know how that nice kid got mixed up with that kind of stuff. Rusty's another matter. She's just a tramp.'

He brushed some of the mud from his sleeve. He appeared to feel quite strongly on the subject of Fiona, at the same time was unwilling to say more about her. That was like him.

'I have to get back. I just wanted to make a few notes on the spot. I've done that. They'll be useful. How do I find where I've parked, Nicholas?'

'We'll go as far as the top of the hill, and have a look round. You'll probably be able to recognize the country better from there. Why don't you have a sleep at your pub, then come over to us for lunch?'

'No, I'll sleep for an hour or two, if I can, then get back to London. I want to write while it's all in my mind, but I've got to have my books handy too.'

He made a movement with his shoulders, and gave a sort of groan, as if that had been painful. He was not at all well. I was rather relieved that he had refused an invitation to lunch. It would not have been an easy meal to sit through. We walked up the field together in silence. Round about the circle of elder trees the grass had been heavily trodden down. Rain was descending quite hard now. Gwinnett's story had distracted attention from the weather. The men with flags were beginning to pack up, the inspecting party massing together again, on the way back to their cars; a few hardy individuals, Mrs Salter, for instance, continuing to talk with the quarry representatives, or make notes. Gwinnett and I reached the summit of the rise.

'Have a look from here.'

The far side sloped down to the waters from which The Fingers drank, when at midnight the cock crew. The Stones would probably need an extra drink after all that had happened during the past twelve hours. I did not mention the legend of their drinking to Gwinnett. It might seem a small matter, after whatever he himself had witnessed up there. We stood side by side on the edge of the hill. Fields and hedges stretched away in front; a few scattered farms; clumps of trees; telegraph poles; a pylon; far distant bluish uplands. The roofs of the small town, where Gwinnett was staying, were just visible in rainy haze. Main roads, hard to pick out in light diminished by heavy cloud, were marked from time to time by the passage of a lorry. Gwinnett stared for some seconds towards the country spread before us, rather than looking immediately below for his recent place of ascent. He pointed.

'There they are.'

He spoke in his usual low voice, quite dispassionately. A long way off, where two hedges met at a right angle, what might be the shape of a yellow caravan stood in the corner of a field. The sight of it seemed to cheer Gwinnett a little, convince him that he had not dreamt the whole experience. Now he was able to turn his attention to the land below, from which he had first approached The Fingers. While rain continued to fall he established his bearings.

'That was the path.'

He pointed down to a sharp decline in the ground, not far from where we stood. Away below to the left, in a hollow overgrown with yet more elder, thick in thistles and ragwort, two or three abandoned cars were slowly falling to pieces. They must have been driven in there, and dumped, from a nearby grass lane. Gwinnett's vehicle, not visible from where we stood, was somewhere beyond these. He raised his hand in farewell. I did the same.

'See you in London perhaps?'

'I'll be having to work hard through the summer and fall.'

The answer seemed to indicate a wish to be left alone. That was understandable after all the things he had by now tolerated from the presence of other people. He edged unsteadily down the incline towards the brook. Rain was pouring so hard that I did not wait to see him negotiate its breadth, shallow and muddy, but too wide to jump with convenience. Probably he waded through. That would not have added much to the general disarray of his clothing. There was a flicker of forked lightning, a clatter of thunder. The whole atmosphere quivered with fluxes of electricity, discernible running through one's limbs. At the same time the rain itself greatly abated, diminishing to a few drops that continued to fall. The lightning flickered again, this time across the whole sky. I hurried to rejoin the rest of the party, hastening away like an army in full retreat. In the big field I noticed the ruts, where Ernie Dunch had so violently reversed the Land Rover. They were now filled with water. Mr Goldney, of the archaeological society, collar turned up, hands in pockets, appeared. He was half running, but slowed up, supposing I was looking for something.

'No weather to search for flints. I once picked up a piece of Samian ware not far from here. It's an interesting little site. Not up to The Whispering Knights, where I was last month. That's an altogether grander affair. Still, we have to be grateful for what we have in our own neighbourhood.'

'Why is it called The Whispering Knights? I've heard the name, but never been there.'

'During a battle some knights were standing apart, plotting against their king. A witch passed, and turned them into stone for their treachery.'

'Perhaps a witch will be waiting at the stile, and do the same to the quarry directors. Then we'll have a second monument up here.'

Mr Goldney did not reply. He looked rather prim, shocked at so malign a concept, or unwilling to countenance light words on the subject of folklore. Rain had possibly soaked him past the threshold of small-talk. Mr Tudor, in company with Mrs Salter, both very wet, joined us. Mr Tudor showed signs of a tempered optimism so far as to the outcome of the meeting.

'The Advisory Committee will have to get together again, Mr Goldney. Will Thursday at the same hour suit you? There's the correspondence with the Alkali Inspector we ought to go through again in relation to new points raised in consequence of today's meeting.'

'That's all right for me, Mr Tudor, and I'd like to bring up haulage problems.'

Mrs Salter sliced at a bramble with her pruning-hook.

'Even Mr Gollop admits haulage problems. At first he was evasive. I wouldn't have that.'

Isobel, after a final word with Mr Todman, caught us up.

'Who was the man you were talking to on the ridge?'

'I'll tell you about it on the way home.'

'You looked a very strange couple silhouetted against the skyline.'

'We were.'

'A bit sinister.'

'Your instincts are correct.'

The company scattered to their cars. Mr Gauntlett, an elderly woodland sprite untroubled by rain—if anything, finding refreshment in a downpour—disappeared on foot along a green lane. The rest of us drove away. The meeting had been a success in spite of the weather. Its consequence, assisted by the findings of the Advisory Committee, and the individual activities of Mr Tudor, was that a Government Enquiry was ordered by the Ministry. To have brought that about was a step in the right direction, even if the findings of such an Enquiry must always be unpredictable. That was emphasized by Mr Gauntlett, when I met him some weeks later, out with his gun, and the labrador that had replaced Daisy.

'Ah. We shall see what we shall see.'

He made no further reference to nocturnal horned dancers round about The Devil's Fingers. Neither did I, though their image haunted the mind. It was not quite the scene portrayed by Poussin, even if elements of the Seasons' dance were suggested in a perverted form; not least by Widmerpool, perhaps naked, doing the recording. From what Gwinnett had said, a battle of wills seemed to be in progress. If, having decided that material things were vain, Widmerpool had turned to the harnessing of quite other forces, it looked as if he were losing ground in rivalry with a younger man. Perhaps the contest should be thought of—if Widmerpool were Orlando—as one of Orlando's frequent struggles with wizards. Or—since the myth was in every respect upsidedown—was Murtlock even Widmerpool's Astolpho, playing him false?

I did not see Delavacquerie again until the early autumn. I wanted to hear his opinion about Gwinnett's inclusion in the rites at The Devil's Fingers. As someone belonging to a younger generation than my own, coming from a different hemisphere, a poet with practical knowledge of the business world, who possessed personal acquaintance with several of the individuals concerned in an episode that took a fairly high place for horror, as well as extravagance, Delavacquerie's objective comment would be of interest. For one reason or another—I, too, was away for a month or more—we did not meet; nor did I hear anything further of Gwinnett himself, or his associates of that night.

When a meeting with Delavacquerie took place he announced at once that he was feeling depressed. That was not uncommon. It was usually the result of being put out about his own business routine, or simply from lack of time to 'write'. He did not look well, poor states of health always darkening his complexion. I thought it more than possible that the trip with Polly Duport had not been a success; projected marriage decided against, or shelved. On the principle of not playing out aces at the start of the game, I did not immediately attack the subject of The Devil's Fingers. Then Delavacquerie himself launched into an altogether unforeseen aspect of the same sequence of circumstances.

'Look, I'm in rather a mess at the moment. Not a mess so much as a tangle. I'd like to speak about it. Do you mind? That's more to clear my own head than to ask advice. You may be able to advise too. Can you stand my talking a lot about my own affairs?'

'Easily.'

'I'll start from the beginning. That is always best. My own situation. The fact that I like it over here, but England isn't my country. I haven't got a country. I'm rootless. I'm not grumbling about being rootless, especially these days. It even has advantages. At the same time certain problems are raised too.'

'You've spoken of all this on earlier occasions. Did going home bring it back in an acute form?'

Delavacquerie dismissed that notion with a violent gesture.

'I know I've talked of all this before. It's quite true. Perhaps I am over-obsessed by it. I am just repeating the fact as a foundation to what I am going to say, a reminder to myself that I'm never sure how much I understand people over here. Their reactions often seem to me different from my own, and from those of the people I was brought up with. Quite different. I've written poems about all this.'

'I've read them.'

Delavacquerie stopped for a moment. He seemed to be deciding the form in which some complicated statement should be made. He began again.

'I spoke to you once, I remember, of my son, Etienne.'

'You said he'd had some sort of thing for our niece, Fiona, which had been broken off, probably on account of that young man, Murtlock. I'm in a position to tell you more about all that—'

'Hold it for the moment.'

'My additions to the story are of a fantastic and outrageous kind.'

'Never mind. I don't doubt what you say. I just want to put my own case first. That is best. We'll come to what you know later—and I'm sure it will help me to hear it, even if I've heard some of it already. But I was speaking of Etienne. He has been doing well. He got a scholarship, which has taken him to America. By then he had found a new girl. She's a nice girl. It seems fairly serious. They keep up a regular correspondence.'

'How does he like the States?'

'All right.'

Whether or not Etienne liked the US did not seem to be the point. Delavacquerie paused again. He laughed rather uncomfortably.

'When Fiona was about the place, with Etienne, I noticed that I was getting interested in the girl myself. It wasn't more than that. I wasn't in love. Not in the slightest. Just interested. You will have had sufficient experience of such things to know what I am talking about—appreciate the differentiation I draw.'

'Of course.'

'I examined myself carefully in that connexion at the time. I found it possible to issue an absolutely clean bill of health, temperature, pulse, blood pressure, above all heart, all quite normal. I didn't even particularly want to sleep with her, though I might have tried to do so, had the situation been other than it was. The point I want to make is that the situation was not in the least like that of *The Humorous Lieutenant*, the King trying to seduce his son's girlfriend, as soon as the son himself was out of the way.'

'No love potions lying about.'

'You never know when you're not going to drink one by mistake, but in this case I had not done so.'

'May I ask a question?'

'Questions might clarify my own position. I welcome them. All I wish to curtail, for the moment, is competing narrative, until I've finished my own.'

'How was this feeling of interest in Fiona related to your other more permanent commitment?'

'To Polly? But, of course. That is just what I meant. How shall I put it? If, as I said, the case had been other, the possibility of a temporary run around might not have been altogether ruled out. You understand what I mean?'

'Keeping it quiet from Polly?'

'I suppose so.'

'Would Fiona herself have been prepared for a temporary run around—I mean had the situation, as you put it, been quite other?'

'Who can say? You never know till you try. Besides, if things had been different, they would have been totally different. That is something that perhaps only those—like ourselves—engaged in the arrangement of words fully understand. The smallest alteration in a poem, or a novel, can change its whole emphasis, whole meaning. The same is true of any given situation in life too, though few are aware of that. It was because things were as they were, that the *amitié* was formed. Perhaps that *amitié* would never have been established had we met somewhere quite fortuitously.'

'I see what you mean.'

'Then—as I told you—Etienne's thing with Fiona blew over. She went off with Murtlock, whether immediately, I'm not sure, but she went off. Passed entirely out of Etienne's life, and, naturally, out of mine too. I was rather glad. For one thing I preferred what existed already to remain altogether undisturbed. It suited me. It suited my work. I forgot about Fiona. Even the interest—interest, as opposed to love—proved to have been of the most transient order.'

I wholly accepted Delavacquerie's picture. Everything in connexion with it carried conviction—several different varieties of conviction. I could not at all guess where his story was going to lead. Inwardly, I flattered myself that my own narration, when I was allowed to unfold it, would cap anything he could produce.

'I told you, before I went away, that Gwinnett was going to see Widmerpool. That visit took place.'

'I know. You haven't heard my story yet. I've seen Gwinnett since he told you that.'

'I myself have not seen Gwinnett, but keep your story just a moment longer. Gwinnett, in fact, seems to have disappeared, perhaps left London. Murtlock, on the other hand, has been in touch with me.'

'Did he appear in person, wearing his robes?'

'He sent a message through Fiona.'

'I see.'

'Fiona arrived on my doorstep one evening. She knew the flat from her Etienne days.'

Delavacquerie lived in the Islington part of the world, not far from where Trapnel had occasionally camped out in one form or another. I had never seen Delavacquerie on his own ground.

'This without warning?'

'No, she called me up first, saying she had something to tell me. I asked her in for a drink. I had forgotten that none of them drink, owing to the rules of the cult, but she came at drinks time of day.'

I thought—as it turned out quite mistakenly—that I saw how things were shaping.

'May I interpolate another question?'

'Permission is given.'

'You remain still living single in your flat?'

Delavacquerie laughed.

'You mean did the combined trip to the Antilles have any concrete result? Well, purely administratively, it was decided that Polly and I would remain in our separate establishments, anyway for a short time longer, on account of various not at all interesting pressures in our professional lives. Does that answer the substance of your enquiry?'

'Yes. That was what I wanted to know. A further query. Had Fiona more or less invented an excuse for coming to see you again?'

Delavacquerie smiled at that idea. It seemed to please him, but he shook his head. On the face of it, the suggestion was reasonable enough. If Delavacquerie had taken what he called an interest in Fiona, when she had frequented the house, she herself was likely to be at least aware of something of the sort in the air, an *amitié*, to use his own term. She could have decided later, if only as a caprice, that she might experiment with his feelings, see how far things would go. Delavacquerie stuck to his uncompromising denial.

'No, she was sent by Murtlock all right. I'm satisfied as to that. Murtlock's motive for wanting to get into communication with me was an odd one. Not a particularly pleasant one.'

'He is not a particularly pleasant young man.'

'Nevertheless people are attracted to him.'

'Certainly.'

'They come under his influence. They may not even like him when they do so. They may not even be in love with him—naturally they could be in love with him without liking him. My first thought was that Fiona was in love with Murtlock. I'm not sure now that's correct. On the other hand, she's certainly under Murtlock's influence.'

It sounded a little as if Delavacquerie was explaining all this to himself, rather than to me, establishing confidence by an opportunity of speaking his hopes aloud. He had, after all, more or less suggested that as his aim, when he broached all this.

'Does Murtlock hope to rope you into his cult? Surely not? That would be too much.'

'It wasn't me he was after. It was Gwinnett.'

'They met, I suppose, when Gwinnett went down to see Widmerpool.'

'That hadn't happened, when Fiona came to see me.'

'Murtlock knew about Gwinnett already.'

'It appears that Gwinnett has won quite a name for himself in occult circles—if that is what they should be called—by having allegedly taken part in an act of great magical significance—in modern times almost making magical history.'

'You mean—'

'By release of sexual energy in literally necromantic circumstances—if we are to accept Gwinnett did that—in short, direct contact with the dead. In performing a negative expression of sex, carried to its logical conclusions, Gwinnett took part in the most inspired rite of Murtlock's cult.'

'I knew that, according to Murtlock doctrine, pleasure was excluded. There is no reason to suppose Gwinnett himself believed that.'

'You are right. Such an attitude seems even to have shocked Gwinnett. At the same time he felt that, as a scholar, he should study this available form of the gothic image of mortality. I do not think Gwinnett exactly expected that the theme would be, so to speak, played back to himself by Murtlock when he paid his visit to Widmerpool. I understand that the reason for Murtlock's interest in him was never put—the metaphor is appropriate—in cold blood. How much Gwinnett himself guessed, I do not know.'

'You learnt all this from Fiona?'

'Yes.'

'Is it time to tell my story yet?'

Delavacquerie laughed. He looked at me rather hard.

'You knew some of this already—I mean in connexion with Fiona?'

'As it happens, yes.'

He hesitated, perhaps more tormented than he would admit to himself.

'Let me say one thing more. What I have been talking about is not quite so simple as the way I've told it. There is another side too. You imply that you know for a fact that Fiona was involved—physically involved—in some of these highly distasteful goings-on. Do you know more, Nicholas, than that she has been for quite a long time a member of the cult, therefore they would inevitably come her way?'

'Yes. I do know more.'

'Involved without love—even in the many heteroclite forms of that unhappy verb.'

'Yes.'

'My first thought—when Fiona came to me with Murtlock's message that he wanted to know Gwinnett's whereabouts—was to have nothing to do with the whole business. That was more on grounds of taste than morals. As Emily Brightman is always pointing out, they are so often hopelessly confused by unintelligent people.'

'Murtlock knew Gwinnett was in England?'

'He'd already found that out somehow.'

'He finds out a lot. I'm surprised, having got so far, he hadn't traced Gwinnett's whereabouts.'

'He may, in any case, have preferred a more tortuous approach. I felt it an imposition on the part of this young visionary—whatever his claims as a magician—to force his abracadabras on an American scholar, engaged over here on research of a serious kind, however idiosyncratic Gwinnett's own sexual tastes may be. Would you agree?'

'Besides, as you've said, so far as we know, Gwinnett pursues these for pleasure, rather than magical advancement.'

'Exactly. Love and Literature should rank before Sorcery and Power. There was, however, an additional aspect. That was why I was not speaking with absolute truth when I denied that Fiona was in some degree playing her own game, when she came to see me. On the other hand, that possibility did not possess quite the flattering slant you implied.'

'She told you in so many words why Murtlock wanted to meet Gwinnett?'

'Certainly. No embarrassments at all about that. More so regarding the ulterior motive for her visit. That emerged while we were talking. The fact was that Fiona was getting tired—more than that, absolutely desperate—about the life she has been living for a long time now.'

'That's good news.'

'Of course.'

Delavacquerie paused again. He did not sound quite so enthusiastic about Fiona cutting adrift from Murtlockism as might have been expected. The chronological sequence of when these things happened—Fiona come to Delavacquerie, Gwinnett gone to visit Murtlock and Widmerpool, the period between—was not very clear to me. I was also uncertain as to Delavacquerie's present feelings about Fiona. Whatever she had said to him did not appear to have affected her doings at The Devil's Fingers. I fully believed what Delavacquerie had described as his attitude towards Fiona as his son's girlfriend; I believed, more or less, that he later put her from his mind; but this new Fiona incarnation remained undefined. It was quite another matter. Also there was Polly Duport in the background. More must be explained. When he spoke again it was in an altogether detached tone.

'Fiona more or less broke down while we were talking. Even then she was unwilling to say she would give up the whole thing. This was at our first meeting.'

'There were subsequent ones?'

'Several. Murtlock wouldn't accept no for an answer, so far as Gwinnett's whereabouts were concerned.'

'You had refused to reveal them?'

'Yes.'

'That showed firmness.'

'Firmness, in any sphere, is ultimately the only thing anyone respects. Murtlock seems to have foreseen a refusal at first. Either that, or he enjoyed linking Fiona and myself in a kind of game.'

'He would be capable of both.'

'His instincts told him that he could force Gwinnett's address out of me, sooner or later, through Fiona herself. Murtlock, as you know by now, is exceedingly cunning in getting what he wants. He was well aware that Fiona felt that he, Scorpio Murtlock, must in some manner release her, personally, from his domination—give her leave to go, before she herself, of her own volition, could escape the net.'

'All she had to do, in plain fact, was to walk out.'

'That is just what Fiona could not bring herself to do. Murtlock knew that perfectly. He knew she must have some sort of legal dismissal from his service, one afforded by himself.'

'An honourable discharge?'

'Even a dishonourable one, I think—since all abandoning of himself and the cult must be wrong—but it had to come from Murtlock. It was no good arguing with her. That was how she felt. We talked it over exhaustively—and exhaustingly—during various meetings.'

Delavacquerie seemed to have established a more effective relationship with Fiona than any up-to-date achieved by her own family.

'So what happened?'

'In the end I revealed Gwinnett's sleazy hotel. The price of that was that Fiona should be free to leave. Even then Murtlock would not allow her to go immediately. He said she could only go when she had taken part in a ceremony that included the presence of Gwinnett.'

'So it was through you, in a sense, that Gwinnett went to see Widmerpool. He said it was because he wanted to observe gothic doings done in a gothic way.'

'That was true too. It was a bit of luck for Murtlock—unless he bewitched Gwinnett too, put the idea into his head. I prefer to think it luck. No doubt he always has luck.

Those people do. Once I had told Murtlock where to find Gwinnett, Gwinnett himself decided there was a good reason to fall in with what Murtlock wanted all along the line.'

'Where's Fiona now? Has she got away from Murtlock yet?'

Delavacquerie looked for a moment a little discomposed.

'As a matter of fact Fiona's living in the flat—not living with me, I mean—but it was somewhere to go. In fact it seemed the only way out. She didn't want to have to live with her parents—obviously she could, for a time anyway, if she felt like doing that—and, if she set up on her own, there was danger that Murtlock might begin to pester her again. A spell of being absolutely free from Murtlock would give a chance to build up some resistance, as against a disease. There's no one in Etienne's room. It was her own suggestion. As you can imagine, she's rather off sex for the moment.'

'I see.'

That was untrue. I did not in the least see; so far as seeing might be held to imply some sort of understanding of what was really taking place. A complicated situation appeared merely to be accumulating additional complicated factors. Delavacquerie himself evidently accepted the inadequacy of this acknowledgment in relation to problems involved. He seemed to expect no more.

'When I say we talked things over, that isn't exactly true either. Fiona doesn't talk things over. She's incapable of doing that. That's partly her trouble. One of the reasons why it was better for her to be in the flat was that it offered some hope of finding out what she was really thinking.'

He abruptly stopped speaking of Fiona.

'Now tell me your story.'

To describe what had happened at The Devil's Fingers, now that Fiona was living under Delavacquerie's roof, was an altogether different affair from doing so in the manner that the story had first rehearsed itself to my mind. Then, planning its telling, there had been no reason to suppose her more than, at best, a sentimental memory; if—which might be quite mistaken—I had been right in suspecting him a little taken with her, when, in connexion with his son, Delavacquerie had first spoken Fiona's name. Nevertheless, there was no glossing over the incident at The Devil's Fingers. It had, in any case, been narrated by Gwinnett with his accustomed reticences, and, after all, Delavacquerie knew from Fiona herself more or less what had been happening. That was only a specific instance, though, for various reasons, an exceptional one. If he felt additional dismay on hearing of that night's doings, he showed nothing. His chief interest was directed to the fact that Gwinnett had been present in person at the rites. This specific intervention of Gwinnett had been unknown to him. He had also supposed anything of the sort to have been, more or less as a matter of course, enacted at whatever premises Widmerpool provided.

'How does Fiona occupy herself in London?'

'Odd jobs.'

'Has she gone back to her journalism?'

'Not exactly that. She has been doing bits of research. I myself was able to put some of that in her way. She's quite efficient.'

'Her parents always alleged she could work hard if she liked.'

One saw that in a certain sense Fiona had worked hard placating Murtlock. Delavacquerie looked a little embarrassed again.

'It seems that Fiona revealed some of her plans about leaving the cult to Gwinnett, when he was himself in touch with them. Gwinnett suggested that—if she managed to kick free from Murtlock—Fiona should help him in some of the seventeenth-century donkey-work with the Jacobean dramatists. I hadn't quite realized—'

Delavacquerie did not finish the sentence. I suppose he meant he had not grasped the extent to which Gwinnett, too, had been concerned in Fiona's ritual activities. Evidently she herself had softpedalled the Devil's Fingers incident, as such. He ended off a little lamely.

'Living at my place is as convenient as any other for that sort of work.'

I expressed agreement. Delavacquerie thought for a moment.

'I may add that having Fiona in the flat has inevitably buggered up my other arrangements.'

'Polly Duport?'

He laughed rather unhappily, but gave no details.

6

WHEN, IN THE EARLY SPRING of the following year, an invitation arrived for the wedding of our nephew, Sebastian Cutts, to a girl called Clare Akworth, I decided at once to attend. Isobel would almost certainly have gone in any case. Considerations touched on earlier—pressures of work, pressures of indolence—could have kept me away. Negative attitudes were counteracted by an unexpected aspect of the ceremony. The reception was to take place at Stourwater. Several factors combined to explain that choice of setting. Not only had the bride been educated at the girls' school which had occupied the Castle now for more than thirty years, but her grandfather was one of the school's governing body. The church service was to be held in a village not far away, where Clare Akworth's mother, a widow, had settled, when her husband died in his late thirties. Mrs Akworth's cottage had, I believe, been chosen in the first instance with an eye to the daughter's schooling, for which her father-in-law was thought to have assumed responsibility. Anyway, the Stourwater premises had been made available during a holiday period, offering a prospect that Moreland might have regarded as almost alarmingly nostalgic in possibilities.

That was not all, where conjuring up the past was concerned. In this same field of reminiscences, the bride's grandfather—no doubt the main influence in putting Stourwater thus on view—also sustained a personal rôle, even if an infinitely trivial one. In short, I could not pretend freedom from all curiosity as to what Sir Bertram Akworth now looked like. This interest had nothing to do with his being a governor of a well reputed school for girls, nor with the long catalogue of company directorships and committee memberships (ranging from Independent Television to the Diocesan Synod), which followed his name in *Who's Who*. On the contrary, Sir Bertram Akworth was memorable in my mind solely on account of the fact that, as a schoolboy, he had sent a note of an amatory nature to a younger boy (my near contemporary, later friend, Peter Templer), been reported by Widmerpool to the authorities for this unlicensed act; in consequence, sacked.

The incident had aroused a certain amount of rather heartless laughter at the time by the incongruity of a suggestion (Stringham's, I think) that an element of jealousy on Widmerpool's part was not to be ruled out. Templer's Akworth (Widmerpool's Akworth, if you prefer), a boy several years older than myself, was known to me only by sight. I doubt if we ever spoke together. Like Widmerpool himself, unremarkable at work or games, Akworth had a sallow emaciated face, and kept himself to himself on the whole, his most prominent outward characteristic being an unusually raucous voice. These minor traits assumed a sinister significance in my eyes, when, not without horror, I heard of his expulsion. The dispatch of the note, in due course, took on a less diabolical aspect, as sophistication increased, and, during the period when Stringham, Templer, and I used all to mess together, Stringham would sometimes (never in front of Templer) joke about the incident, which shed for me its earlier aura of fiendish depravity.

In later life, as indicated, Akworth (knighted for various public services and benefactions) had atoned for this adolescent lapse by a career of almost sanctified respectability. From where we were sitting, rather far at the back of the church—in a pew with Isobel's eldest sister, Frederica, and her husband, Dicky Umfraville—Sir Bertram Akworth was out of view. One would be able to take a look at him later, during the reception. It was unexpected that Umfraville had turned up. He was close on eighty now, rather deaf, walking with a stick. On occasions like this, if dragged to them by Frederica, he could be irritable. Today he was in the best of spirits, keeping up a running fire of comment before the service began. I had no idea how he had been induced to attend the wedding. Perhaps he himself had insisted on coming. He reported a hangover. Its origins could have had something to do with his presence.

'Rare for me these days. One of those hangovers like sheet lightning. Sudden flashes round the head at irregular intervals. Not at all unpleasant.'

The comparison recalled that morning at The Devil's Fingers, when lightning had raced round the sky. The Government Enquiry had taken place, and, to the satisfaction of those concerned with the preservation of the site, judgment had been against further quarry development in the area of the Stones. Our meeting there was the last time I had seen Gwinnett. He had never got in touch. I left it at that. Delavacquerie spoke of him occasionally, but, for one reason or another—not on account of any shift in relationship—our luncheons together had been less frequent. Fiona was still lodging at his flat when we last met. Without too closely setting limits to what was meant by what Delavacquerie himself called a 'heteroclite verb', my impression was that he could be called in love with her. He never spoke of Fiona unless asked, the situation no less enigmatic than his association with Matilda years before.

Matilda Donners had died. She had told Delavacquerie that she was not returning to London after the end of the summer. He had assumed her to mean that she had decided to live in the country or abroad. When questioned as to her plans Matilda had been evasive. Only after her death was it clear that she must have known what was going to happen. That was like Matilda. She had always been mistress of her own life. The organ began playing a voluntary. Frederica attempted to check Umfraville's chatter, which was becoming louder.

'Do be quiet, darling. The whole congregation don't want to hear about your hangovers.'

'What?'

'Speak more quietly.'

Umfraville indicated that he could not hear what his wife was talking about, but said no more for the moment. He was not alone in taking part in murmured conversation, the bride's grandmother, a small jolly woman, also conversing animatedly with relations in the pew behind that in which she sat. Umfraville began again.

'Who's the handsome lady next to the one in a funny hat?'

'The one in the hat, who's talking a lot, like you, is Lady Akworth. The one you mean is the bride's mother.'

'What about her?'

'She was called Jamieson—one of the innumerable Ardglass ramifications, not a close relation—her husband was in Shell or BP, and caught a tropical disease in Africa that killed him.'

That seemed to satisfy Umfraville for the moment. He closed his eyes, showing signs of nodding off to sleep. Sebastian Cutts, the bridegroom, tall, sandy-haired like his father, also shared Roddy's now ended political ambitions. He and his brother, Jonathan, resembled their father, too, in delivering a flow of information, and figures, about their respective computers and art sales. Hard work at his computers had not engrossed Sebastian Cutts to the exclusion of what was judged—by his own generation—as a not less than ample succession of love affairs; a backlog of ex-girlfriends Clare Akworth was thought well able to dispose of. An only child, she had been working as typist-secretary in an advertising firm. Her pleasing *beauté de singe*—the phrase Umfraville's—was of a type calculated to raise the ghost of Sir Magnus Donners in the Stourwater corridors. Perhaps it had done so, when she was a schoolgirl. Her spell at Stourwater had been later than that of the Quiggin twins (recently much publicized in connexion with *Toilet Paper*, a newly founded 'underground' magazine), both withdrawn from the school before Clare Akworth's arrival there. Umfraville, coming-to suddenly, showed signs of impatience.

'Buck up. Get cracking. We can't sit here all day. Ah, here she is.'

The congregation rose. Clare Akworth, who had an excellent figure, came gracefully up the aisle on the arm of her uncle, Rupert Akworth, one of her father's several brothers. He was employed in the rival firm of fine arts auctioneers to that of Jonathan Cutts. There were several small children in attendance. I did not know which families they represented. The best-man was Jeremy Warminster, the bridegroom's first-cousin. Junior Research Fellow in Science at my own former college, Jeremy Warminster was a young man of severe good looks, offhand manner, reputation for brilliance at whatever was his own form of biological studies. A throwback to his great-great-uncle, the so-called Chemist-Earl (specialist in marsh gases, though more renowned in family myth for contributions to the deodorization of sewage), Jeremy had always known exactly what he wanted to do. This firmness of purpose, engrained seriousness, allied to an abrupt way of talking, made him rather a daunting young man. His plan, not yet accomplished, was to turn Thrubworth into an institution for scientific research, while he himself continued to occupy the wing of the house converted into a flat by his uncle and predecessor. Jeremy Warminster's mother, stepbrother and stepsister (children of the drunken Lagos businessman, Collins, long deceased), had lived at Thrubworth until his coming of age. Then Veronica Tolland moved to London, which she had always preferred. Her Collins offspring were now married, with children of their own; Angus, a journalist, specializing in industrial relations; Iris, wife of an architect, her husband one of the extensive Vowchurch family.

There was no address at the wedding service, but—an unexpected bonus—Sir Bertram Akworth read the Lesson. This gave an excellent opportunity to study his bearing in later life. White hair, a small moustache, had neither much changed the appearance, so far as remembered from the days when Templer had aroused his passions. In failing to acquire a great deal of outward distinction, he resembled Sir Magnus Donners, a man of wider abilities in the same line. Sir Bertram Akworth showed, anyway at long range, no sign of projecting Sir Magnus's air of being nevertheless a little disturbing. Sir Bertram, still spare, sallow, rather gloomy, looked ordinary enough. Before he began to read he glanced round the church, as if to make sure all was arranged in a manner to be approved. Possibly he himself had decided that his own reading of the Lesson should be alternative to an address. The passage, one often chosen for such occasions, was from Corinthians. As the voice began to rasp through the church, the memory of the schoolboy Akworth (not yet Sir Bertram) came perceptibly back.

'Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.'

The reference to sounding brass was appropriate, recalling a sole personal memory of the reader, the rebuke administered by our housemaster, his nerves always tried by pupils with strident voices.

'Don't shout, Akworth.' Le Bas had said. 'It's a bad habit of yours, especially when answering a question. Try to speak more quietly.'

The habit remained. It seemed to have been no handicap in Sir Bertram's subsequent career. At one of the closing sentences of the Lesson he hardened the pitch of the utterance. It rang through the nave.

'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.'

Giving a final glance round the congregation, he returned to his seat. The striking image of seeing through a glass darkly again brought thoughts of The Devil's Fingers. Fiona did not appear to be present in the church. She might well have decided to skip the service, just turn up at the reception. In the light of her newly organized life she was unlikely to forgo altogether her brother's wedding. So far as I knew she was still living at Delavacquerie's flat, their relationship no less undefined. Her parents were united in agreeing that, whatever the situation, it was preferable to the previous one. The impression was that Roddy and Susan Cutts, perhaps deliberately, had known little enough about the Murtlock period too. The handout issued by them now was that their daughter had taken a room in an Islington flat that belonged to a man who worked, respectably enough, in Donners-Brebner. Poets not playing much part in Cutts life, Delavacquerie's business side was more emphasized than the poetic; potential emotional ties with

Fiona not envisaged, more probably ignored. Delavacquerie was after all considerably older than their daughter; though, it had to be admitted, so too had been the handsome married electrician. The Wedding March struck up. For some minutes the congregation was penned in while photographers operated at the church door. Outside, we walked with Veronica Tolland towards the car park.

'Are your kids here? Angus couldn't get away either. He had to cover a strike. Iris will be at the reception. Fancy fetching up at Stourwater again. I used to go on visitors' day when I was a child. The park's open to the public now. My father's job was in the local town. I expect I've often said that—also I was at school with Matilda Donners, when she was a little girl called Betty Updike. Did you hear she'd died?'

'Apparently been ill for some time. I didn't know that. I always liked Matilda.'

'She made quite a career for herself. I don't know half the people here. Who's the good-looking black girl with the young Huntercombes. I know—she's wife of Jocelyn Fettiplace-Jones. His mother was an Akworth. How glad I am I live in London now.'

Like Ted Jeavons, Veronica had taken on the workings of a world rather different from that of her earlier life, without ever in the least wanting to be part. She had always regarded that world, not without a certain enjoyment, from the outside. Now she felt free of it all, except on occasions such as this one, which she liked to attend. In spite of such inherent sentiments, Veronica had come by now to look more than a little like a conventional dowager on the stage.

'See you later.'

The immediate vision of Stourwater, in thin vaporous April sunshine, was altogether unchanged. On the higher ground, in the shadows of huge contorted oaks, sheep still grazed. Down in the hollow lay the Castle; keep; turrets;

moat; narrow causeway across the water, leading to the main gate with double portcullis. All seemed built out of cardboard. Its realities had in any case belonged more to the days of Sir Magnus Donners, rather than to the later Middle Ages, when the Castle's history had been obscure. The anachronistic black swans were gone from the greenish waters of the moat. A large noticeboard directed to a car park. Round about the Castle itself playing fields came into view.

'What games would they be?'

'Net-ball, hockey, I suppose.'

We parked, then crossed the causeway on foot. The reception was taking place in the Great Hall, now the school's Assembly Room. Armoured horsemen no longer guarded the door. Forms had been pushed back against the walls, a long table for refreshments set across the far end. In place of Sir Magnus's Old Masters—several of doubtful authenticity according to Smethyck, and others with a taste for picture attribution—hung reproductions of the better known French Impressionists. We joined the queue, a long one, formed by guests waiting to meet bride and bridegroom. The two families had turned out in force. There must have been a hundred or more guests at least. We took a place far back in the line, working our way up slowly, as Roddy, relic of his parliamentary days, liked to talk for a minute or two to everyone he knew personally. When at last we found ourselves greeting the newly married pair, their closer relations in support, I felt this no moment to remind Sir Bertram Akworth that we had been at school together. There would in any case have been no opportunity. Susan Cutts drew us aside.

'Come away from them all for a moment. There's something I must tell you both.'

Leaving her husband to undertake whatever formalities were required, Susan was evidently impatient to reveal some piece of news, good or ill was not clear, which greatly excited her.

'Have you heard about Fiona?'

'No, what?'

One was prepared for anything. My first thought was that Fiona had returned to Murtlock and the cult.

'She's married.'

I thought I saw how things had at last fallen out.

'To Gibson Delavacquerie?'

Susan looked puzzled by the question. The name did not seem to convey anything to her, certainly not that of their daughter's new husband. Susan's words plainly stated that Fiona possessed a husband.

'You mean her landlord? No, not him. What could have made you think that, Nick?'

So far from Susan considering Delavacquerie to rate as a potential suitor, she was momentarily put off her stride at the very strangeness of such a proposition. Any emotional undercurrents of the Delavacquerie association must have completely passed by the Cutts parents, unless Susan was doing a superb piece of acting, which was most unlikely.

'No—it's an American. I believe you know him, Nick? He's called Russell Gwinnett.'

Roddy, disengaging himself from the last guest for whom he felt any serious responsibility at the moment, was unable to keep away from all share in imparting such news.

'Wasn't there some sort of contretemps years ago about Gwinnett? I believe there was. That fellow Widmerpool was mixed up with it, I have an idea. I used to come across Widmerpool sometimes in the House. Not too bad a fellow, even if he was on the other side. He's sunk without a trace, if ever a man did. I can't remember exactly what happened. Gwinnett seems a nice chap. He's a bit older than Fiona, of course, but I don't see why that should matter.'

Susan agreed heartily.

'In his forties. I always liked older men myself. Anyway they're married, so there it is.'

'When did this happen?'

'Yesterday, actually.'

'No warning?'

'You can imagine what it was like to be told this, with Sebastian's wedding taking place the following day.'

'They just turned up man and wife?'

'Fiona brought Mr Gwinnett—I suppose I should call him Russell now—along to see us the same afternoon. She seems very pleased about it. That's the great thing. They both do. He doesn't talk much, but I never mind that with people.'

'Have they gone off on a honeymoon?'

'They're just going to do a short drive round England, then Russell has to go back to America. He's got a little car he dashes about in all over the country, doing his research. He's a don at an American university, as you probably know. They're coming to the reception. Fiona suggested they should do that herself. Wasn't it sweet of her? They haven't arrived yet. At least I haven't seen them.'

Susan, in spite of determined cheerfulness, was showing signs of nervous strain. That was not to be wondered at. I mentioned—less from snobbish reasons than avoidance of cross-questioning about Gwinnett in other directions—that he was collaterally descended from one of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. Roddy showed interest. At least he was deflected from closer enquiry into the subject of what exactly had happened to connect his new son-in-law with Widmerpool.

'Is he indeed? I must say I took to Russell at first sight. I'd like to have a talk with him about the coming Presidential election, and a lot of other American matters too.'

'I wish Evangeline were still here,' said Susan. 'She might know something about the Gwinnetts. We'll talk about it all later. I'll have to go back and do my stuff now. There are some more people arriving . . . darling, how sweet of you to come . . . lovely to see you both . . .'

There was no time to contemplate further Fiona's marriage to Gwinnett, beyond making the reflection that, if he had done some dubious things in his time, so too had she. Leaving the threshold of the reception, we moved in among the crowd that filled the Great Hall. Most of the guests had chosen to wear conventional wedding garments, some of the younger ones letting themselves go, either with variations on these, or trappings that approximated to fancy dress. The children, of whom there was quite a large collection, scuffled about gaily, the whole assemblage making a lively foreground to the mediaeval setting. Hugo, Norah, and Blanche Tolland had all turned up, Norah grumbling about the superabundance of Alford relations present.

'Susie was always very thick with the Alford cousins. I hardly knew any of them. They look a seedy lot, large red faces and snub noses.'

'I find them charming,' said Hugo. 'Look here, what's all this about Fiona marrying an American? The last thing I heard was that she had given up all those odd friends of hers Norah was once so keen on, and was working hard at something or other in Islington.'

Norah was not prepared to be saddled with an admiration for Murtlock.

'I wasn't keen on Fiona's last lot of friends. I've been saying for ages she's hung about much too long doing that sort of thing. If she wants to get married, I'm glad it's an American. It will give her the chance of a new kind of life, if she goes to live there. Somebody said you knew him, Nick?'

'Yes, I know him.'

There was no point in trying to explain Gwinnett to Norah. In any case, given the most favourable circumstances, I was not sure I could explain him to anyone, including myself. The attempt was not demanded, because we were joined by Umfraville, carrying his rubber-tipped stick in one hand, a very full glass of champagne in the other. As prelude to an impersonation of some sort, he raised the glass.

'Here's to the wings of love,
May they never lose a feather,
Till your little shoes, and my big boots,
Stand outside the door together.'

Hugo held up a hand.

'We don't want a scandal, Dicky, after all these years as brothers-in-law.'

Before Umfraville could further elaborate whatever form of comic turn contemplated, his own attention was taken up by a grey-haired lady touching his arm.

'Hullo, Dicky.'

Umfraville clearly possessed not the least idea who was accosting him. The lady, smartly dressed, though by no means young, might at the same time have been ten years short of Umfraville's age. She was tall, pale, distinguished in appearance, very sad.

'I'm Flavia.'

'Flavia.'

Carefully balancing his stick and champagne, Umfraville embraced her.

'How horrid of you not to recognize me.'

Umfraville swept that aside.

'Flavia, this is an altogether unexpected delight. Does your presence at our nephew's wedding mean that you and I are now related—in consequence of the marriage of these young people? How much I hope that, Flavia.'

The grey-haired lady—Stringham's sister—laughed a rather tinkly laugh.

'Dicky, you haven't changed at all.'

Flavia Wisebite—it was to be assumed she still bore the name of her American second husband, Harrison Wisebite (like Veronica Tolland's first, alcoholic, long departed)—laughed again tremulously. Her own affiliations with Umfraville dated back to infinitely distant days; Kenya, the Happy Valley, surroundings where, according to Umfraville himself—he had emphasized with a certain complacency his own caddishness in revealing the information—he had been the first to seduce her. That possibility was more credible than Umfraville's follow-up, that he (rather than the reprehensible Cosmo Flitton, married to Flavia not long after) could be true father of Flavia's daughter, Pamela. Pamela Flitton, it might be thought, carried all the marks of being Cosmo Flitton's daughter. Age had done little or nothing to impair Umfraville's capacities for routine banter, if he happened to be in the right mood. He continued to press the possibility of a remote family tie emerging from the Cutts/Akworth union that would connect Flavia Wisebite with himself.

'Bride or bridegroom? Come on, Flavia. I want to be able to introduce you as my little cousin.'

'No good, Dicky. I'm not a blood relation. I'm Clare Akworth's godmother. Her mother's a dear friend of mine. We live in cottages almost next door to each other, practically in walking distance of Stourwater.'

Flavia Wisebite began to narrate her past history to Umfraville in her rapid trembling voice; how nervous diseases had prostrated her, she had been in and out of hospital, was now cured. In spite of that assurance she still seemed in a highly nervous state. Umfraville, less tough in certain respects than in his younger days, was beginning to look rather upset himself at all this. No doubt he felt sorry for Flavia, but had reached a time of life when, if he came to a wedding, he hoped not to be harassed by having poured into his ears the troubles of a former mistress. His face became quite drawn as he listened. I should have been willing to escape myself, scarcely knowing her, and feeling in no way responsible. Before withdrawal were possible, Umfraville manoeuvred me into the conversation. Flavia Wisebite at once recalled the sole occasion when we had met in the past.

'It was when Dicky was first engaged to your sister-in-law, Frederica. You drove over from Aldershot to Frederica's house during the war. I was there with poor Robert, just before he was killed. I'm a contemporary of Frederica's, you know. We came out at the same time. I remember you talking about my brother, Charles.'

She began to speak disjointedly of Stringham. She was, I thought, perhaps a little mad now. As one gets older, one gets increasingly used to encountering this development in friends and acquaintances; causing periods of self-examination in a similar connexion. Seeing that Flavia and I had something in common to talk about together, Umfraville slipped away. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him stumping across the room on his stick to have a further word with the bride. Flavia Wisebite rambled on.

'Charles was never sent into the world to make old bones, of course I always knew that, but how sad that he should have died as he did, how sad. He was a hero, of course, but what difference does that make, when you're dead?'

She seemed to require an answer to that question. It was hard to offer one free from sententiousness. I made no attempt to do so.

'I suppose it makes a difference the way a few people remember you.'

That seemed to satisfy her.

'Yes, yes. Like Robert.'

'Yes. Robert too.'

She appeared to have been made quite happy by this justifiable, if unoriginal conclusion. Oddly enough, when at Frederica's, Flavia Wisebite had spoken almost disparagingly of her brother's determination, in face of poor health, to join the army. This canonization of Stringham after death had something of her daughter Pamela's way of remembering dead lovers. Now, in a somewhat similar manner, Flavia began to talk of Umfraville with affection, though she had hardly noticed him at Frederica's. Then, of course, she had been involved with Robert Tolland. Even so, the enthusiasm with which she went on about Kenya, how amusing Umfraville had been there, how much her father had liked him, was an illustration of the way human relationships fluctuate, without any action taking place; Umfraville, from being entirely disregarded, now occupying a prominent place in Flavia Wisebite's personal myth. Without warning, she switched to Pamela.

'Did you ever meet my daughter?'

'Yes. I knew Pamela.'

I was about to say that I knew Pamela well, then saw that, in Pamela Flitton's case, that might imply closer affiliations than had ever in fact existed. It was a needless adjustment of phrase. Her mother had certainly long ceased to worry, if she had ever done so, about her daughter's affairs, with whom she had, or had not, slept. Perhaps, in her own state of health, Flavia had been scarcely aware of all that. In any case something else in relation to Pamela was now on her mind.

'She died too.'

'Yes.'

'She married that dreadful man—Widmerpool.'

For the first time it occurred to me as strange, abnormally strange, that Flavia Wisebite had never, so far as I knew, played anything like an active rôle in her capacity as Widmerpool's mother-in-law. In fact I now saw that, without formulating the idea at all clearly in my mind, I had always supposed Flavia to have died. Whatever the reason—chiefly no doubt the interludes in hospitals and nursing-homes—she seemed to have sidestepped the scandals that had enveloped her daughter's name; not least Pamela's unhappy end. If that had been her mother's deliberate intention, she had been remarkably successful in keeping out of the way.

'Did you know Widmerpool?'

'Yes. I know him. I've known him for years.'

'I said *did* you know him. Nobody could know him now.'

'How do you mean?'

I did not grasp immediately the implication that Widmerpool had become literally impossible to know.

'You can't have heard what's happened to him. He's gone out of his mind. He lives with a crowd of dreadful people, most of them quite young, who wear extraordinary clothes, and do the most horrible, horrible things. They are quite near here.'

It was true that Widmerpool's mother's cottage had been only a mile or two from Stourwater.

'I did know he'd become rather odd. I'd forgotten he was in this neighbourhood.'

'I see them out running quite often.'

In the light of the cult's habits there was nothing particularly extraordinary in Flavia Wisebite catching sight of them at their exercises from time to time. During the period of working for Sir Magnus Donners, Widmerpool had often spoken of his good fortune in having his mother's cottage—later enlarged by himself—so close to the Castle.

'Sometimes they're in blue garments, sometimes hardly any clothes at all. I've been told they do wear absolutely nothing, stark naked, when they go out in the middle of the night in summer. They do all sorts of *revolting* things. I wonder it's allowed. But then everything is allowed now.'

Flavia Wisebite grimaced.

'I try not to look at them, if they come running in off a sideroad. When I see them in the distance I go off up a turning.'

'Is Widmerpool head of the cult?'

'How should I know? I thought he was. Didn't he start it? As soon as Pamela married him, he began his horrible goings-on, though they weren't quite like what he does nowadays. Why did she do it? How could she? Find the most horrible man on earth, and then marry him? She always had to have her own way. It was quite enough that everyone agreed that Widmerpool was awful, hideous, monstrous. She just wanted to show that she didn't care in the least what anyone said. She was the same as a child. Absolutely wilful. Nobody could control her.'

No doubt there was much truth in what her mother said. I remembered Pamela Flitton, as a child bridesmaid, being sick in the font at Stringham's wedding. One of the children had made a good deal of noise at the ceremony just attended, but nothing so drastic as that. Flavia's daughter had always been in a class by herself from her earliest days. A girl like Fiona was no real competitor.

'Because Pam didn't always go for unattractive people. When she was a little girl she fell madly in love with Charles—you know the way children do—at the time he was drinking too much. The amount he drank in those days was terrible. Pam didn't see him often because of that. Still, Charles was always fond of her, very nice to her, whenever he came to see us, which wasn't often. Charles left Pam his things, not much, hardly anything by then. Pam never made a will, of course, so Widmerpool must have got whatever there was. The Modigliani drawing. Pam loved that. I wonder what happened to it. I suppose that awful Widmerpool sold it.'

Flavia Wisebite took a small folded pocket handkerchief from her bag. She lightly dabbed her eyes. It was the precise gesture her mother had used, another memory of Stringham's marriage to Peggy Stepney; Peggy Klein, as she had been for years now. Mrs Foxe's tears had been more prolonged on that occasion, lasting intermittently throughout the whole service. Flavia's were quickly over. She returned the handkerchief to the bag. I did not know what to say. Where could one begin? Stringham's past? Pamela's past? Flavia's own past? These were extensive and delicate themes to set out on; Widmerpool's present, even less approachable. There was no need to say anything at all. Flavia Wisebite, in the manner of persons of her sort, had suddenly recovered herself. She was perfectly all right again. Now she spoke once more in her tremulous social voice.

'Isn't Clare Akworth a sweet girl?'

'I don't really know her. She looks very attractive.'

'I'm so proud to be her godmother. He's a charming young man too. He told me all about his computers. It was far above my head, I'm afraid. I'm sure they'll be very happy. I never was, but I'm sure they will be. So nice to have met again.'

Smiling goodbye, she disappeared into the crowd. In its own particular way the encounter had been disturbing. I was glad it was over. One of its side effects was a sense of temporary inability to chat with other guests, most of them, unless relations, from their age unknown to me. Flavia Wisebite had diminished exuberance for seeking out members of an older generation, whom one had not seen for some time, hearing their news, listening to their troubles. In that line, Flavia Wisebite herself was enough for one day. She had also in some way infected me with her own sense of disorientation. I required to recover. The idea suggested itself to slip away from the reception for a few minutes, find release in wandering through the corridors and galleries of the Castle. After all, that was really why I had come here. There was the dining-room, for example, draped with the tapestries of the Seven Deadly Sins, the little library or study, drawings and small oils between bookshelves, where Barnby's portrait of the waitress from Casanova's Chinese Restaurant had hung. A side door seemed the most convenient exit from the party. Rupert Akworth, the bride's uncle, who had given her away, saw me about to leave.

'The gents? Down the stairs on the left. Rather classy.'

'Thanks.'

The Stourwater passages had by now acquired the smell common to all schools: furniture polish: disinfectant: fumes of unambitious cooking. I found the little library—now a schoolroom hung with maps—which Sir Magnus had entered with such dramatic effect that he seemed to have been watching for his guests' arrival through a peephole in the far door (concealed with dummy books), the night we had come over with the Morelands to dinner at the Castle. One of the pictures in this room had been another Barnby, an oil sketch of the model Conchita, described by Moreland as 'antithesis of the pavement artist's traditional representation of a loaf of bread, captioned *Easy to Draw but Hard to Get*.'

After striking one or two false trails, I came at last to the dining-room of the Seven Deadly Sins. Rows of tables indicated that its function remained unchanged, though the Sins no longer exemplified their graphic warning to those who ate there. The fine chimneypiece, decorated with nymphs and satyrs—no doubt installed by Sir Magnus to harmonize with the tapestries—had been allowed to remain as adjunct to school meals. Above this hung a large reproduction of an Annigoni portrait of the Queen. Here, scene of the luncheon where I had first met Jean Templer after her marriage to Duport; later, of the great impersonation of the Sins themselves, recorded in the photographs shown by

Matilda, were more pungent memories. I stood for a moment by the door, reconstructing some of these past incidents in the mind. While I was doing so, a man and a girl entered the dining-room from the far end. They were holding hands. Without abandoning this clasp, they advanced up the room. If wedding guests, like quite a few others present at the reception, neither had dressed up much for the occasion.

'Hullo, Fiona—hullo, Russell.'

Gwinnett offered the hand that was not holding Fiona's.

'Hullo, Nicholas.'

'Congratulations.'

'You've heard.'

'Yes.'

Gwinnett gave one of his rare smiles. I kissed Fiona, who accepted with good grace this tribute to her marriage. She, too, looked pleased. Her dress still swept the ground—as on the crayfishing afternoon, the last time I had actually set eyes on her—but her breast no longer bore the legend HARMONY. In her disengaged hand she carried a large straw hat trimmed with multicoloured flowers. A considerable cleaning up, positive remodelling, had taken place in Fiona's general style. No doubt much of that was owed to Delavacquerie. Gwinnett had surmounted the sober suit of the Magnus Donners dinner with a thin strip of bow tie. His head seemed to have been newly shaved.

'Have you both just arrived?'

'A side door outside was open. We thought we might look around before meeting the family. Is the Castle thirteenth or early fourteenth-century? I'd say that was the date. The machicolations might be later. What's its history?'

Gwinnett had shown architectural interests in Venice.

'Not much history, I think. Sir Magnus Donners, who owned it, had some story about a mediaeval lord of Stourwater, whose daughter drowned herself in the moat for love of a monk.'

Halfway through the sentence I saw that tradition was one preferably to have remained unrepeated in the circumstances. Sir Magnus had narrated the tale to Prince Theodoric the day the Walpole-Wilsons had taken me to luncheon here. I added quickly that the room we were in had once contained some remarkable tapestries depicting the Seven Deadly Sins. That seemed scarcely an improvement as a topic. Fiona may have felt the same, as she enquired about the wedding.

'How did Sebastian stand up to it?'

'Very well. Let's return to them, and drink some champagne.'

Fiona looked questioningly at Gwinnett, as she used to look at Murtlock for a decision; perhaps had so looked at Delavacquerie, before relinquishing him.

'Do you want to see them all yet?'

'Whatever you say.'

I supposed they would prefer to remain alone together.

'I'm going to continue my exploration of the Castle for a short time, then I'll see you later at the reception.'

Fiona did not seem anxious to face her relations yet.

'We'll come with you. You can show us round. I'd like to see a bit more of it. Wouldn't you, Rus?'

'I don't know the place at all well. I was here absolutely years ago, and only went into a few rooms then.'

'Never mind.'

The three of us set off together.

'I'm glad I wasn't at school here.'

Stourwater was one of the educational establishments Fiona had never sampled. The new rôle of young married woman seemed to come with complete ease to her. There could be no doubt that she liked exceptional types. Gwinnett's attraction to Fiona was less easy to classify. A faint train of thought was perceptible so far as Pamela Widmerpool was concerned, though Fiona had neither Pamela's looks, nor force of character. The impact of Pamela might even have jolted Gwinnett into an entirely different emotional channel, his former inhibitions cured once and for all. That was not impossible.

'Sir Magnus Donners once took some of his guests down to the so-called dungeons, but I'm not sure I can find them.'

Gwinnett pricked up his ears.

'The dungeons? Let's see them. I'd like to look over the dungeons.'

Fiona agreed.

'Me, too. Do have a try to find them.'

They did not cease to hold hands, while several rooms and passages were traversed. Structural alterations had taken place in the course of adapting the Castle to the needs of a school. The head of the staircase leading to these lower regions, where the alleged dungeons were on view—knowledgable people said they were merely storerooms—could not be found. Several doors were locked. Then a low door, a postern, brought us out into a small courtyard, a side of the Castle unenclosed by moat. Here school outbuildings had been added. Beyond this open space lay playing fields, a wooden pavilion, some seats. Further off were the trees of the park. Gwinnett surveyed the courtyard.

'This near building might have been a brewhouse. The brickwork looks Tudor.'

Fiona turned towards the fields.

'At least I'll never have to play hockey again.'

'Did you hate games?'

'I used to long to die, playing hockey on winter afternoons.'

Gwinnett gave up examining the supposed brewhouse. We moved towards the open.

'In the ball-courts of the Aztecs a game was played of which scarcely anything is known, except that the captain of the winning side is believed to have been made a human sacrifice.'

Gwinnett said that rather pedantically.

'The rule would certainly add to the excitement of a cup-tie or test match.'

'Another feature was that, when a goal was scored—a very rare event—all the clothes and jewellery of the spectators were forfeit to the players.'

'Less good. An incitement to rowdyism.'

'I think they both sound excellent rules,' said Fiona. 'Nothing I'd have liked better than to execute the captain, and I never watched any games, if I could help it, so they wouldn't have got my gear.'

Gwinnett would have liked to remain serious, but gave way to her mood. Marriage seemed already to have loosened up both of them. Further discussion of Aztec sport was brought to an end by something happening on the far side of the hockey-field, which distracted attention. Beyond the field a path led through the park. Along this path, some way off, a party of persons was slowly running. They might well have been the Aztec team, doubling up to play a sacrificial contest. There were about a dozen of them approaching, mostly dressed in blue, trotting in a leisurely way, knees high, across the park. Fiona, naturally enough, grasped at once the identity of this straggling body. I don't know how soon Gwinnett also took that in. Probably at once too. The strange thing was that, before comprehending the meaning of what was taking place, I thought for a second of childhood, of Dr Trelawney and his young disciples.

'Look! Look!'

Fiona was displaying great excitement. By that time I, too, had understood the scene.

'It's them all right.'

Fiona tried to discern something.

'Is *he* there?'

She spoke with a certain apprehension. Obviously she meant Murtlock. No one answered her. Gwinnett seemed interested. He watched the runners. Fiona examined them intently too.

'No—he's not there. I'm sure he's not there. But I can see Barnabas.'

There were at least a dozen of them, perhaps more. Not all wore the robes or tunic of the cult, some almost in rags. Both sexes were represented, the average age appeared to be early twenties. The only two older persons were much older. One of them, Widmerpool, was leading the pack. He wore the blue robe. The other elderly man lacked a robe. Dressed in a red sweater and trousers, greybearded, dishevelled, incredibly filthy in appearance even from far-off, this one was by a long way the last of the runners. Fiona was thrilled.

'He's not there. Let's talk to them. Let's talk to Barnabas.'

'OK.'

Gwinnett said that quite warmly, as if he too would enjoy the encounter.

'You don't mind?'

'Not at all.'

She turned towards the runners, and shouted.

'Barnabas! Barnabas!'

At the sound of Fiona's voice, the pace set by Widmerpool became even more sluggish, some of the party slowing up to the extent of not running at all. These last stood staring in our direction, as if we, rather than they, were the odd figures on the landscape. That may well have seemed so to them. Fiona cried out again.

'Come and talk to us, Barnabas.'

Widmerpool was the last to stop running. He had to walk back some little way to where the rest had drawn up. He was evidently in charge. If the run were to be interrupted, he might have been supposed the correct individual to be hailed by Fiona. I was not sure what her attitude towards him had been when herself a member of the cult. No doubt he was a figure to be taken very much into account, but, if only from his age, having no such grip as Murtlock on her imagination. It was unlikely she would ever have made our presence known had Murtlock been sighted among the runners. Now, behaving like a girl seeing old schoolfriends again, some of the pleasure coming from their being still at a school from which she had herself escaped, Fiona began to walk across the field to meet them. Gwinnett followed. It was not clear whether he was indifferent to the reunion, wanting only to humour his bride, or still felt curiosity as what this encounter might bring forth. The runners, Henderson foremost among them, strayed across the grass towards us, the elderly man with the tangled beard remaining well to the rear.

'How are you, Barnabas?'

Henderson looked as if a far more ascetic life had been imposed on him since crayfishing days. His face was pale and thinner. He had removed the moustache, and taken to wire spectacles. The sight of Fiona greatly cheered him. She began to explain what was happening at Stourwater.

'Sebastian's wedding reception is going on here this afternoon. Chuck told me he was going to come to it. Chuck knows Clare Akworth.'

I did not grasp the significance of that, nor hear Henderson's answer. The sight of Widmerpool at close quarters absorbed all my attention. Although I knew he had by now been more or less entangled with the cult for the best part of two years, was accustomed to take part in its esoteric rites, in all respects identified himself with this new mode of life—as The Devil's Fingers showed—the spectacle of him wearing a blue robe was nevertheless a startling one. Flavia Wisebite had been justified in the account she had given, so far as that went. The image immediately brought to mind was one not thought of for years; the picture, reproduced in colour, that used to hang in the flat Widmerpool shared with his mother in his early London days. It had been called *The Omnipresent*. Three blue-robed figures respectively knelt, stood with bowed head, gazed heavenward with extended hands, all poised on the brink of a precipice. It was a long time ago. I may have remembered the scene incorrectly. Nevertheless it was these figures Widmerpool conjured up, as he advanced towards me.

'Nicholas?'

When he spoke, within a second, that impression was altered. What had momentarily given him something never achieved before, a kind of suitability, almost dignity, dwindled to no more than a man gone into the garden wearing a blue dressing-gown. It was largely the clothes that had outraged Flavia Wisebite, but, in the end, it was not this kind of bathrobe that made the strong impression —any more than with Murtlock—it was the man himself. Widmerpool looked ill, desperate, worn out. The extreme debility of his appearance brought one up short. The low neckband of the garment he wore revealed a scar that ran from somewhere below the neck to the upper part of one cheek; possibly the gash inflicted on the night of The Devil's Fingers ceremony. In this physical state it was surprising that he was able to run at all, even at the slow pace he himself had been setting. No doubt the determination always shown to go through with anything he took up, carry on to the furthest limit of his capacity, was as painfully exercised in the activities to which he had latterly given himself, as in any undertakings of earlier life.

'Hullo.'

His manner was as changed as his costume. He sounded altogether bemused. He stood there limply, haunted in expression, glancing from time to time at Fiona and Gwinnett, though not speaking to either. So far as could be seen, Fiona was introducing her husband to these former associates; Henderson, the young ones, all crowding round. There was a hum of chatter. The filthy grey-beard hung about in the background. Widmerpool seemed to make an effort to pull himself together.

'Why are you wearing a tailcoat?'

'A wedding is taking place. I'm one of the guests.'

'A wedding's taking place in Stourwater?'

'Yes.'

'But—but the Chief's dead, isn't he?'

Sir Magnus Donners, in days when Widmerpool worked for him, had always been referred to by subordinates as the Chief. Widmerpool put the question in an uncertain puzzled voice that seemed to indicate loss of memory more damaging than reasonably to be associated with a man of his age.

'He died some little while ago—close on twenty years.'

'Of course he did, of course. Extraordinary that I should have doubted for a moment that the Chief had passed over. A mistaken term escaped me too. I shall do penance for that. At our age transmutations take place all the time. Yes, yes.'

Widmerpool gazed round again. Perhaps more to steady himself than because he had not already recognized Gwinnett, he suddenly held up a hand in Murtlock's benedictional manner.

'It is Professor Gwinnett—to use an absurd prefix?'

'It is, Lord Widmerpool.'

Gwinnett smiled faintly, without the least friendliness. That was hardly surprising in the circumstances.

'Not Lord, not Lord—Ken, Ken.'

Gwinnett withdrew his smile.

'You came to see us about a year ago?'

'Yes.'

Fiona turned from the group with which she had been talking. Perhaps she wanted to impress on Widmerpool her ownership of Gwinnett; anyway now absolute separation from the cult, whatever her taste for still hobnobbing with its members.

'Russell and I have have just got married, Ken.'

'Married?'

The way Widmerpool spoke the word was hard to define. It might have been horror; it might, on the other hand, have aroused in his mind some infinitely complicated chain of ideas as to what Fiona meant by using such a term. Fiona may also have wished to shock by stating that she had taken so conventional a step. Acceptance of the fact that she gave the word its normal face value seemed to sink into Widmerpool's head only slowly. Not unnaturally, in the light of what he had just been told about a wedding taking place in the Castle, he mistook the implications.

'You've just been married at Stourwater, Fiona?'

He looked more astounded than ever. Fiona laughed derisively. I think she intended to make fun of him, now that she was free from any possible reprisals. Even Gwinnett smiled at the question.

'No, it's my brother's wedding.'

Taking Gwinnett's arm, Fiona turned back to her younger acquaintances. Widmerpool reverted to the subject of Sir Magnus Donners. It seemed to trouble him.

'Extraordinary I should not only have forgotten about Donners, but used that erroneous formula, there being no death, only transition, blending, synthesis, mutation—just as there are no marriages, except mystic marriages. Marriages that transcend the boundaries of awareness, the unmanifest solutions of Harmony, galvanized by meditation and appropriate rites, the source of all Power—rather than the lethal manufacture of tensions as constructed in these very surroundings today.'

Widmerpool's observations on such matters were suddenly interrupted by a burst of singing. The notes, thin and quavering, possessed something of Flavia Wisebite's conversational tones, mysteriously transmuted to music, weird, eerie, not at all unpleasant all the same. They came from the other elderly man, the bearded one, who had still moved no nearer to join the rest of the group.

'Open now the crystal fountain,
Whence the healing stream doth flow:
Let the fire and cloudy pillar
Lead me all my journey through.'

Widmerpool started violently. It was as if someone had touched him with a red-hot iron. Then he recovered himself, was about to go on talking.

'Who is that singing?'

'Take no notice. He's all right, if left alone. He finds Harmony in singing that sort of thing.'

The bearded man stood a little way apart, hands clasped, eyes uplifted. He had hardly more hair on his head than Gwinnett. Something about the singing suggested he had absolutely no teeth. It crossed my mind that the old red high-necked sweater he wore, over torn corduroy trousers, might have been passed on by Widmerpool himself. The beard was matted and grubby, his feet bare and horrible. Entirely self-occupied, he took no notice at all of what was otherwise going on. What he chose to sing altogether distracted my attention from Widmerpool's discourse on death and marriage. The strains brought back the early days of the war. It was the hymn my Regiment used to sing on the line of march. The chant seemed to disturb Widmerpool, irritate, upset him. His expression became more agonized than ever.

'Don't you remember the men singing that on route marches?'

'Singing what?'

Widmerpool, himself on the staff of the Division of which my Battalion had been one of the units, might not have heard the motif so often as I, but the tune could hardly have passed entirely unnoticed, even by someone so uninterested in human behaviour.

'Who is he?'

'One of us.'

Widmerpool had to be pressed for an answer. He was prepared to agree that I might have heard the verse sung before.

'True, true. He's a man I apparently ran across in the army. Somebody brought him along to us. He'd been a dropout for years—before people knew about an alternative lifestyle—and was at the end of his tether. We thought he was going to pass over. When he got better, Scorp took a fancy to him. At the time he came to us, I didn't remember seeing him before. Didn't recognize him at all. Then one day Bith brought it all up himself.'

'Bith?'

'He's named Bithel. I seem to have known him in the army. Through no fault of my own, it seems I had something to do with his leaving the army. Many people would have been grateful for that. Scorp likes Bith. Thinks he contributes to Harmony. I expect he does. Scorp is usually right about that sort of thing.'

Widmerpool sighed.

'But I know Bithel too. I knew all about him in those days. He commanded the Mobile Laundry. Don't you remember?'

Widmerpool looked blank. While he had been speaking these words, his thoughts were evidently far away. He was almost talking to himself. If he had forgotten about the death of Sir Magnus Donners, he could well have forgotten about Bithel; even the fact that he and I had soldiered together. In any case the matter did not interest him so far as Bithel was concerned. He was evidently thinking of himself, overcome now with self-pity.

'When Scorp found out that I'd had to tell Bith he must leave the army—leave the Mobile Laundry, you say—Scorp made me do penance. What happened had been duty—what I then quite wrongly thought duty to be—and wasn't at all my fault. I must have been told by those above me that I'd got to tell Bith he had to go. I tried to explain that to Scorp. He said—he'd got the story from Bith, of course—that I acted without Harmony, and must make amends, mystical amends. He was right, of course. Scorp made me . . . made me . . .'

Widmerpool's voice trailed away. He shuddered violently, at the same time swallowing several times. His eyes filled with tears. Whatever Murtlock had made him do as penance for relieving Bithel of his commission was too horrific to be spoken aloud by Widmerpool himself, even though he had brought the matter up, still brooded on it. I was decidedly glad not to be told. One's capacity for hearing about ghastly doings lessens with age. At least this showed that Murtlock had taken over complete command. Even thinking about the retribution visited on him had brought Widmerpool to near collapse. In fact he looked much as he had described Bithel, when—not at all unjustly so far as the actual sentence went—the alternatives of court martial, or acceptance of a report declaring Bithel unsuitable for retention as an officer were put before him. This was the incident to which Greening had referred. It may well have been true—as Greening had said—that Widmerpool had talked in a callous manner later in the Mess about Bithel breaking down. Certainly he had spoken of it to me.

'Bithel's one of your community?'

'For a year or more now.'

Again Widmerpool answered as if his thoughts were elsewhere. Bithel continued to stand apart, smiling and muttering to himself, apparently quite happy. His demeanour was not unlike what it had been in the army after he had drunk a good deal. Fiona left the group with which she had been talking, and came up to Widmerpool.

'Look, Ken, I want you all to look in on my brother's wedding party for a minute or two. Barnabas's old boy-friend, Chuck, is there, and rows of people Barnabas knows. You must come. Just for a moment. Scorp always said that Harmony, in one form, was to be widely known.'

It looked very much as if marriage had caused Fiona to revert, from the gloom of recent years, to the more carefree style of her rampageous schoolgirl stage. Widmerpool made an attempt to avoid the question by taking a general line of disapproval.

'You went away, Fiona. You left us. You abandoned Harmony.'

The others, uneasy perhaps, but certainly tempted, now began to crowd round. Fiona continued her efforts to persuade Widmerpool, who was plainly uncertain how the suggestion should be correctly handled. It seemed to daze him. Possibly he was not without all curiosity to enter Stourwater again himself. Bithel began to sing once more.

'From every dark nook they press forward to meet me,
I lift up my eyes to the tall leafy dome.
And others are there looking downward to greet me,
The ashgrove, the ashgrove, alone is my home.'

At this, Fiona abandoned Widmerpool, and made for Bithel. Bithel seemed all at once to recognize her for the first time. He held his arms above his head. Fiona said something to him, then taking his hand, led him towards the rest of the group.

'Come along all of you. Bith's coming, if no one else is.'

Widmerpool's powers of decision were finally put out of action by the inclusion of Bithel in an already apparently insoluble situation. It could well be that one of his responsibilities was to keep an eye on Bithel, probably easy enough out on a run, quite another matter in what was now promised. He made a final effort to impose discipline.

'Remember, no drink.'

'All right,' said Fiona. 'How do we find our way?'

The last question was addressed to myself. It was a disconcerting one. I was not particularly anxious to take on the responsibility of leading this mob into the wedding reception. If Fiona wanted to present them all to her brother and his bride that was her own affair. She must do it herself. Apart from other considerations, such as uncertainty how they would behave, was the very real possibility that I might not be able to find the way back to the Great Hall by the path we came. Some of them might easily get left behind in the Stourwater corridors. This last probability suggested an alternative route to the reception.

'The easiest would be to walk round to the front of the Castle. You follow the banks of the moat, then cross the causeway, and straight ahead.'

Fiona looked uncertain for a moment. Gwinnett, either because he saw the tactical advantages of such an approach, or simply speaking his own wish, gave support to this direction.

'I'd like to do that. We haven't seen the double-portcullised gateway yet.'

Fiona concurred. Her chief desire seemed to be to transfer her former friends of the cult to the party the quickest possible way. This was no doubt intended as a double-edged tease; on the one hand, aimed at her relations; on the other, at Murtlock. That was how things looked.

'All right. This way. Come along, Bith.'

They set off; Fiona, Gwinnett, Henderson, Bithel, all in the first wave. Widmerpool lagged behind. He had been taken by surprise, unable to make up his mind, incapable of a plan. If I did not wish to appear at the head of the column, there was no alternative to walking with him. This also solved for the moment the question of Bithel; whether or not to draw his attention to our former acquaintance. We strolled along side by side, Widmerpool now apparently resigned to looking in on the reception. It could be true, as Fiona had hinted, that Murtlock encouraged his people to show themselves, from time to time, in unlikely places. This might not be Widmerpool's main worry so much as Bithel. Widmerpool's own words now gave some confirmation to that. He was still speaking more or less to himself.

'I daresay it's all right if we don't stay too long. People can see Harmony in action. Bith, in my opinion, has never achieved much Harmony—still slips away and drinks, when he can lay hands on any money—and I must be sure to keep an eye on him where we're going. The others are all right. One glass doesn't matter for Bith—Scorp recognizes that. He says it won't necessarily make bad vibrations in Bith's individual validation. He's a special case. Scorp thinks a lot of Bith. Says he has remarkable mystic powers inherent in him. Still, I mustn't let him out of my sight. I'm in charge of today's mystical exercises, and Scorp will hold me responsible. Who are the couple going through these meaningless formulas today?'

Widmerpool asked the last question in a more coherent tone.

'Fiona's brother, Sebastian Cutts, and a girl called Clare Akworth.'

Widmerpool winced, much as he had done when Bithel had first begun to sing.

'Akworth?'

'Akworth.'

He began to stammer.

'Like . . . like . . .'

He did not finish the question. His face went the dull red colour its skin sometimes took on under stress. I knew, of course, what he meant. At least I thought I knew. As it turned out, I knew less than I supposed. In any case there was no point in pretending ignorance of the essence of the enquiry. The obvious assumption was that, even after half a century, Widmerpool was unwilling to be confronted with Akworth, if there were any danger of such a thing. This was only the second occasion, so far as I could remember, when the Akworth matter had ever cropped up between us. The first had been when we had not long left school, and were both learning French with the Leroy family at La Grenadière.

'The name is spelt like the boy who was at school with us. In fact the bride is that Akworth's granddaughter.'

'Granddaughter of Bertram Akworth?'

'Yes.'

'Is he still—still on this side?'

'Who?'

'Bertram Akworth.'

'If you mean is he still alive, he's actually at the wedding. He read the Lesson in church.'

'He's—at Stourwater?'

'If you're coming to the reception you'll see him.'

Widmerpool stopped abruptly. I had hoped for that. It looked as if he might now decide not to enter the Castle at all. His absence would make one less potentially unwelcome addition to the wedding party; in fact remove what was probably the least assimilable factor. The young people were likely to mix easily enough with their own contemporaries. At worst Bithel would pass out. He could be put in the cloakroom, until time came to take him away. That sort of thing should easily be dealt with on premises as large as Stourwater. Widmerpool was another matter. Not only would his appearance in a blue robe attract—owing to his age—undue attention, but his nervous condition might assume some inconvenient form. With any luck, now he knew Akworth would be present, he would make for home right away. Instead of doing so Widmerpool began to babble disconnectedly.

'I've know Bertram Akworth for years . . . years . . . We were on the board of the same bank together—until he and Farebrother got me off it, between them. Farebrother always had it in for me. So did Akworth. It was natural enough.'

It was certainly natural enough in Akworth's case; even if surprising that Widmerpool recognized the fact. A moment's thought ought to have made it obvious that Widmerpool and Sir Bertram Akworth were certain to encounter each other in the City. It seemed to have been more than occasional acquaintance, indeed looking as if they had been engaged in a running fight all their lives. This prolonged duel added to the drama of the original story. If I had known about it, I should have been more than ever convinced that this cross-questioning on Widmerpool's part was aimed at avoiding a meeting with his schoolboy victim and commercial rival. That was a dire misjudgment. On the contrary, Widmerpool was filled with an inspired fervour, carried away with delighted agitation, at the prospect of a face-to-face confrontation.

'Bertram Akworth will be there? He will actually be present? It can't be true. This is an opportunity I have been longing for. I behaved to Akworth in a way I now know to be not wrong—so-called right and wrong being illusory concepts—but what must be deplored as transcendentally discordant, mystically in error, in short, contrary to Harmony. In those days I was only a boy—a simple boy at that—who knew nothing of such experiences as cohabiting with the Elements, as a means of training the will. Moreover, I should have encouraged any breaking of the rules, struck a blow for, rather than against, rebellion, aided the subversion of that detestable thing law and order, as commonly understood. In those days—my schoolboy years—I had already dedicated myself to so-called reason, so-called practical affairs. I allowed no—at least very little—unfettered play of those animal forces that free the spirit, though later I began to understand the way, for example, that nakedness removes impediments of all sorts. Besides, if the universe is to be subjected to his will, a man must develop his female nature as well as the male—without lessening his own masculinity—I knew nothing of that . . . but Akworth . . . long misunderstood . . . should make amends . . . as with Bith . . . though not . . . not . . .'

Again Widmerpool tailed off, unable to bring himself to mention whatever Murtlock had made him act out in relation to the Bithel penance. What he said about Sir Bertram Akworth was most disturbing. A far more threatening situation than before had now suddenly come into being. It was one thing for Fiona, the bridegroom's sister, to bring into her brother's wedding party a crowd of young persons, curious specimens perhaps, but, not long before, closely associated with herself. It was quite another to allow the occasion to be one for Widmerpool to give rein to an ambition—apparently become obsessive with him—that he should make some sort of an apology to a lifelong business antagonist, grandfather of the bride, the boy he had caused to be sacked from school half a century earlier. In his present mood Widmerpool was capable of exploring in public, in much the same manner that he had been expatiating on them to me, all the mystical implications of Sir Bertram Akworth's youthful desires.

'If the matter of reporting Akworth has never come up in the years you've been meeting him, doesn't it seem wiser to leave things at that now? It might even be preferable not to go to the reception?'

Widmerpool was not listening.

'Amazing how long it took me to understand the ritual side of sex. Although I never enjoyed sex much myself, I'd always supposed you were meant to enjoy it. Now I know better. I see now that, even when I was young, I was reaching out for the ritual side, to the exclusion of enjoyment. In objecting to Akworth's conduct, I was displaying an attitude I later took up in my own mind in relation to Donners and his irregular practices. He, too, may have had his own instinctive reactions in the same field. In those days I knew nothing of the Dionysiac necessities. They were revealed to me all but too late. If Donners was aware of such needs earlier than myself, he fell altogether short in combining them with transcendental meditation, or mystical exercises of a physical kind, other than sexual.'

Widmerpool, absorbed with the case of Sir Magnus, shook his head. By this time we were crossing the causeway, about to pass under the portcullised gate, through which Fiona's vanguard had already disappeared. Either to catch up with the rest of his company, or from impatience to make contact with Sir Bertram Akworth, Widmerpool pressed forward. This urgency on his part impelled his own entry into the Great Hall well ahead of myself, something I was anxious to manoeuvre, but had seen no way of bringing about. Widmerpool was lost in the crowd by the time I came through the doorway. Caroline Lovell—a niece of ours, married to a soldier called Thwaites—was standing just by. She began some sort of conversation before it was possible to estimate the effect of Fiona's additions to the party. We talked for a minute or two.

'Is Alan here?'

Caroline said her husband, having just been posted to Northern Ireland, had been unable to come to the wedding. She looked worried, but was prevented from saying more of this by Jonathan Cutts, who joined us, and began to speak of the Sleaford Veronese—as it once had been—a favourite subject of Caroline's father, Chips Lovell. The *Iphigenia* had come on the market again, handled by Jonathan's firm, and achieved a record price. Neither Jonathan Cutts nor Caroline seemed to have noticed the incursion of Fiona's friends from the cult; confirming the impression that, once within the lofty dimly lit limits of the Great Hall, they had quickly merged with other less than conventionally clad guests. Certainly there was no clearcut isolation of the group. For a second I caught a glimpse of Bithel; a moment later he disappeared. He had been surrounded by a circle of laughing young men. By this time a fair amount of champagne had been drunk. Widmerpool was nowhere to be seen. No doubt he was searching for Sir Bertram Akworth, but Sir Bertram, too, had disappeared for the moment. I asked Caroline where he had gone.

'There was a hitch about the car to take Sebastian and Clare to the airport. Sir Bertram's making some new arrangement, somebody said.'

Flavia Wisebite appeared again at my elbow.

'Have you seen who's just come in?'

'Do you mean Fiona Cutts and her former crowd?'

'Widmerpool.'

She was overcome with indignation, her face dead white.

'The dreadful man is wandering about the room in his loathsome clothes. What could have made them invite him? Young people will do anything these days. I'm sure it wasn't Clare's choice. She's such a sweet girl. Sebastian seemed a nice young man too. Surely he can't have asked Widmerpool? Do you think his father—who used to be an MP—had to have Widmerpool for political reasons. That's a possibility.'

'Widmerpool and his lot were brought in by Fiona Cutts, Sebastian's sister.'

'Fiona brought them? I see. Now I understand. Do you know who Fiona Cutts has just married—who my goddaughter, little Clare, is going to have for a brother-in-law?

An American called Gwinnett. I don't expect you've even heard of him. I have. I know a great deal about Mr Gwinnett. It's all too dreadful to say. Dreadful. Dreadful.'

Gwinnett, in sight on the far side of the room, was talking in a comparatively animated manner to his new in-laws. Behind them, in a corner, Jeremy Warminster had made contact with one of the prettier girls of the cult, whether or not for the first time was hard to judge. The two of them seemed already on easy terms with each other. A husband and wife, introduced as Colonel and Mrs Alford-Green, came up to speak with Flavia Wisebite. Their friendship seemed to date back to very ancient days, when Flavia had still been married to Cosmo Flitton. Colonel Alford-Green was evidently a retired regular soldier. While they were talking Sir Bertram Akworth reappeared. Hailing the Alford-Greens in his loud harsh voice, he greeted Flavia, too, as one already well known to him.

'How are you, Rosamund, how are you, Gerald? How nice to see old friends like you both, and Flavia here today. The honeymoon car broke down. All is now fixed. I've seen to it. No cause for panic.'

'We thought you read the Lesson very well, Bertram.'

'You did, Rosamund? Thank you very much. I'm glad you thought I did it all right. You know I rather pride myself on my reading. It's a beautiful passage. A great favourite of mine. It was the one on the agenda anyway. A bit of luck. I was very glad. If I'd been asked, I'd certainly have chosen it.'

'When are you coming up to our part of the world again, Bertram?'

'I hope I shall one of these days. I very much hope I shall. You know how hard it is to get away. Is Reggie still joint-master?'

The question prompted a rather complicated account of some quarrel in which the local hunt had been involved for a long time. I was about to move away, when I became aware that Widmerpool was near by. In fact he was very close. He must have been wandering about in the crowd, looking for Sir Bertram. Now at last he had run him to ground. Sir Bertram had not yet seen him. He was much too engrossed with the foxhunting feuds of the Alford-Greens. Widmerpool began muttering to himself. Suddenly he spoke out.

'Bertram.'

Use of the christian name somehow surprised me; though obviously, if the two of them had come across each other as often as Widmerpool indicated, they would be on those sort of terms, however great their mutual dislike.

'Bertram.'

Widmerpool repeated the name. He spoke quite quietly, in an almost beseeching voice. Sir Bertram either did not hear the first appeal, or, more probably, decided that, whoever it was, he wanted to hear the end of the Alford-Greens' story, which treated of one of those rows between foxhunting people, which have a peculiar intensity of virulence. At the second summons, Sir Bertram turned. Plainly not recognizing an old business adversary under the blue robe Widmerpool wore, he did not seem more than a trifle taken aback at what might quite reasonably have been regarded as an extraordinary spectacle of humanity. His face merely assumed an expression of rather self-consciously wry amusement; the tolerant good humour of a man of the world, who is prepared for anything in the circumstances of the moment in which he finds himself; in this case, unexpected guests invited by his granddaughter to her wedding.

Without making excessive claims for Sir Bertram's imperturbability, or good humour, one could see that it took more than an excited elderly man, not too clean and wearing a blue robe, socially to discompose him these days. Sir Bertram had not reached the position he had in his own world without achieving a smattering of what was afoot in an essentially disparate one. This particular instance happened to be considerably more than a sharp contrast, to be neutralized by tactful ingenuity, with his own way of life. In short, Sir Bertram Akworth became suddenly aware that he was contemplating Widmerpool. No doubt he had already heard rumours of Widmerpool's changed ways—probably associated in his mind more with treasonable contacts and equivocal financial dealings—but, a man not given to imaginative reconstructions, Sir Bertram was not altogether prepared for the reality now set before him. Enlightenment caused a series of violent emotions—deep hatred the most definable—to pass swiftly across his sallow cadaverous features; reactions gone in a split second, recovery all but instantaneous.

'Kenneth, what are you up to?'

Sir Bertram spoke calmly. There was no time for him to say more. Instead of answering an undoubtedly rhetorical question—even if some sort of explanation were required, conventionally speaking, for thus arriving unasked at a party—Widmerpool, in terms of ritual of another kind, went straight to the point; if repentance were to be expressed in physical form. While Sir Bertram Akworth stood, eyebrows slightly raised, a rather fixed expression of humorous enquiry imposed on his features, like that of a reasonably talented amateur actor, Widmerpool, without the slightest warning, knelt before him; then bent forward, lowering his face almost to the parquet.

This description of what Widmerpool did suggests, in fact, something much more immediate, more outwardly astounding, than the act seemed at the time. I should myself have been completely at a loss to know what Widmerpool was at, if he had not expressed only a short time before his intention of making some sort of an apology about what had happened at school. Even so, when Widmerpool went down on all fours in utter self-abasement, I supposed at first that he was searching for something he had dropped on the floor. That was almost certainly the explanation that offered itself to those standing round about who witnessed the scene at close quarters. Of these last no one, so far as I knew, had ever heard of the incident from which the action stemmed. Even had they been familiar with it, the complexity of Widmerpool's declared attitude towards social revolt, ritual sex, mystical repentance, was likely to be lost on them, as it was lost, collectively and separately, on Sir Bertram Akworth himself.

If quite other events had not at that moment intervened, Widmerpool's innate perseverance, his unsnubbableness, might at last have made his motives clear to the object of this melodramatic self-condemnation. As things fell out, two happenings diminished the force of the act—in any case for the moment generally misunderstood—to almost nothing, altogether removing possibility of its meaning being driven home. The first of these interpolations, not more than a matter of routine, was the reappearance of bride and bridegroom, who had retired a short time before to put on their going-away clothes. This entry naturally caused a stir among the guests, distracting the attention of those even in the immediate Widmerpool area of the Great Hall. The second occurrence, individual, distressing, even more calculated in its own way to cause concentration on itself, was prefigured by a sort of low gasp from Flavia Wisebite.

'Oh . . . Oh . . .'

She must have moved up quite close to Widmerpool, possibly with the object of making some sort of a contact, in order to express in her own words, personally, the detestation she felt for himself and all his works. If that were the end she had in view, Widmerpool's own unexpected obeisance to Sir Bertram Akworth had taken her completely by surprise. It seemed later that, when Widmerpool went down on his knees, Flavia Wisebite, brought up short in her advance, had fallen almost on top of his crouching body. This caused considerable localized commotion among guests in that part of the room; by this time beginning to empty in preparation for seeing off the newly married pair. Sir Bertram Akworth and Colonel Alford-Green, who were the nearest to the place of her collapse, with help from several others, managed to get Flavia to one of the forms by the wall. Finally, at the suggestion of Sir Bertram, she was borne away to the school's sickroom. Perhaps someone lifted Widmerpool from the floor too. When I next looked in that direction he was gone. Isobel came up.

'Are we going out to see them off? Did somebody faint near where you were standing?'

'Widmerpool's mother-in-law.'

'What do you mean?'

'Flavia Wisebite.'

'Is she here?'

'Her son-in-law is a subject she feels strongly about.'

Outside, farewells were taking place round the bridal car. Whatever the mishap, the vehicle had been repaired or replaced. Sir Bertram Akworth came across the causeway. He looked rather flustered. Somebody asked about Flavia Wisebite.

'Not at all well, I'm afraid.'

'Where is she?'

'Being looked after by the school's skeleton staff. We've rung for a doctor.'

Absurdly, the phrase made me think of the opening inscription of *Death's-head Swordsman*, conjured up a picture of the dead ministering to the dead, which would have appealed to Gwinnett. He and Fiona, once more hand in hand, moved away now that the car had driven off, crossing the drive to continue their examination of the exterior features of the Castle. Having gone to some trouble to bring her former associates to the wedding reception, Fiona seemed now to have lost interest in them. As usual, bride and bridegroom departed, there was a certain sense of anticlimax. Some of the guests continued to stand about in small groups, chatting to friends and relations; others were going off to look for their cars. The members of the cult were, most of them, standing, rather apart from the wedding guests, in a small forlorn circle, which included Widmerpool. Looking somewhat distraught, he was now at least upright, apparently haranguing his young companions; either explaining the significance of his own prostration before Sir Bertram Akworth, or merely taking the first steps in rounding up the crew, preparatory to setting out on the homeward run.

'To hell with all that.'

The voice, shrill, unconsenting, sounded like that of Barnabas Henderson. It appeared that he was arguing with Widmerpool. One of the wedding guests, a long-haired beefy young man in a grey tailcoat, was standing beside Henderson. Both these last two were in a state of some excitement. So was Widmerpool. It was at first not possible to hear what was being said, though Widmerpool was evidently speaking in an admonitory manner. The young man in the tailcoat, whose muscles were bursting from its contours, was becoming angry.

'Barnabas wants to get out. That's all about it.'

Henderson must have been asserting that intention too. Widmerpool was inaudible. His voice was more measured than theirs, possibly advised that things should be thought over before any such step be taken. Henderson almost shrieked.

'Not now I've found Chuck again. I'm going right away. Chuck will put me up at his place.'

Clearly a wrangle of some magnitude was in progress.

The big young man, who spoke in scathing cockney when addressing Widmerpool, snatched Henderson by the arm, walking him across to the side of the drive where Fiona and Gwinnett stood discussing the Castle. I felt no particular interest in the row. It was no affair of mine. Isobel, with Frederica and Norah, were chatting with Alford cousins. They would be some little time dishing up family news. I strolled towards the moat. As I did so, Widmerpool's tones sounded desperately.

'I forbid it.'

Since the days of Sir Magnus, the waterlilies had greatly increased in volume. If not eradicated, they would soon cover the whole surface of the stagnant water. On the far side, placed rather low in the wall near the main gate, was a small window, scarcely more than an arrow-slit, probably sited for observation purposes. A frantic face appeared at this opening for a moment, then was instantly withdrawn. The features could have been Bithel's. There was not time to make sure; only the upper half visible. It was just as likely I was mistaken, though Bithel was not among those standing round Widmerpool, nor, apparently, elsewhere on the drive. He might have decided to make his own way home. Some of the cult, possibly Bithel among them, were straying about in the neighbourhood of the Castle, because a blue robe was visible at some distance from where I stood. Its wearer was crossing one of the playing-fields. This was likely to be a straggler returning to the main body for the homeward journey.

Watching the approaching figure, I was reminded of a remark made by Moreland ages before. It related to one of those childhood memories we sometimes found in common. This particular recollection had referred to an incident in *The Pilgrim's Progress* that had stuck in both our minds. Moreland said that, after his aunt read the book aloud to him as a child, he could never, even after he was grown-up, watch a lone figure draw nearer across a field, without thinking this was Apollyon come to contend with him. From the moment of first hearing that passage read aloud—assisted by a lively portrayal of the fiend in an illustration, realistically depicting his goat's horns, bat's wings, lion's claws, lizard's legs—the terror of that image, bursting out from an otherwise at moments prosy narrative, had embedded itself for all time in the imagination. I, too, as a child, had been riveted by the vividness of Apollyon's advance across the quiet meadow. Now, surveying the personage in the blue robe picking his way slowly, almost delicately, over the grass of the hockey-field, I felt for some reason that, if ever the arrival of Apollyon was imminent, the moment was this one. That had nothing to do with the blue robe, such costume, as I have said before, if it made any difference to Murtlock at all, softened the edge of whatever caused his personality to be a disturbing one. Henderson must have seen Murtlock too. His high squeak became a positive shout.

'Look—he's coming!'

Fiona seemed a little frightened herself. She appeared to be giving Henderson moral support by what she was saying. For the moment, while doing that, she had relinquished Gwinnett's hand. Now she took hold of it again. Murtlock continued his slow relentless progress. As this descent upon them of their leader became known among the cult—such of them as were present on the drive—a sense of trepidation was noticeable, not least in the case of Widmerpool. Abandoning the group he appeared to have been exhorting, he crossed the drive to where Henderson was standing with Fiona and Gwinnett. Widmerpool began a muttered conversation, first with Henderson, then with Fiona.

'So much the better.'

Fiona spoke with what was evidently deliberate loudness. At the same time she turned to glance in the direction of

Murtlock. He had somewhat quickened his pace for the last lap, reaching the gravel of the drive. Small pockets of ordinary wedding guests still stood about chatting. Most of these were some distance away from the point where Murtlock would have to decide whether he made for the bulk of his followers, or for the splinter group represented by Widmerpool and Henderson. There was no special reason why the run-of-the-mill guests, having accepted the blue-robed intruders as an integral part of the wedding reception, should suppose Murtlock anything but an offshoot of the original body. Of the two groups—the one huddled together, robed or otherwise; the other, consisting of Widmerpool, Henderson, Fiona, Gwinnett, together with the beefy young man called Chuck—Murtlock made unhesitatingly for the second. He stopped a yard or two away, uttering his greeting gently, the tone not much more than a murmur, well below the pitch of everyday speech. I heard it because I had moved closer. It was possible to ignore squabbles between Widmerpool and Henderson; Murtlock had that about him to fire interest.

'The Essence of the All is the Godhead of the True.'

Only Widmerpool answered, even then very feebly.

'The Visions of Visions heals the Blindness of Sight—and, Scorp, there is—'

Murtlock, disregarding the others, held up a hand towards Widmerpool to command silence. There was a moment's pause. When Murtlock answered, it was sharply, and in an altogether unliturgical manner.

'Why are you here?'

Widmerpool faltered. There was another long pause. Murtlock spoke again.

'You do not know?'

This time Murtlock's question was delivered in an almost amused tone. Widmerpool made great effort to utter. He had gone an awful colour, almost mauve.

'There is an explanation, Scorp. All can be accounted for. We met Fiona. She asked us in. I saw an opportunity to take part in an active rite of penitence, a piece of ritual discipline, painful to myself, of the sort you most recommend. You will approve, Scorp. I'm sure you will approve, when I tell you about it.'

After saying that, Widmerpool began to mumble distractedly. Murtlock turned away from him. Without troubling to give further attention to whatever Widmerpool was attempting to explain, he fixed his eyes on Henderson, who began to tremble violently. Fiona let go of Gwinnett's hand. She stepped forward.

'Barnabas is leaving you. He's staying here with Chuck.'

'He is?'

'Aren't you, Barnabas?'

Henderson, still shaking perceptibly, managed to confirm that.

'I'm going back with Chuck.'

'You are, Barnabas?'

'Yes.'

'I hope you will be happier together than you were before you came to us.'

Murtlock smiled benevolently. He seemed in the best of humours. Only Widmerpool gave the impression of angering him. The defection of Henderson appeared not to worry him in the least. His reply to Fiona, too, had been in the jocular tone he had sometimes used on the crayfishing afternoon; though it was clear that Murtlock had moved a long way, in terms of power, since that period. Perhaps he had learnt something from Widmerpool, while at the same time subduing him.

'A mystical sister has been lost, and gained. You are not alone in abandoning us, Fiona. Rusty, too, has returned to Soho.'

Fiona did not answer. She looked rather angry. Her general air was a shade more grown-up than formerly. Murtlock turned to Gwinnett.

'Was not the Unicorn tamed by a Virgin?'

Gwinnett did not answer either. Had he wished to do so, in itself unlikely, there was no time. At that moment Widmerpool seemed to lose all control. He came tottering forward towards Murtlock.

'Scorp, I'm leaving too. I can't stand it any longer. You and the others need not be disturbed. I'll find somewhere else to live. I won't need much of the money.'

Apparently lacking breath to continue, he stopped, standing there panting. Murtlock's demeanour underwent a complete change. He dropped altogether the sneering bantering manner he had been using intermittently. Now he was angry again; not merely angry, furious, consumed with cold rage. For a second he did not speak, while Widmerpool ran on about Harmony.

'No.'

Murtlock cut Widmerpool short. Chuck, not at all interested in the strangeness of this duel of wills, put a protective arm round Henderson. He may have thought his friend in danger of capitulating, now that Murtlock was so enraged. That passion in Murtlock was not without its own horror.

'Come on, Barnabas. No point in hanging about. Let's be getting back.'

After Henderson had spoken some sort of farewell to Fiona, he went off with Chuck towards the cars. Murtlock took no notice of this withdrawal. His attention was entirely concentrated on Widmerpool, who, avoiding the eyes Murtlock fixed on him, continued to beg for release.

'Where could you go?'

Widmerpool made a gesture to signify that was no problem, but seemed unable to think of a spoken reply.

'No.'

'Scorp . . .'

'No.'

Murtlock repeated the negative in a dead toneless voice. Widmerpool was unable to speak. He stood there stupefied. Murtlock came closer. This conflict—in which Widmerpool, too, was evidently showing a certain amount of passive will power—was brought to an end by the re-entry of an actor forgotten in the course of rapid movement of events. The sound of singing came from the gates of the Castle.

> 'When I tread the verge of Jordan,
> Bid my anxious fears subside,
> Death of Death and hell's destruction,
> Land me safe on Canaan's side.'

Bithel was staggering across the causeway. His voice, high, quavering, much enhanced in volume by champagne, swelled on the spring air. Some sort of echo of the hymn was briefly taken up by another chant, possibly Umfraville's —he had served with the Welsh Guards—on the far side of the drive. Murtlock, as remarked earlier, was not in the least lacking in practical grasp. At a glance he took in the implications of this new situation.

'You allowed Bith to drink?'

'I—'

'What have I always said?'

'It was—'

'Lead the others back. I will manage Bith myself.'

This time Widmerpool made no demur. He accepted defeat. An unforeseen factor had put him in the wrong. He was beaten for the moment. The rest of the cult still stood in a glum group, no doubt contemplating trouble on return to base. Widmerpool beckoned to them. There was some giving of orders. A minute or two later Widmerpool, once more at the head of the pack, was leading the run home; a trot even slower than that employed when we first sighted them. Bithel had stopped half-way across the causeway. He was leaning over the parapet, staring down at the water-lilies of the moat. The possibility that he might be sick was not to be excluded. That idea may have crossed Murtlock's practical mind too, because a slight smile flickered across his face, altering its sternness only for a moment, as he strode towards the Castle. Some words were exchanged. Then they moved off together towards the playing-fields. Bithel could walk; if not very straight. Once he fell down. Murtlock waited until Bithel managed to pick himself up again, but made no effort to help. They disappeared from sight. Fiona came over to where I was standing.

'Will you be seeing Gibson?'

'I expect so.'

'I want you to give him a message from me.'

'Of course.'

'When Russell and I first knew each other, Rus lent me his copy of Middleton's *Plays*. It's got some of his own notes pencilled in. I can't find it, and must have left it at Gibson's flat. Could you get him to send the book on—airmail it—to Russell's college? Just address it to the English Department. We're not going to have any time at all when we get back to London.'

'You're going straight to America?'

'The following day.'

'No other messages for Gibson?'

'No, just the book.'

By the time I next saw Delavacquerie he was aware that Fiona was married to Gwinnett. I don't know whether he heard directly from her, or the news just got round. She appeared to have left the flat without warning, taking her belongings with her. He smiled rather grimly when I passed on the request to send the Middleton book to Gwinnett's college.

'As a matter of fact I read some of the plays myself in consequence—*The Roaring Girle*, which Dekker also had a hand in. I enjoyed the thieves' cant. Listen to this:

> A gage of ben rom-bouse
> In a bousing ken of Rom-vile,
> Is benar than a caster,
> Peck, pennam, lay, or popler,
> Which we mill in deuse a vile.
> O I wud lib all the lightmans,
> O I wud lib all the darkmans
> By the salomon, under the ruffmans,
> By the saloman, in the hartmans,
> And scour the queer cramp ring,
> And couch till a palliard docked my dell,
> So my bousy nab might skew rom-bouse well.
> Avast to the pad, let us bing;
> Avast to the pad, let us bing.

Not bad, is it?'

'It all sounds very contemporary. What does it mean?'

'Roughly, that a quart of good wine in London is better than anything to be stolen in the country, and, as long as wine's to be drunk, it doesn't matter if you're in the stocks, while some heel is stuffing your tart—that's a palliard docking your dell. Owing to Gwinnett, I came across a good couplet in Tourneur too:

> Lust is a spirit, which whosoe'er doth raise,
> The next man that encounters boldly, lays.

There seems a foot too many in the first line. They may have elided those relatives in a different way at that period.'

'How does the thieves' slang poem come into the Middleton play?'

'The Roaring Girl sings it herself, with a character called

Tearcat. The Roaring Girl dresses like a man, smokes, carries a sword, fights duels. A narcissistic type, rather than specifically lesbian, one would say. At least there are no scenes where she dallies with her own sex.'

Delavacquerie's good memory, eye for things that were unusual, had certainly been useful to him as a PR-man; for which he also possessed the requisite toughness. What he said next was a side he much less often revealed. It suggested reflections on Fiona.

'It's odd how one gets acclimatized to other people's sexual experiences. At a younger age, they strike one so differently. For instance, during the war I knew a married woman—a captain's wife—who told me of her first seduction. She was seventeen or eighteen, and on the way to her art-school one morning. Running to catch a bus, she just missed it. Two men, cruising by in a car, laughed at her standing breathless on the pavement. They stopped and offered her a lift. When they dropped her at the art-school door, the one who wasn't driving asked if she'd dine with him later in the week. She agreed. They went to a roadhouse outside London. In the course of dinner—establishing his bonafides as *homme sérieux*—her host remarked that he had lived with one girl for two years. Telling the story to me, she commented that—in those days—she thought love was for ever. Anyway, the chap gave her dinner, they had a good deal to drink—which she wasn't used to—and, afterwards, went into the garden of the roadhouse where he had her in the shrubbery. When she got home, finding her knickers all over blood, she thought to herself: I've been a silly girl. That's what she told me.'

'What's the moral of all that?'

'There isn't one, except that the story used to haunt me. I don't quite know why. It seemed to start so well, and end so badly. Perhaps that's how well constructed stories ought to terminate.'

'She never saw the bloke again?'

'No. I don't think it really made a ha'p'orth of difference to her. All I say is that for a while the story haunted me.'

'You were in love with the heroine?'

'Naturally. In a way that wasn't the point, which is that, in due course, you find girls are really perfectly well able to look after themselves, most of them. Even allowing for the fact that *les chiens sont fidèles, mais pas aux chiennes*. To retain the metaphor—bring it up to date—in sexual matters, as in others, the dogs bark, the Caravelle takes off.'

I never knew what Delavacquerie really felt about the Fiona business. Afterwards I wondered whether the heroine of the story he had told was really his dead wife. As Canon Fenneau had observed, we go through life lacking understanding of many things, though I think the Canon inwardly made something of an exception of his own case, where knowledge was concerned. That, at least, was modestly implied in an article I came across later that year, in which he contrasted Chaldean Magic with the worship of Isis and Osiris.

7

BAD WEATHER, OTHER ODD JOBS, mere lack of energy, had all contributed to allowing the unlit bonfire, projected as a few hours' clearing and burning, to become an untidy pile of miscellaneous débris; laurel (cut down months before), briars, nettles, leaves, unsold rubbish from a jumble sale, on top of it all several quite large branches of oak and copper beech snapped off by the gales. In spite of fog, something calm, peaceful, communicative, about the afternoon suggested the time had come to end this too long survival. A livid sky could mean snow. That dense muffled feeling pervaded the air. The day was not cold for the season, but an autumnal spell of mild weather—short, though notably warm that year—was now over. It had given place to a continuous wind blowing from the west, dropped the night before, after bringing down a lot of leaves and the sizeable boughs. There was a great stillness everywhere, except for a monotonous thud-thud from the quarry; a persistent low rumble, like a faraway train making laborious headway along a rough stretch of track. White vapour, less thick over by Gauntlett's farm, where a few ghostly trees penetrated its mists, wholly obscured the quarry's limestone platforms and Assyrian rampart.

For kindling, I shoved twists of newspaper in at the base of the heap. At the moment of ignition, the match flared against capital letters of a headline displayed on the outward surface of one of these scraps of newsprint.

EDWARDIAN SYMBOLIST
SEASCAPE VOTARIES

The enigmatic antithesis topped an article read a week or two before. Even allowing for contemporary changes in art fashions, the critic's enthusiasm had then seemed surprising. After seeing the pictures, remembering the piece, I vaguely thought of glancing through the notice again, to see if I now felt more agreement with the opinions expressed. By then the newspaper had been thrown away, or disappeared among a heap of others; kept for such uses as lighting fires. A search, likely to be unfruitful, seemed scarcely worth the trouble. Now, inclination to read about what had been said of the exhibition—the two exhibitions—was reanimated. In any case the visit to the gallery had been rather an historic occasion; setting something of a seal on all sorts of past matters.

Lighting another screw of newspaper under the stack, I extracted a handful of crumpled up pages, and straightened them out. On the back of one of these was a paragraph reporting Quentin Shuckerly's end in New York (battered to death in Greenwich Village), while on a cultural mission of some kind. I tore out Edwardian Symbolist/Seascape Votaries, committing Shuckerly's obituary lines to their funeral pyre. The paper flared up, dry twigs began to crackle, damp weeds smouldered, smoke rose high into the white mists, merging into grey-blueness. The atmosphere was filled all at once with the heart-searing bonfire smell.

'...albeit his roots lie in Continental Symbolism, Deacon's art remains unique in itself. In certain moods he can recall Fernand Khnopff or Max Klinger, the Belgian's near-photographic technique observable in Deacon's semi-naturalistic treatment of more than one of his favourite renderings of Greek or Roman legend. In his genre pictures, the academic compliances of the Secession School of Vienna are given strong homosexual bias—even Deacon's sphinxes and chimaeras possessing solely male attributes—a fearless sexual candour that must have shocked the susceptibilities of his own generation, sadomasochist broodings in paint that grope towards the psychedelic . . .'

The writer of the critique, a young journalist, with already something of a name in art circles, had been less enthralled by the late Victorian seascapes, also on view at the gallery; though he drew attention to the fact that here too, as with the Deacons, an exciting revival had taken place of a type of painting long out of fashion with yesterday's art critics. He expressed his welcome of these aesthetic reinstatements; noting the fact that at least a few connoisseurs, undeterred by the narrow tastes of the day, had followed their own preference for straightforward marine subjects, painted in an unaffectedly naturalistic manner. Most of those on view at the gallery had come from a single collection. He praised the 'virtuosity' and 'tightness of finish' of *Gannets Nesting*, *The Needles: Schooner Aground*, *Angry Seas off Land's End*, all by different hands.

Although a card had arrived for a Private View at this gallery, a new one, these two exhibitions had run for at least a fortnight before I found opportunity to pay a visit. Returning to the newspaper article—having been to the gallery—I felt less surprise at the critic's warm responses, not only to the Deacons, but also to the Victorian seascapes. That was probably due, as much as anything else, to a desire to keep in the swim. There was also a sense of satisfaction in reading praise of Mr Deacon (to me he always remained 'Mr Deacon'), given by a responsible art critic; a young one at that. The last quality would have delighted Mr Deacon himself. He had once remarked that youth was the only valid criterion in any field. He himself never quite achieved a fusion of the physical and intellectual in propagating that view. Certainly the notice marked how far tastes had altered since the period—just after the second war—when I had watched four Deacons knocked down for a few pounds in a shabby saleroom between Euston Road and Camden Town. At the time, I had supposed those to be the last Deacons I should ever set eyes on. In a sense they were; the last of the old dispensation. The pictures on view at the Barnabas Henderson Gallery (the show specifically advertised as the Bosworth Deacon Centenary Exhibition) were not so much a Resurrection as a Second Coming.

If the rehabilitation of Mr Deacon's art had not in itself provided an overriding inducement to visit the exhibition, the name of the gallery—proving all curiosity was not at an end—would have gone a long way as an alternative inducement to do so. A single-page pamphlet, accompanying the Private View card, outlined the aims of this new picture firm, which had just come into being. They seemed admirable ones. The premises were in the neighbourhood of Berkeley Square. It was rather late in the afternoon when I finally reached the place, a newly painted exterior, the street in process of being rebuilt, the road up, several Georgian houses opposite looking as if they had been recently bombed. In the window of the Barnabas Henderson Gallery itself a poster proclaimed Mr Deacon's name in typography of a size, and fount, he would have approved, an aureole of favourable press notices pinned round about.

Within, I found myself surrounded by Deacon canvases assembled on an unprecedented scale; more Deacons than might be supposed even to have been painted, far less survived. The Victorian seascapes were segregated in a room beyond, but an arrow pointed to an extension of the Deacon Centenary Exhibition on the upper floor, which I decided to explore first. The red tag of a sale marked a high proportion of the pictures. Two of those so summarily dismissed at the down-at-heel auction-rooms were immediately recognizable from their black-and-gold Art Nouveau frames, Deacon-designed to form part of the picture itself; a technique Mr Deacon rather precariously supported by quoting two lines from *Pericles:*

> In framing an artist, art hath thus decreed:
> To make some good, but others to exceed.

In the shabby saleroom this purpose of the frames had been obscured by dirt and tarnished paint, which cleaning and restoration now made clear. Light in pigment, some of the canvases were huge in size, remembered subjects included Hellenic athletes painfully straining in some contest; another (too grimy at the time to be properly appreciated), a boy slave reproved by his toga-enveloped master, whose dignified figure was not without all resemblance to Mr Deacon himself in his palmy days. The show was stylish in presentation. In fact Barnabas Henderson had done a stupendous rescue job from the Valley of Lost Things; Mr Deacon's Astolpho, or perhaps one of the well disposed swans, fishing up his medallion for the Temple of Fame. Henderson clearly knew his business. To have supposed him the dim figure he had seemed, only a few months earlier in the same year, under the Murtlock régime, was an error of judgment. Since his self-manumission at Stourwater the Private View card was the first I had heard of him; nor was there any further news of Murtlock and Widmerpool.

Even Mr Deacon's closest friends were accustomed to smile tolerantly, behind his back, about his painting. The few patrons had all faded away by the later stages of his life, when he had exchanged an artist's career for an antique-dealer's. All the same, in days when Barnby's studio was above the antique shop, Barnby had remarked that, little as he approved himself, Sickert had once put in a good word for Mr Deacon's work. Looking round, more impressed than I should have been prepared to admit, I took heart from Sickert's judgment; at the same time trying to restore self-confidence as to an earlier scepticism by noting something undoubtedly less than satisfactory in the foreshortening of the slave boy's loins.

There was still no one about in the first ground floor room of the gallery when I returned there, the attendant's desk in the corner unoccupied. Through a door at the far end several persons, one of them in a wheel-chair, were to be seen perambulating among the Victorian seascapes. I had not at first noticed that one of the smaller pictures in this first room was *Boyhood of Cyrus*. Moving across to ascertain how closely, if at all, the palace in its background resembled the configurations of the local quarry, I was intercepted by Barnabas Henderson himself, who came hurrying up a flight of stairs leading from the basement. It was instantaneously apparent that he was a new man; no less renovated than the Deacon pictures on the walls. That was clear in a flash, a transformation not in the least due to adjustments in dress and personal appearance, also to be observed. He had slightly shortened his haircut, reverted to a suit, elegant in cut without being humdrum in style, wore a tie of similar mood. These, however different from a blue robe, were trivial modifications in relation to the general air of rebirth. There was a newly acquired briskness, even firmness of manner, sense of self-confidence amply restored.

'Oh, hullo, Nicholas. You received our card all right? I was afraid it might have gone astray, as you hadn't been in.'

'I couldn't get to the Private View.'

'I hope your wife will look in, too, before the Deacon show closes. I always remember how good she was about our turning up once with that awful man. I was quite ashamed at the time. We went crayfishing, do you remember? It was an unusual experience. I can't say I enjoyed it much. Still, I didn't enjoy anything much in the circumstances of what my life was then. I hope you like these pictures—and the ones in the next room too, which are by various painters. Bosworth Deacon is one of my own discoveries.'

'I used to know him.'

'Know whom?'

'Edgar Deacon.'

'Who was Edgar Deacon—a relation of Bosworth Deacon?'

'He was called Edgar. Bosworth was only his middle name.'

'No, no. Bosworth is the painter's name. Are you sure you aren't confusing your other Deacon man? Bosworth Deacon is a most remarkable artist. In his way unique. I can think of no other painter like him.'

Henderson, possibly with reason, was not in the least interested in whether or not I had known Mr Deacon. Perhaps it was not really a relevant subject; or rather seemed relevant only to myself. It was clear that Mr Deacon—born a hundred years before—seemed in Henderson's eyes a personage scarcely less remote in time than the kindly slave-master of the artist's own self-image.

'I saw you were making for *Boyhood of Cyrus*, one of Deacon's best. On the whole I prefer the smaller compositions. He's more at ease with figure relationships. Several of the critics picked out *Cyrus* in their notices. I sold it within an hour of the show opening.'

'The background looks rather like the quarry to be seen from our windows. You may have noticed it on your caravan visit?'

Henderson raised his eyebrows. They could have been plucked. The comparison of Mr Deacon's picture with the quarry landscape struck no chord. Henderson sold pictures, rather than pondered their extraneous imagery.

'Surely the palace in the distance represents Persepolis. It's symbolic.'

'Well Persepolis isn't unlike Battersea Power Station in silhouette. An industrial parallel is not excluded out of hand.'

Henderson did not reply. He pursed his lips a little. We were getting nowhere. The subject was better changed. Eleanor Walpole-Wilson had probably sold *Cyrus* after her parents died. When, in days of frequenting the house, I had once referred to 'their Deacon', she was all but unaware of its existence, hanging over the barometer in the hall.

'When I was young I sometimes dined with the people to whom *Boyhood of Cyrus* used to belong.'

At this information Henderson regarded me with keener interest.

'You knew Lord Aberavon?'

He was not incredulous; merely mildly surprised. One had to be grateful even for surprise.

'Not actually. Aberavon died five or six years before I was born. My hostess was his daughter. She owned the picture. Her husband was a diplomat called Walpole-Wilson.'

Henderson was no more prepared to allow that the Walpole-Wilsons had once possessed *Boyhood of Cyrus* than for Mr Deacon to have been commonly addressed as Edgar.

'The provenance of *Cyrus* has always been recognized as the Aberavon Collection. Several Aberavon pictures—by a variety of artists—have been coming on the market lately. They're usually good sellers. Aberavon was an erratic collector, but not an uninstructed one. Have you looked at *By the Will of Diocletian*? It hasn't found a buyer yet. Owing to being rather large for most people's accommodation these days it is very reasonably priced, if you're thinking of getting a Deacon yourself.'

'The younger of the two torturers is not unlike Scorpio Murtlock.'

This time Henderson reacted more favourably to extension of a picture's imaginative possibilities.

'Canon Fenneau said the same, when he was in here the other day. He's someone who knew Scorp when he was quite young. One of the few who can control him.'

'Where did you come across Fenneau?'

'Scorp once sent me with a message to him. Chuck and I sometimes go to his church. It was Canon Fenneau who told me that *By the Will of Diocletian* was painted during Bosworth Deacon's Roman Catholic period.'

'Do you ever hear of Murtlock now? Or Widmerpool?'

Henderson, facetiously, made the sign to keep off the Evil Eye.

'As a matter of fact I do once in a way. Somebody I knew there comes to see me on the quiet if he's in London. There's a thing I'm still interested in they've got in the house.'

'Would coming to see you not be allowed?'

'Of course not.'

Henderson might perhaps have said more on that subject had not Chuck appeared from the inner room. Chuck (perhaps also of seafaring origins) had some of the same burly working-class geniality—now adapted to the uses of the art world—that had once characterized Hugo Tolland's former partner, Sam.

'Can you come through for a moment, Barney? Mr Duport wants a word.'

Henderson indicated that he would be along in a moment. Towards Chuck, too, his manner had changed. Himself no longer a victim requiring rescue, Henderson had become something not much short of Mr Deacon's benign slave-owner. No doubt mutual relationship was carefully worked out in that connexion, Chuck showing no resentment at the readjustment. On the contrary, they seemed on the best of terms.

'There are some rather interesting people in the further room. The actress, Polly Duport, and her parents. Far the best of the Victorian marine painters show come from the Duport Collection. He's decided to sell now the going's good. He's quite right, I think. I expect you've seen Polly Duport in the Strindberg play. Super, I thought. She's an absolute saint too, the way she looks after her father. Wheels him round all the time in that chair. He's not at all easy. Can be very bad mannered, in fact. He was a businessman —in oil, I'm told—then had to retire on account of whatever's wrong with him. He'd always been interested in these Victorian seascapes, picked them up at one time or another for practically nothing. Now they're quite the thing. He comes in almost every day to see how they're selling.'

'I know Polly Duport—and her father.'

'Do you? But you won't know her mother, who's come with them this afternoon. She's lived most of her life in South America. She must be partly South American, I think. She looks like one of those sad Goya duchesses. She and Robert Duport, the owner of the Collection, have been separated for years, so Polly Duport told me, but have been seeing a good deal of each other lately. He's never brought her along before. She was married to a South American politician, who was killed by urban guerillas. That's why she came back to England.'

Henderson's explanation had taken so long that the people next door, tired of waiting, now moved into the room where we were talking; Duport's wheeled-chair pushed by his daughter. Her mother followed. Norman Chandler, who was directing the Strindberg production to which Henderson referred, was one of this party. Henderson was right about Jean. The metamorphosis, begun when the late Colonel Flores had been his country's military attaché in London at the end of the war, was complete.

She was now altogether transformed into a foreign lady of distinction. The phrase 'sad Goya duchess' did not at all overstate the case. Chandler gave a dramatic cry of satisfaction at seeing someone with whom he could exchange reminiscences of Mr Deacon.

'Nick, so you've come to see Edgar's pictures? Who'd ever have thought it? Do you remember when I sold him that statuette called *Truth unveiled by Time*? Barney and Chuck ought to have that on show here too. I wonder where it is now?'

Duport stirred in the wheel-chair. He looked a rather ghastly sight. All the same he recognized me at once, and let out a hoarse laugh.

'How the hell do you know he hasn't come to see my pictures, Norman, not these naked Roman queers? He probably loves the sea.'

He turned in my direction.

'I can't remember your name, because I can't remember anyone's name these days, including my own most of the time, but we were in Brussels together, looking after different fragments of the Belgian military machine.'

'We were indeed.'

I told Duport my name. Chandler hastened to make additional introductions.

'So you and Bob know each other, Nick, and I'm sure you've met Polly. This is her mother, Madame Flores—'

Jean smiled graciously. She held out the hand of a former near-dictator's lady—Carlos Flores cannot have been much short of dictator at the height of his power—a clasp, brief and light, not without a sense of power about it too. There could have been no doubt in the mind of an onlooker—Henderson, say, or Chuck—that Jean and I had met before. That was about the best you could say for past love. In fact Jean's former husband, whom I had never much liked, was appreciably less distant than she.

'I've gone down the drain since those Brussels days. It all started in the Middle East. Gyppy Tummy, then complications. Never got things properly right. Look at me now. Shunted round in a bathchair. Penny for the guy. That's how I feel. One of the things I remember about you is that you knew that château-bottled shit Widmerpool.'

Polly Duport patted her father's head in deprecation of such forcible metaphor. Duport's appearance certainly bore out an assertion that he was not at all well. There seemed scarcely room in the chair for his long legs, the knees thrust up at an uncomfortable angle. Spectacles much altered his appearance. His daughter looked much younger than her forties. Firmly dedicated—somebody said like a nun—to her profession, she was dressed with great simplicity, as if to emphasize an absolute detachment from anything at all like the popular idea of an actress. This was in contrast with Jean, who had acquired a dramatic luxuriousness of turnout, not at all hers as a girl. Polly had always greatly resembled her mother, but, their styles now so different, perhaps only someone like myself, who had known Jean in her young days, would notice much similarity. Duport was not in the least disposed to abandon the theme of Widmerpool, whom he regarded as having at one moment all but ruined him financially.

'Polly once saw Widmerpool knocked out by an American film star. I wish I'd been there to shake him by the hand.'

'He wasn't really knocked out, Papa. Only his specs broken. And Louis Glober wasn't a film star, though he looked like one.'

'It was something to break that bastard's glasses. I'd have castrated him too, if I'd ever had the chance. Not much to remove, I'd guess.'

Jean made a gesture to silence her former husband.

'How are you, Nick? You're looking well. Better than the time you and your wife came to a party we gave, when

Carlos was over here. Everybody in London was so utterly tired out at the end of the war. Do you remember our party? How is your wife? I liked her so much.'

'I was sorry to hear—'

Before Jean could answer, Duport, recognizing the imminence of condolences for the death of Colonel Flores, broke in again.

'Oh, don't worry about Carlos. Carlos didn't do too badly. Had the time of his life, when the going was good, then went out instantaneously. Lucky devil. I envy him like hell. Wish I'd met him. He always sounded the sort of bloke I like.'

Jean accepted that view.

'I've often said you'd both of you have got on very well together.'

Polly Duport, possibly lacking her parents' toughness in handling such matters, at the same reminded by them of emotional complications suffered by herself, turned the conversation in the direction of these.

'You know Gibson Delavacquerie, don't you?'

'Of course. I haven't seen him for a month or two. He said he was working very hard.'

'Gibson and I are getting married.'

'You are? How splendid. Best possible wishes.'

'He's got a new book of poems coming out. That's why he's gone into retirement as much as possible.'

She looked very pleased; at the same time a little sad. I wondered whether the poems had anything to do with the sadness. In any case there had been quite a bit of sadness to surmount. She had given this information in an aside, while her parents were laughing, with Chandler and the owners of the gallery, about some incident illustrated in one of the Deacons, to which Chandler was pointing. Now he turned to Polly and myself.

'Goodness, don't these bring Edgar back? Do you remember his last birthday party when he fell down stairs at that awful dive, *The Brass Monkey*?'

'I wasn't there. I knew that was the final disaster.'

Duport stared round disapprovingly.

'I prefer my wind and waves. Smart of me to hang on to them all these years, wasn't it? That took some doing. Do you remember, Jean, how your brother, Peter, used to grumble about looking after my pictures for me, when I was in low water, and hadn't anywhere to put them. He hung them in the dining-room of that house he had at Maidenhead. He'd no pictures of his own to speak of—except that terrible Isbister of his old man—so I can't see what he was grousing at. I might easily have got rid of them, but was spry enough not to sell. They wouldn't have made a cent.'

Jean laughed.

'Poor Peter. Why should he keep your junk? You weren't in low water. You were running round with Bijou Ardglass.'

'Perhaps I was. One forgets these things. Poor Bijou too.'

'Do you remember the pictures in the dining-room, Nick? Peter's Maidenhead house was where we met.'

'And played planchette.'

'Yes—we played planchette.'

Duport, becoming suddenly tired, lay back in his chair. He gave a very faint groan. I felt I liked him better than I used. His daughter made a movement to leave.

'I think we'd better go home now, Papa.'

Duport sat up straight again.

'So we've only got one more to sell?'

Henderson agreed. Jean once more held out her hand. Fashion, decreeing one kissed almost everyone these days, might not unreasonably have brought that about had she kept herself less erect. It was thus avoided without prejudice to good manners.

'So nice to have met.'

'Yes, so nice.'

Polly Duport smiled goodbye. I told her how glad I was to hear about herself and Delavacquerie. She smiled again, but did not say anything. Chandler waved. Taking Henderson and Chuck each by an arm, he led them towards the door, evidently imparting an anecdote about Mr Deacon. Duport gave a nod, as he was wheeled away. I strolled round the marine painters. There was—as Jean had said—a vague memory of sea pictures, hung rather askew, on Templer's dining-room wall. Rather a job lot they had seemed to me that weekend. Even if other things had not been on my mind—that soft laugh of Jean's—Victorian seascapes would have made no great appeal.

'It's the bedroom next to yours. Give it half an hour. Don't be too long.'

The Needles: Schooner Aground was by no means without all merit. The painter had evidently seen the work of Bonington. I was less keen on *Angry Seas off Land's End*. Henderson returned.

'Polly Duport's sweet, isn't she? Don't you find her mother a little alarming? But then you'd met her before. She must have been very handsome when young. Let me show you that last remaining one of the Duport Collection. You might like to consider it yourself.

He did so. There was no sale. Chuck reappeared.

'Time to close.'

Henderson looked at his watch.

'You were telling me you still had some line on the Murtlock/Widmerpool setup. I'd be most interested to hear more of what went on there.'

Chuck interposed.

'Do you want me to stay?'

Henderson hesitated.

'No thanks, Chuck. I'll deal with everything. Just do the usual, and go home. I'll follow on.'

Henderson seemed divided between wanting to tell his story, and something else that appeared to weigh on his mind. Then he must have decided that telling the story would be sufficiently gratifying to make up for possible indiscretion in other directions.

'If you've got a moment, we could go down to the office.'

I said goodnight to Chuck, by then making preparations to leave. Henderson led the way down a spiral staircase to the basement. The narrow passages below were cluttered with more pictures, framed and unframed. We entered a small room filled with filing cabinets and presses for drawings. Henderson took up his position behind a desk. I chose an armchair of somewhat exotic design, of which there were two. Henderson now seemed to relish the idea of making a fairly elaborate narration. He had perhaps exhausted the extent of persons of his own age prepared to listen.

'When we all crashed Clare Akworth's wedding, did you notice an old fellow with us. He had a beard and a red sweater. It was him all the trouble was about at the end, so I heard. Chuck and I had gone off by then.'

'You mean Bithel?'

'You know about him? I was told Scorp had almost to carry him home. Bith was a drunk. Somebody sent him along to us when he was just about to freak out. Bith was the only man or woman I've ever seen Scorp behave in a decent way to. He pretty well saved Bith's life. Bith worshipped Scorp in return. When he got better, Bith did odd jobs about the place nobody else wanted to do. That was pretty useful. There was no one who liked household chores. There was another side too. Scorp said an aged man was required for certain rites. Bith didn't mind that. He didn't mind what he did.'

Henderson's face suggested that some of the acts Bithel had been required to perform were less than agreeable, bearing out Widmerpool's reluctance to detail his own experience in that line.

'Could he stand being allowed no alcohol?'

'That's the point. Bith found that a drag. It was just the knowledge he was being kept alive prevented him from packing it in—plus adoration for Scorp. From time to time Bith would get hold of a little money, and have a drink on the quiet. Scorp winked at that. He'd never have stood it from anyone else, unless for strictly ritual purposes. That was permitted, like getting high on whatever Scorp might sometimes decide to produce. I used to give Bith the price of a drink once in a while, so he'd do things for me. I'd got some money hidden away.'

'You weren't allowed money?'

'Scorp controlled all that. Most of them hadn't much anyway. I'd hidden some at the top of the house under the eaves. I'd been thinking about getting away for some time, but it wasn't so easy. Then seeing Chuck gave me the chance. If Chuck hadn't been working in the same firm as Clare Akworth—he's one of their drivers, and gives her lifts to the office—I might not be here. I might not even be alive, if she'd not invited Chuck to the wedding, and he hadn't always wanted to wear a grey tailcoat.'

Henderson looked absolutely serious when he said he might not have been alive. His manner had become even a little disconcerting in its seriousness.

'It's Bith who looks in to see me occasionally. Scorp sends him to London sometimes to do odd jobs. Perhaps with a message to Canon Fenneau, if a respectable link is needed. It is sometimes. Fenneau helped once about getting a girl who was having a baby into hospital. Scorp recognizes that Bith will arrive back drunk, but he just makes him do a small penance. There's a particular thing Widmerpool's got that I hope one of these days to get out of him. That's why I keep in touch with Bith. He isn't very coherent as a rule. That doesn't much matter. Do you ever hear anything of Fiona? She used to use Bith too.'

'Her mother got a letter from her the other day. Fiona seems all right. They're in the Middle West.'

The Cutts parents, 'good' as ever, never complained about hearing rarely from their daughter. Probably they took the view that no news was better than bad news.

'Scorp used to talk a lot about that American Fiona married.'

'In connexion with Fiona?'

'No, not at all. Scorp was angry when Fiona went away, but I don't think he foresaw she would end up with Gwinnett. It was Gwinnett's own potential powers that attracted Scorp.'

'Transcendental ones?'

'Yes.'

'What about Widmerpool? Did Murtlock think he possessed transcendental powers too?'

The question was put lightly, even ironically. Henderson chose to answer it seriously. Having now abandoned the cult, he was prepared to denounce Murtlock as an individual; he had been too long connected with its system and disciplines utterly to reject their foundations. That was the impression his manner suggested.

'Ken's transcendental gifts were not what Scorp valued him for. I doubt if he possessed any. Not like Gwinnett. It was Ken's will-power. Also, of course, the basic fact of being able to live in and around his house. Ken wanted to be head. I see now he never could have been. At first it seemed touch and go. At least I thought so. I was afraid Ken would take over. He picked up the doctrinal part so quickly. I was terrified.'

'Why terrified?'

Henderson looked surprise at being asked that.

'Because I was in love with Scorp. I wanted him at the head.'

'Is Widmerpool in love with Murtlock too?'

This time Henderson did not give a snap answer. He hesitated. When he spoke it was objectively, almost primly.

'I don't know. It was hard for me to judge. I thought everybody was in love with Scorp. I was jealous of them for that. Ken doesn't actively dislike girls. He'd watch them naked, whenever he could. He may like boys better now he's used to them.'

'You mean in sexual rites?'

'Or on runs.'

'You went for naked runs?'

'Not at all often. Very rarely. Sometimes the ritual required it. In spring or autumn we would have to wait for a fairly warm night. Even then it could be dreadful.'

'Before breakfast?'

'Breakfast—you don't suppose we had breakfast? It was usually about half-past four in the morning. Only about once a year.'

'Murtlock himself?'

'Of course.'

'Widmerpool too?'

'Why not?'

'Bithel?'

'No—not Bith. Bith was let off. He'd make up for it by the other things he had to do.'

'And Widmerpool took part in the sexual rites?'

'When he was able.'

'Didn't you meet anyone on your naked runs?'

'Not in the middle of the night. It wasn't often. Scorp took us along paths through the woods.'

'Murtlock had Widmerpool completely under control in the end?'

'Only after the arrival of Bith. That was the turning point. Ken hated Bith. There was no Harmony. No Harmony at all. That made Scorp angry. It made bad vibrations. He was quite right. It did. I won't tell you some of the things Scorp made them do together. I don't like to think of it.'

Henderson shuddered.

'Why didn't Widmerpool leave?'

'Where would he go? If he went, Scorp remained in possession of the house. There's no getting him out. Ken's believed to have bequeathed it to the cult anyway. He could have made it over already.'

'Was thought of the house what caused Widmerpool to change his mind at Stourwater?'

'It was Scorp's will-power. That's stronger than anything. You'd know, if you'd ever had to face it. He came to Chuck's flat, and tried to get me back. There was an awful scene. I don't know how I got through it. I was shaky for a fortnight after. I did somehow—with the help of Chuck.'

Henderson shuddered again.

'But what was the point of it all. What did—what does—Widmerpool expect to get out of it?'

Once more Henderson seemed surprised. He was prepared to accept that he himself might find the ways of Murtlock harsh, horrible, even murderous. The aim of the cult, if impossible to express in words, was to him an altogether understandable one.

'Ken was playing for high stakes, if he really became head. It's hard to explain. Of course I don't believe now, not in the least. But Scorp, for instance, where's he going to end? He might go anywhere. That's what Ken felt. Of course Ken was too old, apart from anything else.'

'A messiah?'

'If you like.'

A bell rang at some length from upstairs. It sounded as if someone was following that up by rattling on the front door. Henderson rose,

'What can that be? It's just possible . . . Wait a moment. I'll go and see.'

When Henderson's voice sounded again, at the top of the spiral staircase, its note suggested unexpected satisfaction. Henderson himself seemed to be doing all the talking. At least no replies were audible from whomever he had let in. There was a crash, a pause, a great scrambling and stumbling on the stairs, several steps missed; then Bithel, closely piloted from behind by Henderson, arrived—almost fell down—in the office. The immediate conclusion seemed to be that, whatever gratified Henderson, was not the fact of Bithel having arrived sober. On the contrary, Bithel was in a state of extreme intoxication. He was clutching a brown-paper parcel. Henderson spoke formally, as if nothing were more natural than Bithel's state.

'Here's Bith. I thought it might be him, but I never guessed what he'd bring with him. He can't speak at present. Wait till he's unwrapped the parcel.'

Henderson made an unsuccessful effort to get hold of this. Bithel clung on. He was, as described, entirely speechless. If Bithel had seemed filthy at Stourwater, out in the open, he looked infinitely filthier enclosed within the narrow confines of the gallery's office. He smelt horrible. In the army he had admitted to an age in the late thirties, so now was at least seventy, if not more. He appeared a great deal older than that; some dreadful ancient, brought in from tramping the roads day in day out. A decaying pushteen, torn and grimy, covered patched corduroy trousers. This time his feet were in sandals.

'Sit down, Bith. When did you get to London? Pretty early I'd guess from your state. Let's have a look at the picture.'

Bithel, deposited in the other exotically designed armchair, evidently wanting desperately to make some statement, was literally unable to speak. What had at first seemed a mere state of drunkenness gave signs of being something more than that. Drink had at least brought no solace, none of the extreme garrulousness that had characterized Bithel's army toping. He conveyed the air of a man, whatever his innately broken-down state, who had been seriously upset. That might be the form Bithel's intoxication now took. Henderson was chiefly interested in the brown-paper parcel, trying to get it into his own hands, always failing. Then Bithel got a word out.

'Scotch.'

'Haven't you had enough?'

'Not . . . feeling . . . myself.'

'No, you're not your usual self, Bith, on a day off. All right. We'll see what can be done.'

Henderson, opening a cupboard, brought back to the desk a bottle and glasses.

'Now unwrap it. How did you manage? It wasn't theft? You're sure of that? I'm not going to handle it, if it's stolen. There must be evidence you were allowed to take it. That's absolutely definite.'

Bithel made a jerky movement of his shoulders, apparently indicating that nothing at all nefarious had taken place in regard to whatever was under discussion.

'All right, but why can't you say more? You're not usually like this, Bith. You've had much too much. What will Scorp do to you? Try and tell me about it.'

Bithel took a deep gulp, finishing off the reasonably generous shot of whisky Henderson had poured for him. He held out the glass for more. Henderson allowed him an individual replenishment. I attempted to explain to Bithel that we had been comrades-in-arms. It was hard to think of an incident that had not reflected some unhappy moment in his own military career; any happy ones almost certainly experienced at times he would have been too drunk to recall.

'Do you remember our Company Commander, Rowland Gwatkin?'

Bithel's eyes, damp and bleary, suddenly reacted.

'Fol-low, fol-low, we will fol-low Gwatkin—
We will fol-low Gwatkin, everywhere he leads.'

Bithel sang the words gently. Their reference to romping round the Mess on Christmas night, following the Commanding Officer over tables and chairs, sideboards and sofas, must have been entirely lost on Henderson. In any case the Commanding Officer's name had been Davies. Now Colonel was evidently merged as a single entity with Gwatkin in Bithel's mind. Becoming more than ever impatient, Henderson once more tried to get hold of the parcel. Bithel demanded a third round before giving it up.

'Not before I see the picture—know how you got it.'

Bithel made a violent effort to give an explanation.

'Going to . . . be burnt.'

'Scorp wanted to burn it. You rescued it?'

Bithel's twitching face seemed to indicate that solution as near the mark.

'Does Ken know?'

This question threw Bithel into a paroxysm of coughing, followed by an awful dry retching. He seemed about to vomit, something not at all out of the question in experience of him. An alternative possibility was apoplexy. When this violent attack was at an end he got out a sentence.

'Lord Widmerpool's . . . dead.'

'What?'

Both Henderson and I exclaimed simultaneously.

'Murdered.'

Bithel's powers of speech made some sort of recovery now. He had contrived to articulate what was on his mind. This was when it became clear that nervous strain, at least as much as drink, was powerfully affecting him. In fact the whisky he had just drunk had undoubtedly pulled him together. At first his words, dramatically gasped out, aroused a picture of gun, knife, poison, length of lead piping.

Then one saw that Bithel was almost certainly speaking with exaggeration. Even so, some ritual—like the gash at The Devil's Fingers—might have gone too far; for example, misuse of a dangerous drug. Allowing for overstatement, I was not at all sure which was meant. Henderson, with closer knowledge of the circumstances, seemed to regard anything as possible. He had gone white in the face.

'Was he found dead? Has this just happened? Are the police in on it?'

'Scorp was responsible. You can't call it anything but murder. I'm not going back. I've left for good. I'm fond of Scorp—fonder than I've ever been of any boy—but he's gone too far. I'm not going back.'

'But what happened? You don't really mean murder?'

'What Scorp made him do.'

'Say what that was.'

The story came out only by degrees. Even in a slightly improved condition Bithel was not easy to follow. In his—comparatively speaking—less dilapidated days, Bithel's rambling narratives had been far from lucid. The events he had just been through seemed to have been enough to disturb anyone. They had, at the same time, to some degree galvanized him out of the state of brain-softening he had displayed at Stourwater. He kept on muttering to himself, his voice at times entirely dying away.

'Lord Widmerpool ought never to have gone. Wasn't fit. Wasn't in the least fit. It was murder. Nothing short.'

That the old Bithel—with his respect for the 'varsity man'—survived under the tangled beard and foul rags, was shown by dogged adherence to calling Widmerpool by a title he had himself renounced by word and deed; if never by official procedure. After a bout of breathlessness, Bithel now showed signs of falling asleep. Henderson prodded him with a paper-knife.

'What happened?'

Bithel opened his eyes. Henderson repeated the question.

'What happened about Ken?'

'We could all see Lord Widmerpool wasn't well. He hadn't been well for weeks. He was bloody ill, in fact. Not himself at all. He could hardly get up from the floor.'

I asked why Widmerpool was on the floor. Henderson explained that the cult did not use beds. Bithel groaned in confirmation of that.

'When Lord Widmerpool did get up he was all shaky. He wasn't fit, even though it was a warmish night last night. It was Scorp who insisted.'

'Was Widmerpool unwilling to go?'

Bithel looked at me as if he did not understand what I was talking about. Even if prepared to accept that we had served in the same regiment, could recognize the same songs or horseplay, he certainly had not the least personal recollection of a common knowledge of Widmerpool.

'Lord Widmerpool didn't object. He wanted to be in Harmony. He always wanted that. He took a moment to get properly awake. At first he could hardly stand, when he got up from the floor. All the same, he took his clothes off.'

'Why did he take his clothes off?'

Henderson explained that was the rite. He seemed to have fallen back into regarding what had gone forward as natural enough in the light of the ritual, a normal piece of ceremonial. Not only did he understand, he seemed a little carried away by the devotional aspects of the story.

'Scorp must have thought it would get too cold if use was not made of that late mild spell we've been having. He was right. The temperature dropped this afternoon. If he'd left it till tonight they'd never have been able to go out.'

'Do you mean they all went out on a naked run in the early hours of this morning?'

'Ken never wanted to be outdone in Harmony by Scorp.'

Henderson and Bithel agreed about that, Bithel almost showing animation.

'Didn't we all? Didn't we all? But I'm through. I'm bloody well through. I swear I am. If I go back, it won't be for long. I swear that. I can't stand it. I'll find somewhere else. I swear I will.'

Bithel rocked himself backwards and forwards.

'What happened on the run?'

'It was through the woods.'

'Scorp was leading of course. Did Ken feel ill when he got outside?'

'Lord Widmerpool seemed recovered at first, they said. There was a warm mist. It was cold enough, they told me, but not as bad as they thought it would be.'

'So they set off?'

'Then Lord Widmerpool shouted they weren't going fast enough.'

Henderson showed amazement at such a thing happening.

'Why should Ken have done that? It was never a race. The slow pace was to give a sense of Harmony. Scorp always made a point of that.'

'When Lord Widmerpool shouted, they said Scorp sounded very angry, and said no. They were going fast enough. To increase the speed would disrupt the Harmony. Lord Widmerpool didn't take any notice of Scorp.'

'That was unlike Ken.'

Bithel lay back, so far as doing so were possible, in the pop-art armchair. The Scotch had greatly revived him, calmed his immediate fears, enabled him to tell the story with a kind of objectivity.

'If Lord Widmerpool disagreed with Scorp he'd always say why. They quite often argued. Lord Widmerpool seemed to enjoy a tussle, then giving in, and being given a penance. Never knew such a man for penances.'

Abandoning his narrative, at the thought of Widmerpool's penances, Bithel sighed.

'Did Widmerpool increase his own speed?'

'Not at first, they told me. Then he began complaining again that they weren't running fast enough. He started to shout "I'm running, I'm running, I've got to keep it up." Everybody thought he was laughing, trying to get himself warm. After shouting out this for a while, he did increase his pace. Some of the others went faster too. Scorp wouldn't allow that. He ordered Lord Widmerpool to slow down, but of course he couldn't stop him. He was way on ahead by then. Somebody heard Lord Widmerpool shout "I'm leading, I'm leading now."'

'How did it end?'

'It was rather a twisty way through the woods. Nobody could see him, especially in the mist. When they came round a corner, out of the trees, he was lying just in the road.'

'Collapsed?'

'Dead.'

Bithel held out his glass for yet another refill. Henderson topped it up. There was quite a long silence.

'How did they carry the body back?'

'They managed somehow.'

'It must have been quite a way.'

'You bet.'

'What did Scorp say?'

Henderson's voice shook a little when he asked that. I felt disturbed myself. Bithel seemed glad to leave the more macabre side of the story, for its administrative elements.

'I was sent to London to ask Canon Fenneau what should be done.'

'That's why you came up?'

'I couldn't find Canon Fenneau till this afternoon. He wasn't too keen on being mixed up with it all. In the end he said he'd do what he could to help.'

'And the drawing?'

'Scorp said the first thing was for all Lord Widmerpool's things to be ritually burned. There wasn't much. You know there was hardly anything, Barnabas, except the picture you told me to try to get hold of, if ever Scorp, in one of his destructive moods, insisted on throwing it out. You said it was between the cupboard and the wall, bring it along, if you've half a chance. It looks like a rough scribble to me, but I'm sure it's the one you said. I hope it's the right picture, and you'll make me a nice bakshee for bringing it along. I got it off the fire without Scorp seeing, just as he was going to set everything alight with the ritual torch. I stuffed it away somewhere, and here it is. God, I'm tired. Bloody well done in. I haven't had any sleep since they got back at five this morning.'

Henderson snatched the parcel, and began to open it. Bithel lay still further back in the pop-art armchair. He closed his eyes. Henderson threw away the brown paper. He held the Modigliani drawing up in front of him. The glass of the frame was cracked in several places; the elongated nude no worse than a little crumpled. It had been executed with a few strokes running diagonally across the paper. The marvellous economy of line would help in making it hard to identify—if anybody bothered—as more than a Modigliani drawing of its own particular period. It was signed. In any case, no one was likely to worry. It had hung in Stringham's London flat in early days; then passed to Stringham's niece, Pamela Flitton; on Pamela's demise, to her husband, Widmerpool. Pictures had never been Widmerpool's strong point. For some reason he must have clung on to this one. It was odd that he had never sold it. Henderson, even at the period of his renunciation of such vanities as art, must have marked it down, as it lay about somewhere in the commune. Now the agent, even at secondhand, of its preservation, he deserved his prize. Bithel gave a terrible groan in his sleep.

He had begun to slip from the exotically shaped armchair; would soon reach the floor.

'I shall have to be going.'

'I'll come and let you out.'

'What will you do about Bithel?'

'I'll ring up Chuck. He'll lend a hand. Chuck won't be too pleased. He doesn't like Bith. This has happened before. We put him on the late train.'

'You'll send him back?'

'Of course. Where else can he go? He'll be all right.'

'Will Fenneau do the clearing up down there?'

'Everything he can. He's very good about that sort of thing. He understands. Now I know about it, I'll get in touch with him too.'

We said goodbye. Henderson was right about the temperature dropping. It was getting dark outside, and much colder. A snowflake fell. At first that seemed a chance descent. Now others followed in a leisurely way. The men taking up the road in front of the gallery were preparing to knock off work. Some of them were gathering round their fire-bucket.

The smell from my bonfire, its smoke perhaps fusing with one of the quarry's metallic odours drifting down through the silvery fog, now brought back that of the workmen's bucket of glowing coke, burning outside their shelter. For some reason one of Robert Burton's torrential passages from *The Anatomy of Melancholy* came to mind:

'I hear new news every day, and those ordinary rumours of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, meteors, comets, spectrums, prodigies, apparitions, of towns taken, cities besieged, in *France*, *Germany*, *Turkey*, *Persia*, *Poland*, *&c.*, daily musters and preparations, and suchlike, which these tempestuous times afford, battles fought, so many men slain, monomachies, shipwrecks, piracies, and sea-fights, peace, leagues, stratagems, and fresh alarms. A vast confusion of vows, wishes, actions, edicts, petitions, lawsuits, pleas, laws, proclamations, complaints, grievances, are daily brought to our ears. New books every day, pamphlets, currantoes, stories, whole catalogues of volumes of all sorts, new paradoxes, opinions, schisms, heresies, controversies in philosophy, religion, &c. Now come tidings of weddings, maskings, mummeries, entertainments, jubilees, embassies, tilts and tournaments, trophies, triumphs, revels, sports, plays: then again, as in a new shifted scene, treasons, cheating tricks, robberies, enormous villainies in all kinds, funerals, burials, deaths of Princes, new discoveries, expeditions; now comical then tragical matters. Today we hear of new Lords and officers created, to-morrow of some great men deposed, and then again of fresh honours conferred; one is let loose, another imprisoned, one purchaseth, another breaketh; he thrives, his neighbour turns bankrupt; now plenty, then again dearth and famine; one runs, another rides, wrangles, laughs, weeps, &c.'

The thudding sound from the quarry had declined now to no more than a gentle reverberation, infinitely remote. It ceased altogether at the long drawn wail of a hooter—the distant pounding of centaurs' hoofs dying away, as the last note of their conch trumpeted out over hyperborean seas. Even the formal measure of the Seasons seemed suspended in the wintry silence.

MARYGROVE COLLEGE
3 1927 00093780 2

DATE DUE

MEL #: 33116234

Demco, Inc. 38-293

MARYGROVE COLLEGE
LIBRARY
DETROIT, MI

FICTION

Includes these novels:

Books Do Furnish a Room ◆ *Temporary Kings* ◆ *Hearing Secret Harmonies*

In this climactic volume of *A Dance to the Music of Time,* Nick Jenkins describes a world of ambition, intrigue, and dissolution. England has won the war, but now the losses, physical and moral, must be counted. Pamela Widmerpool sets a snare for the young writer Trapnel, while her husband suffers private agony and public humiliation. Set against a background of politics, business, high society, and the counterculture in England and Europe, this magnificent work of art sounds an unforgettable requiem for an age.

"In *The Music of Time* Mr. Powell has created a world as rich as Joyce's on the one hand and P. G. Wodehouse's on the other. His achievement in doing so is immense and his concluding novel is among his most brilliant."
—*Guardian*

"The way in which Powell invests the whole of the book with parallels, variations and ironic reversals of this legend is wondrously rich and subtle."
—Christopher Porterfield, *Time*

"A great chronicle . . . absolutely fascinating and the most important fiction since the war. . . . I would rather read Powell than any English novelist now writing."—Kingsley Amis

ANTHONY POWELL'S recent works include *Miscellaneous Verdicts* and *Under Review,* both available from the University of Chicago Press.

Cover illustration: Nicholas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (detail). c. 1639–40. The Trustees of the Wallace Collection, London.

Cover design: Toni Ellis.

ISBN 0-226-67718-4

90000>

9 780226 677187

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS